

Christ Among His People

by John Murray

Christ promises to be present with his people, even when they are reduced to the minimum of two or three, and to disclose to them something of his matchless glory.

Duration: 53:06

Scripture: Matthew 18:20, Hebrews 10:24-25

Topics: "Christ"

Description

In this sermon, the minister emphasizes the importance of gathering together in the name of Christ. He highlights that Christ's institution is where two or three are gathered, and that even in small numbers, Christ is present among them. The minister criticizes those who think they are doing a favor to the Church by attending, as it shows a lack of understanding of God's grace and their own importance. He also criticizes those who prioritize large crowds over the presence of God, emphasizing that the permanent enjoyment of Christ's presence should be the driving force behind gathering together. The sermon concludes by highlighting the significance of the family as a basic institution and how it relates to the concept of gathering in Christ's name.

Transcript

The Gospel according to Matthew chapter 18, verse 20, For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them. There are people who appear to think that they bestow a great favor upon the Church of God when they grace it with their presence. And the assumption is that they bestow a great favor upon the Almighty.

Well, how reprehensible is their conception of the living God and of their own importance as in His presence. And how God-dishonoring is the frame of mind entertained by such people when they entertain such a conception of the mercy and the grace of God bestowed upon us in the institutions of His Church. There are other people are so obsessed with the idea of numbers that they will not patronize the services of God's worship unless great crowds of people congregate there.

And you can readily see what is the standard they apply to the presence of God. They have more respect for numbers than they have for the presence of God. More respect for the presence of people than for the presence of the Savior.

And if numbers are the criterion of our esteem of the presence of God, then we miss entirely the purport of our Lord where He says, where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them. Let us suppose that on a particular occasion where a much larger number of people gather, on one particular occasion only two happen to come to the service on a particular occasion. And when the minister came to the pulpit and found that there were only two there, and he said to them, well, there are so few of us here today, we better suspend the service.

Of course, the minister then would be doing the gravest dishonor to the promise of Christ. He'd be offering the gravest insult to the Lord of Glory Himself. But let us suppose that on one occasion only one came.

And when he entered the pulpit, he found that there was only one in the congregation. Well, it might be a little embarrassing for him, and it might be a little embarrassing for the particular person concerned. But if the minister on that occasion then said, there is only yourself here, we better suspend the service, he would be doing the gravest insult.

For Christ's institution is where two or three are gathered together in my name. There am I in the midst of them. And we must always remember that where there are only three, there are also four.

And the fourth is the Lord of Glory. And where there are only two, there are always three. And the third is the head of the church.

Now in connection with these words, there are three things which I want to mention. First, the institution. Second, the requirement.

And third, the promise which Christ offers us in this particular text. First then, the institution. We know, all of us, at least all of us who have gone to school, know what is the difference between the plural and the singular.

Where there are more than one, we speak of the plural number. And where there is only one, we speak of the singular number. And we all understand that distinction.

And when we want to use another term, and we want to speak of the plural, we speak of plurality. And when we have only one, and we want to... And so we can speak of plurality in unity. And that is the particular institution of which our Lord is speaking in this particular text.

The plurality of at least two in the unity of one. Where two or three are gathered together in my name. We need to appreciate the place which this institution of plurality in unity occupies in the constitution of the human race.

The basic institution, or at least one of the basic institutions in the constitution of the human race, is the family. And where you have a family, you always have more than one. You have at least two, the man and the wife.

And the institution of God is that there is plurality and there is unity. They, too, shall be one flesh. And we have the same illustrated on a very much broader scale in the political spheres.

We have a commonwealth which is comprised of a great many individuals. But they are united under one government, and sometimes under one head. And so you have, on a much broader scale, the institution of plurality in unity.

And you have the same in the Church of Christ. You have a great many individuals, but nevertheless they are comprised in one body. And you don't have the Church of Christ unless you have that plurality in unity.

The plurality is the great multitude of those who are united to Christ, and the unity is the unity of one body. There is one body and one spirit, even as we are called in one hope of your calling. Now, what is it that lies back of this institution in accordance with which God has constituted the whole way? What is it that lies back of it? It is simply the fact that God Himself is plurality in unity.

The plurality of three in the unity of one. Trinity in unity. For He is not one who became three, and He is not three who became one, but He is one in three, and three in one eternally and necessarily.

