Where two or three are gathered together in my name I am there among them.

I have always taken great solace from these few words, as they speak to me of the constancy of God’s presence, they have also confirmed a conviction I have about the necessity of public worship.

I think I could say that I have had hundreds of people, possibly even more than that who when in conversation with me have uttered the words “well, you don’t need to go to Church in order to be a Christian.” It seems to be a commonly held belief that what Jesus calls us to do is to live a good life following his example but that does not mean for many people that they have to spend quality time with others engaging in religious activity!

I have always answered such claims as being understandable and yet rather untrue, as I do believe that you cannot be a Christian unless you come to Church. The difficulty is of course in what we mean by Church!

Although Jesus and his early followers were devoted to the religious life and regularly attended the Synagogue and upheld many of the expected norms of Jewish Religious life, they did create something which was very different for their followers. Not only of course was what they offered open to everyone in equal measure but it could be seen because of the example of Jesus in a number of different ways.

When two or three are gathered is the first part of the quotation to look at, even priests although that in itself has been broadened somewhat under current restrictions, are normally required to have at least two people present before they conduct a Eucharist.

This is centred on what we understand being a Christian really is. For being a Christian is not just about attending church or not, or living a good life or not.

For we all know that thousands call themselves Christian but never or very rarely come to worship, whilst others who do not live good lives at all, are in many cases as regular as clock work!

After all the Church is the place where those who sin come to be forgiven, and so it is not just a place for those consider themselves to be righteous.

When I think about the acts of worship which I have conducted over the last thirty years there have been great occasions, with huge congregations at times, whilst there have also been those quiet times where simply one or two have gathered to be with me. Every one of them of course carry special memories, but I can honestly say that the ones where I have felt the presence of God so acutely have been those quiet and reflective moments spent with just a couple of people. There is it seems something truly intimate about worshipping with just a few people and I think it is that level of intimacy which is crucial.

This is why I am not much of a fan of large gatherings, or meeting up with people via Zoom or the other forms of worship currently being made available. For me personally they simply do not work and leave me cold. That is because it is difficult to create an artificial intimacy of being gathered together as one in the Lord.

Jesus is part of the Eternal God-Head and as such is a part of an intimate relationship with the Father and the Spirit. They cannot be separated, their relationship is a perfected relationship bound together through divine love. When we call ourselves a Christian we are making a public declaration that we have joined that intimate relationship. For we can only be a Christian if we have allowed Jesus into our lives. This does not just mean that we follow him or his guidance to us, it means far more than that.

We become a part of Jesus, he is within us always in the power of the Spirit, he indwells within us and we are in him, joined together by mutual love and companionship.

That is why you cannot be a Christian without coming to Church, but what do we mean by Church?

Church is not the building we worship in, but rather Church is the people we worship with. Whether that be two or three or several hundred people. We attend Church every time we engage in any activity which is done in the Lords name.

It us that final bit of the quotation which is often missed. “I Am” the eternal name of God, is brought to our attention here. God is with us whenever we meet in his name, but as Christians we are richly blessed by Jesus, as in and through him we are given a deeper opportunity to share in his eternal presence. That requires that we gather together.

We do not of course have to gather in a conventional way at all, but we do have to gather ourselves up in the name of the Lord which allows the intimacy of a personal relationship to be experienced in all its fullness.

I am sure that many of you will have had the joy of going on a personal retreat at some point in your lives. I have been on a great deal. Some have been guided by others and I have been surrounded by people all gathered together in the name of the Lord. Some retreats have however been quite different and I recall many silent and isolationist retreats that I have done in the past. Spending the first four days of Lent in a Passionist Monastery was the way I always began my Lenten observance. My few days isolated on my own in a little room however does not seem to fit the message of being with at least a few others at the same time.

However it does if one opens up the box, if one opens up what Church really is and how we engage with it. You see I may have been in isolation in my little room but I did have a little hatch through which a nun would give me a little bread and cheese to sustain me through my Lenten fast. No words were spoken but intimacy was achieved. I was never completely on my own in both a literal and spiritual way depending on your personal theological perspective, as I always had an Altar with a monstrance upon it holding before me the consecrated bread of the Lord. In this way the whole gathered community of the monastery was with me in my little room, as I gazed and worshipped the physical and spiritual presence of the Lord in my midst.

My tastes have changed and I am sure that is the case for many of you, nowadays I am happier praying with my Lord when I am out for a run or cycling on my bike. I have had some of the most amazing experiences of my spiritual life when out and about within the glory of God’s creation, but I have always on return shared those experiences with others, that is being Church. If our intention is to gather around a few people in the Lord’s name then we can be assured that the Lord will be with us.

There are so many occasions in the stories we hear about Jesus which tell us whenever he needed to speak to his Father he went off to a quiet place, but when he did, it was so often with two or three of his closest disciples. He may well have withdrawn from them to be alone with God, but they were always part of his very being. We are relational beings, and being alone is not natural for us, but that does not mean that it is wrong only harder. Jesus helps so much with this because if we call upon his name when we meet with others he has promised to be with us, to help us, to guide us and to love us. We can all live good lives, but we must meet with others and share what being a Christian is and what being a Christian means to us. So you cannot be a Christian without coming to Church!

But Church is what you make it, Church is being together in some way with others so that the intimacy of inter-personal connectivity can enable the presence of the Lord Jesus to fill us with divine grace.

For where two or three are gathered together in my name I am there among them.

Amen.