

Homily for the second Sunday of Easter, 19 April, 2020

John 20:19-31

'Christian community'

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INTRODUCTION

There's a book many of you would know by Dietrich Bonhoeffer called 'Life Together'.

It's a real spiritual classic on the theme of Christian community,

And I think it's very relevant and helpful for us right now.

Because for example, in the first paragraph of that book, he writes words that really hit at the moment:

Quote - *'it is not simply to be taken for granted that the Christian has the **privilege** of living among other Christians....'*

'It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God's Word and Sacrament.'

As we live through this time when we are unable to meet together in Christian community as we normally do, we are learning these truths Bonhoeffer writes about in a very real way.

So from our text today I'd like to take the opportunity, to think about Christian community.

And there are four points from our text I'd like to draw out today on this theme.

We see that Christian community,

Gathers regularly,

Is made up of sinners,

Is centered on Christ,
And is sent out into the world.

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GATHERS REGULARLY

So number one,
Christian community ***gathers regularly.***

Notice that right after the resurrection,
In the very first weeks,
we already find the disciples of Jesus Christ in some sort of regular rhythm of
gathering together.

*‘When it was evening on that day,
the first day of the week’.*

Sunday, they’re all together.

Then we read again,
‘A week later his disciples were again in the house...’

So the next Sunday, they’re together again.

Already right there after Jesus resurrection we have the disciples meeting on two
consecutive Sundays.

And this pattern of meeting together on Sunday – the day of Christ’s resurrection,
Has continued right until today!

And notice something else here,
that after Jesus’ resurrection as he appears to the disciples,
It’s almost always when they are gathered as a group, in community.

Even when there are instances like with Mary Magdalene when she has a one-on-
one encounter,

You get the sense this is an exception,

Because even then Jesus is insistent on sending her back to the others,
Back into the community.

You can trace this theme then through the book of Acts.

As the Christian Gospel is going out and people are being brought to repentance
and faith in Jesus Christ,

We hear this little summary statement:

*'They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship,
To the breaking of bread and the prayers'. Acts 2:42*

And later on in the New Testament the writer to the Hebrews will remind the early
Christians,

*'Do not neglect meeting together as is the habit of some,
But encourage one another,
And all the more as you see the day approaching.'* Hebrews 10:25

So number 1, Christian community ***gathers regularly***.

But how does this apply right now when we can't actually do it in our normal way?

Well one simple application I'd like to make here,

And it's to do with the technology we're using.

On the one hand,
we can be incredibly thankful to have technology Bonhoeffer never dreamed of to
stay connected!

We can continue our life together even in these limited ways.

And there are opportunities in this too!

Opportunities to reach out to people who wouldn't normally come to our church,

But on the other hand,
as we use it,
I think it's healthy that we also acknowledge its' limits,

Online worship and online ministry,
It is not a substitute or replacement for the true gathering of the Christian
community around Word and Sacrament.

So while thankful for what it is,

Let's not get too comfortable with it,

It's a temporary, better-than-nothing measure,

But our text reminds us that the disciples gathered together in the flesh,

They looked each other in the eye,

Thomas reached out and touched Jesus,

True Christian community is physical,
It's incarnate.

Let's learn during this time to treasure even more deeply the gift of Christian
community,
and long for the time we can gather together again.

So that's number 1,
Christian community ***gathers regularly.***

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MADE UP OF SINNERS

Number 2,

Christian community is made up of sinners.

Here we are in our text,
after the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead -

- The event which is at the center of God's plans for the redemption of the
cosmos,

And what sort of community do we find growing out of this most wonderful event
at first?

A motley crew hiding away behind locked doors in fear.

They had denied him.

They had deserted him.

And now they were doubting him.

Deniers, deserters and doubters,
Hardly the thriving community you might expect to find associated with the one
who had just conquered death and the grave!

From its earliest days,
The Christian community has not been a place where everyone's faith was always
strong with no struggles,
Where everyone did the right thing and never slipped up,
Where it's all pristine and harmonious all the time,

It's just never been like that,
That's not real Christian community.

Read the rest of the New Testament.

Many of the letters of Paul and others are dealing with **problems** in the early
church,
And problems which make some of our issues look very tame.

You go and read what was going on in Corinth,
I guarantee you didn't learn about it Sunday school!

And yet at the start of all these letters what's amazing is that these 'problem congregations' are greeted as the 'Church of God', 'those who are sanctified', As 'Saints'.

St Paul doesn't write,

'Now if you were a real Christian congregation you wouldn't have these problems',

No, he knows that true Christian community will always have problems,
Because it's made up of sinners.

The application here is quite simple,

As wonderful a gift as life together with other Christians is,

Don't be surprised when it's also messy,

When it's hard,

When you discover that you're living together with real sinners, just like you,

Who need real forgiveness,
From a real Christ.

And this leads us to our next and most important point,

That Christian community is centered on Christ Jesus.