And it could not be otherwise, because God could not be any other than that which He eternally and perfectly is. Or perhaps some refer to that question as God is. And it is just as sensible to ask the question why as it is to ask the question why God is.

God necessarily and eternally and perfectly is. And He is three in one. Of course, God is unique, and there is nothing in His whole creation that is really comparable to Him.

Who among the sons of men or what in the whole realm of creation can be compared unto the Almighty Himself? He is absolutely transcendent. He's absolutely unique, and He's beyond all comparison. He's not in a class.

He's absolutely unique because He alone is God, and there is none else beside Him. And yet it is so that God has made man in His own image, and He has constituted the way in accordance with that which is uniquely and transcendentally and incomparably true with reference. He has constituted the way to a certain extent after the pattern of that which He Himself uniquely and incomparably is.

Now it is in connection with the Church of Christ, with that institution, that that pattern appears particularly. It is in the Church of Christ that you have the great, the great example of that which God has done in the human race after the pattern of His own unity. The Church, of course, is an institution of redemptive grace, and it is preeminently the institution of redemptive grace.

And it is made up of a great multitude, drawn from every nation and kindred and people and tongue, but it is one body in Christ Jesus. And the assemblies of God's people in this world, met in accordance with the institution of Christ and in accordance with His commandments, are, as it were, the way in which this unity which exists in the body of Christ is expressed. And it is the way by which God's purposes of grace and salvation are promoted and fulfilled in the world.

That is preeminently the institution of redemptive grace in this world. Now it is well for us to remember the words of Scripture in another connection. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews, you remember, says, Let us consider one another to provoke and to love and to good work, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another daily and so much the more as ye see the day approaching.

He is talking of the perfect day, of the last day, the day of judgment, nothing else. As ye see the day, the perfect day, the last day, the judgment day approaching. Now we might think that the expectation of that last day, when all the elect of God will be perfectly united together in one body, would, as it were, interfere without change for the imperfect in this world.

It might seem that our preoccupation with the eternal would impair our interest in the temporal, and our expectation of the final bliss, when the whole body of Christ will be made perfect, would interfere with the imperfection and the limitations which attach to the assemblies of God's people in this world. Oh, how much imperfection there is in all the assemblies of God's people in this world, and that we cast our eye to the perfect day, when there will be no longer any imperfection attaching to the body of Christ. It might seem that that would interfere with our interest in the assemblies of God's people in this world, where sometimes there are only very few gathered, and where there is always imperfection.

But you notice that the line of thought suggested in this particular text, which I quoted from the epistle to the Hebrews, is just in the very opposite. Forsake not the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhort one another daily, and so much to more, as ye see the day approaching. You see, the thought is that it is the expectation of the perfect day that is the incentive tool of God in this world, and it is just the reason for it.

And when we examine the Scripture a little further, or when we examine the direction of thought a little further, then we see that it is because even the imperfect assemblies of God's people in this world are a foretaste of that perfect presence of the Lord that will be enjoyed at the perfect day, at the last day, when Christ will gather out of all nations and kindle the whole body of the elect, and present them thoughtless to the Father, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. It is the expectation of the permanent enjoyment of Christ's presence that gives renewed force and incentive to the necessity of the unity that there is in the body of the Lord, of that which will ultimately be dispensed in its wholeness. And you can see the great grace that the Savior, the Lord of the Church, and the head of the Church, has bestowed in this particular institution where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Two or three. It is sometimes impossible to gather together more than two or three in the unity of the Spirit and in the bond of peace. And Christ has made provision in His marvelous grace for the minimum, not the maximum, but the minimum.

And there may be only two who can gather together unto His name, because there are only two in a particular situation or in a particular community who can gather together in Jesus' name, that is, in the unity of the Spirit and in the bond of peace. O blessed be His name! It is not always true that we are reduced to the minimum. But what does now is the fact that Christ has made provision for the very minimum of plurality in unity, and unity in plurality.

Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. Now, second, we have the requirement where two or three are gathered together in my name, in my name. And what does that mean? Everything hinges upon that little expression, in my name.

Now, what does it mean? Well, it's very difficult to be able to determine exactly what is meant in this particular instance. But there are certain things which are very clearly implied. And which of these Jesus had particularly in mind, it's difficult to determine exactly.

But in any case, if we cover the implications of this arise by one way or another at the meeting. And there are four implications, or four things implied which I shall mention. And the first is that we meet together in accordance with Christ's authority and institute.

It is very profitable indeed for the people of God to gather, because they draw water with joy over the wells of time. There are innumerable advantages which are true from the observance of Christ. We derive

inestimable benefits from this communion that the people of God have with one another in the unity of the faith.

But that is not to be the reason why we gather together. And of course, it is very pleasant. We like to meet people who are of kindred spirit and of kindred faith.

It's a great encouragement. And it is intended to be of assistance to the people of God for them to meet together, to encourage one another. That, of course, is implied in the words which I quoted already, exhort one another daily and so much the more as we see the day approaching.

But that is not the fundamental reason why the people of God gather together. It isn't from the prophet that they derive from it. It isn't from the advantages that they derive from it that they principally gather together.

They gather together principally for this reason that it is Christ which is commanded. And that, after all, is the basic reason for everything that is done in the Church of Christ. We gather together because Christ.

And the second thing that is implied in this little expression in my name is that we gather together in union with Christ. In Christ's name is simply in himself. The name stands for the person.

And if you say, where two or three are gathered together in my name, it is just synonymous with saying if two or three are gathered together in me. In union with me. You remember on another occasion when it is said that many have received him, to them gave he authority to become sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.

You have the same expression there as you have here. In his name. Even to them that believe on his name.

Well, to believe on his name is not to believe in an empty vocable. It's to believe in himself. The name stands for the person.

And so when he says here, gather together in my name, it means the same thing as saying, gather together in me. In union with Christ. And so to gather together in his name is to gather together in him.

That is to say, in the union which he himself has detected. So that we are united, first of all, to him. And then, because we are united to him, we are united to one another, and we can be united in the unity of the faith.

Oh, what grave prejudice it has done to the church of Christ when that great principle is neglected or overlooked. We must, first of all, be sure that we are united to Christ himself. For it is from him that all nurture, all vitality springs.

As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can he, except he abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches. And just as the branches derive all their sustenance and their vitality from the vine, so the people of God from Christ.

Oh, let us make sure of this, that we are united to Christ in the bonds of love and faith and obedience. United to him in the efficacy of his death and in the power of his resurrection. And then, my friends, we shall have fulfilled the condition that Christ speaks of in this particular.

And the third thing that is implied here is that there must be unity of faith. Unity of confession. You remember the great confession that Peter made at Caesarea Philippi.

He said, thou art the Christ, the son of the living God, and that is the central confession. Unless there is that confession in our heart, unless there is that confession in our assembly, we're not fulfilling the condition which Christ has laid down for his church. Everyone that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God.

And let us make sure that we have a unity of confession. That is what is meant by the unity of the faith. The unity of confession in Jesus Christ as the son of the living God.

And that means nothing less than that he is God himself manifest in the flesh. God himself on an equality with God the Father, and nevertheless distinguished from the father as the son of the father. And there you have the kernel of the Christian confession.

And the fourth thing that is implied in this condition is that we come together to meet. Surely the condition is the counterpart of the promise. The condition is where two or three are gathered together in my name.

And the promise is there am I in the midst of them. And we surely cannot get away from it. But when Jesus says gather together in my name with me.

And he never failed to keep that appointment if we fulfill the condition. You remember under the old testament there was what was known, translated in our version as the tabernacle. But it can be more literally and perhaps a little more perspicuously rendered if we say the tent of meeting.

That's the literal ending. The tent of meeting. That is the tabernacle under the old testament was the tent of meeting.

And why was it called the tent of meeting? It wasn't called the tent of meeting because the people met together. It's quite true that the people came to the tabernacle. But it wasn't called the tent of meeting just because they met together there.

The meaning is that the Lord himself met with them there. And that was the reason why it is the tent of meeting. Meeting with the Lord himself.

And Christ is the grand fulfillment of the tabernacle under the old testament. He is the fulfillment. Do you remember what John said? The word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

That is to say the word was made flesh and tabernacle among us. And it is in Christ Jesus preeminently that the tabernacle of God is with man. He is the grand fulfillment of all that was symbolized and typified in the tent of meeting.