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CENTRED ON CHRIST

What is it that creates this Christian community and holds it together and makes it what it is?

It's not us,

It's Christ.

And it's his work among us.

That's the big emphasis in our text.

It's not just that the disciples gather together,
Any group of people can gather regularly,

It's not just that they acknowledge their own sin and need and that this binds them together,
That's a support group,
and it can be very helpful,

But it's not the Church.

True Christian community exists because of what we hear in this text,

*'Jesus came and stood among them and said "Peace be with you".
After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.'*

It's the presence of Jesus Christ in our midst as we gather,
That's the essence of our life together.

And notice it's the Jesus with wounds.

In other words,

It's the crucified Jesus,

Jesus who suffered and died for your sins and so can bring you true peace,

It's this Jesus now raised from the dead who is present in our midst as we gather
to speak his peace to us,
Through those he has authorized and sent to us –
For us, our pastors.

Jesus comes and stands among us,

And just as he did for those first disciples,
He breathes on us his Holy Spirit.

Each and every time we gather we receive anew, afresh,
The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on us as a community as individuals.

Jesus comes and stands among us,

As he does this as one who does not come to condemn those who have doubts
and struggles in faith,
But as one who comes to reach out to those who struggle,
To reveal himself to them and move them from disbelief to faith.

And please notice this,

That Christian community is not centered on Christ as if Christ were an idea,

It's not that we're bound together by a common cause,
Or even just a common body of teach - as important as that is,

But's it's the actual, real, presence of the risen Christ among us that creates and
sustains our life together by his Spirit,
Through his Word,
Through his body and blood in the Holy sacrament.

As we live through time of being scattered as the people of God and isolated one
from another,

As we seek to find ways of growing in Christ as individuals and families,

Of staying connected and living out our Christian community in the limited means we have available to us,

Let's not lose sight that to be a disciple of Jesus Christ,
To be a Christian,

Is to be a part of a community which gathers,
Confesses its own unworthiness,

And receives forgiveness, peace and the gift of the Holy Spirit from the risen Jesus in our midst.

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SENT OUT TO THE WORLD

And finally then,
Christian community is sent out into the world.

'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'

The doors are not to remain locked.

This little group of disciples,
this budding church,
this embryonic Christian community,

in all their frailty and weakness and imperfection,

they are to be the means by which the forgiveness of sins Christ won on the cross and secured in his resurrection,

they are to be the means by which this is given to the world.

They are sent,

We are sent.

As those who confess with Thomas that this Jesus is my Lord and my God!

This peace we are given is not a gift for us to hold on to only for ourselves,

It's like air,

As we breathe it in,

We need also to breathe it out.

Notice that verse,

'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe?'

How does that happen?

It's through the witness of the Christian community to Christ,

As it is sent into the world.

Now right now,

This presents us with both unique challenges and opportunities.

On the one hand we are limited of course as to how much interaction we can have with people.

Some of the regular places into which you have been sent as Christ's witnesses are also not going at the moment,

Schools or aged care homes or soup kitchens or local sports clubs or whatever,

In this sense there are challenges to our current context in terms of our being sent out into the world.

But I'd encourage you too to consider where you have been sent right now.

For those of you who live with family,

I'd say the first place you are sent right now is to your family,

This is where you are sent with Jesus' peace and the gift of forgiveness to live as his disciple in that place.

Some of you are working from home now so you're finding your way through the sometimes tricky balance of being with each other more and with new dynamics.

Others of you simply can't go to your regular outings and activities and so you have more time with your spouse or family for that reason,

And these changes in dynamics are not easy actually for many people,

They can be stressful and take extra thought and care as to how to make them work well.

But it may just be that is where God is sending you right now,
To love and serve your family,
To live out his peace and forgiveness right there.

Another thought at this time,
Is your physical neighbors.

Perhaps you've got more time at home right now,

And we're still trying limit out contact with neighbors,

But I've already heard many stories of wonderful conversations over the back fence,

Or dropping notes in mailboxes and other creative ideas,

People connecting with their neighbors in ways they haven't' for years,

There God sends you out into your little patch,
With his Spirit, his peace, his forgiveness.

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CONCLUSION

So Christian community gathers regularly,
Is made up of sinners,
Is centred on Christ,
And is sent out into the world.

In the short letter of second John,
He writes,

'Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink...'

In my own paraphrase today I'd put it this way,
'Although I have much to say and we have much to do, I'd rather not use a
website and YouTube and Facebook...'

*'Instead', John writes, 'I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face, so that
our joy may be complete'. 2 John 12*

Let this be our desire.

And I'll close with one more quote from Bonhoeffer's Life Together where he
draws a conclusion from what I read out earlier,

*'Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common
Christian life with other Christians,
praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart.
Let him thank God on his knees and declare:
It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with
Christian brethren.'*

God grant it to us for Jesus' sake. Amen.