And when we come together in obedience to Christ's commandments, honoring his institution, united together first of all with Christ, and united together in the unity of that single confession, that there is one body and one spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all, then we can be sure that when we come together in the expectation of meeting with him, when we come together in the assurance that his promise will be fulfilled and that he will disclose to us something of his matchless glory, then we may be sure. And if we ever go away disappointed, my friends, it is not because Christ has failed in the fulfillment of his promise, but because we have failed in

the faith and in the hope and in the assurance of expectation. Christ is always true because he is himself the truth.

He failed in the fulfillment of his promise. Now, finally, we have the promise. Where am I in the midst of that? And it's very simple.

It's that Christ is the essentialist of his people, even when they are reduced to the minimum of two bodies. And you ask the question, well, how in Christ? And you ask yourself the question, how in Christ? Or you perhaps ask somebody else the question, how in Christ? And it would be no wonder indeed if that question would baffle you, no wonder at all. And if you are not, if you do have a sense of bafflement in trying to answer that question, you don't really have appreciation of the nature of Christ.

The apostle Paul speaks in another epistle of the love of Christ that passes not. And in another epistle, he speaks of the peace of God that passes all. And therefore it's no wonder at all that Christ's presence with his people in this world should be a great mystery that baffles our understanding or baffles our comprehension.

Something incomprehensibly, comprehensibly mysterious about it, and never forget that there is something here, notwithstanding its reality, notwithstanding its reality in experience, is something that surpasses understanding, that surpasses all explanation. No wonder. Can we, can we comprehend what Jesus meant when he said, I in them and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one, that the world may believe that there are I in them and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one.

Can we understand what Jesus means when he says on another occasion, if a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my father will love him, and we will come unto him and make our abode with him. Can we understand it? Can we fully understand it? Of course not. It's a great mystery.

It is one of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith. The first great mystery of the Christian faith is the incarnation of the Son of God. That's the mystery of godliness, and we cannot unravel all its truths.

But one of the greatest mysteries of our Christian faith is the presence of Christ in and with his nature. It surpasses our understanding. But remember this, that although it surpasses our understanding, it is not something that is unintelligible.

It is not something that is a complete blank in our understanding. It's not all darkness. There is light at the center.

Of course, as you, as you extend the circumference of light, you extend the circumference of mystery. Yes, but remember this, that there is always the focal point of light. There is, there is, there is something intelligible about the presence of Christ with his people.

There is something that, that comes within the, the, the scope of our understanding. It is something that comes even within the scope of our experience. If we are united to Christ in the bonds of faith, and if we don't have any experience, any understanding of the presence of Christ with us, then it is just because we do not know what it is to be united.

It's a reality that is understood after all. It's a reality that is apprehended, and it is a reality. What shall we say about our, our, our understanding of this grace? Well, you remember that when Christ ascended upon high, he said, Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end.

Or, Lo, I am with you all the days, even unto the end. Christ were not present with his people in this world, if he were not in them, if they were not in him, and if he were not present with them, there would be no such reality as the Church of God. There would be no experience of salvation.

There are two ways, indeed, in which he is, first of all, present with his people by his word. He is present with them by his word. On the day of the resurrection, we only know the name of one of them.

They were on the way to Emmaus, and they were very sad. And Jesus drew near, and he went with them. And you remember, they did not know it, because their eyes were open, and yet Jesus was speaking to them incognito about himself, beginning from Moses and all the top himself.

And afterwards, when they discovered that it had been Jesus who was with them, you remember what they said? Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us this literature? And it's just as true, my friends, that Christ is present in the Church of God now. He's present with his people in all generations now. When the word of God is read, when the word of God is preached, and I protest, my friends, if you know Christ, I protest your experience of that fact, that oftentimes in hearing the word of God read in the assemblies of God's people, or hearing the word of God preached in the assemblies of God's people, afterwards you were able to say, and you didn't fully realize it at the time, did not our hearts burn within us while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us this scripture? Christ is present with his word as really, as truly, as efficaciously now as he was in the flesh.

On the day of the Resurrection, your heart will burn within your way of it. You have been taken up so much with the glory of the Redeemer, that at that particular moment you were fiercely aware of the fact that your heart was burning. Christ is present in his word in accordance with Christ.

I will praise you beyond all your expectations. Then in the second place he addressed, Jesus said to his disciples, I will praise the Father, and he will give you another Comforter, that he may abide in you forever, even the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him, but ye know him, because he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. Yes, it is the peculiar prerogative of the Holy Spirit to take of the things that are Christ's and show them unto us.

That's his unique prerogative in the economy of salvation, and where we fulfill the conditions, the Holy Spirit is there glorifying Christ, and is glorifying him in our apprehension, glorifying him in our understanding, glorifying him in our respectation. The Holy Spirit it is who glorifies, and I tell you, my friends, that if you in reality come in accordance with Christ's institution and fulfill the condition of his promise, the Holy Spirit will be working silently perhaps, very secretly indeed, but nevertheless efficaciously to glorify Christ, and that is the presence of Christ himself. John said, we beheld his glory, glorious of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth, and as you get renewed visions of the fullness of grace and truth that are in Christ Jesus, out of his fullness you will receive.

Let us not despise the gathering together. Two, do not despise the day of small things, for to despise the day of small things is to despise the presence of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. My friends, if you were invited to an interview with Royalty, with Queen Elizabeth of England, would you dare to patronize, because there would only be two there besides yourself? Would you refrain from going, because there would only be two present? Would it in any way interfere with the great privilege and honor which God upon you to be ushered into the presence of Royalty, simply because of the fewness of the number? It isn't the criterion of number, is it? It's the presence of Her Majesty the Queen.

Of Him who is given all authority in heaven and in earth, who is exalted far above all gathering angels, did not despise to speak to the Samaritan woman, did he? He spoke to her alone. And do you know that eternity, that heaven will eternally resound with the praise which emanated from that with the woman of Samaria? Christ did not despise to speak to Nicodemus, and the repercussions will be eternal. And are we to despise the presence of Christ, because perhaps only two or three persons, human persons, are present on that particular occasion? Don't you see the awful insult that we offer to the Lord of Glory when we despise the attempt, however much they may be despised by this present evil? When my friend said that when Christ is present with two or three, there is, if I may use the figure, there is dropped into the pond of stones and the ripples in endless cycles.

And these ripples break from the source of eternity. The veracity of him who is the truth is pledged to the fulfillment of his promise that where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I. And don't despise the presence of Christ because it is the presence of him who is the faithful witness, the first begotten from the dead, the prince of the kings of the earth, the king of kings, the lord of lords. And is there any glory comparable to his glory? Is there any tabernacle that is comparable to that which is great? By the majesty of the king eternal, immortal, invisible, where there are two, there are always three.

And the third is the Lord of Glory. And we go a step further where there are only two in Christ's name. There are always five, and there are never less than five.

And the third and the fourth and the fifth are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Jesus said, I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another comforter, that he may abide with you forever, even the spirit of truth. Jesus said, respecting himself and the Father, that they all may be one, that thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us.

I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one. And as we meet in humble expectation of Christ's person, as we wait upon his words, as we pray for his spirit, that he may glorify Christ in accordance with his prerogative, then our hearts will burn within us, and the bells will begin to ring in the deepest recesses of our spirits, and they are bells that are responsive in heaven. And then we shall be able to sing, there is a river which streams whereof makes love the Spirit of God, the holy place of the Tabernacles of the Most High.

God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved. God is one, that will I think of that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord. Why? How shall we be for the communion of the Lord, for the inheritance of the saints in life, if we have defied the presence of the King eternal, impartial? Oh, let us plead his promise, let us expect his glory, for the two or three are gathered together in my name, there.

O Thou eternal and ever-blessed God, who has given us exceeding great and precious promise, that by these we might be partakers of divine nature, and escape the corruption that is in the world through love. Do Thou captivate our hearts, O Lord, and do Thou grant that we might be bound in the commitment of faith, of love, of hope, and may we come to the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord. Oh, do Thou proclaim us, O Lord, so that we shall be the bondservants that we may know nothing of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Do Thou grant us Thy benediction, enable us to sing Thy praise, that we part the one with the other, and may we be bound together in the bond of everlasting communion, because they are the bonds that by the redemptive love of our Lord and Savior Jesus, for His name's sake.

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