

“No Man is an Island, entire of itself.” It was the great 17th-century Anglican priest and poet John Donne who famously reminded us of that basic fact – though it’s an observation which goes back at least as far as the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. We humans are naturally social creatures; and while there are those who’ve chosen the life of a hermit (and there can be good reasons for doing so), solitary existence is, in the ordinary way of things, contrary to our nature. Throughout human history, life has been lived in the context of communities of one sort or another. This is a simple factual statement and not dictating what’s right or wrong, since as we all know communities can in practice just as easily be bad or unhealthy or destructive as good and life-enhancing. Nonetheless, the increasing tendency towards social isolation – even, or especially, in densely populated urban environments – is more and more becoming a serious social problem, with chronic and debilitating consequences.

So we need to recognise our need to be around fellow-humans – to share our lives with others, no matter how aggravating or wearisome we may sometimes find

them (and who doesn't, at times?!). Indeed, it's one of the very obvious reasons why it isn't possible to be a Christian all by oneself, neglecting the wider body. Not for nothing does the central prayer of Christian faith begin with the words "Our Father", not "My Father". We recognize that we're part of a family in which we're all brothers and sisters with the same heavenly Father; and as such our lives are to be lived in a group which promotes mutual loving support.

But does this mean "the more, the merrier"? Well, not necessarily – as our Gospel today makes clear. There are two parts to the reading, but in each we hear Jesus telling of the power of "two or three". Never just one; but two or three will often suffice. It can be enough to prevent our private spiritual life turning inward and becoming desiccated and fragile. Living it in the context of connection with others elevates prayer from the risk of becoming a selfish wish and turns it into a shared, harmonious petition for the good of all God's people.

Two or three doesn't sound much, though. How transformative can such a small group truly be? Faced with all the huge needs of the world, surely the bigger the

numbers you can deploy, the better. Well, this was one of God's early lessons for his people – that he's not impressed by numbers. In the Book of Judges, we read of Gideon leading Israel's armies against the Midianite forces. Gideon originally had a body of 32,000 men, but God told him that that was far too many for the purpose. The army was whittled down to 10,000, but even that was still too many. Finally, via a test involving how the men drank water from a nearby stream, it was reduced to just 300 – less than one percent of the original. This tiny group went on to defeat the vast Midianite army.

And turning from the Old Testament to the New, how can we forget that it was a body of just twelve apostles who went out to spread the Gospel to all the nations of the then-known world. And ever since, tiny groups of outwardly unremarkable people have transformed the world for the better in ways that few at the time would have expected or even thought possible. Think back to our celebration, just a few weeks ago, of the 150th anniversary of the Mothers' Union. That started out with Mary Sumner gathering a small group of mothers in her living room near Winchester. It's now a global movement

standing at over four million members. Or consider the huge social transformation, both in this country and abroad, brought about largely by the efforts of three men – William Wilberforce, Olaudah Equiano and Thomas Clarkson – in stamping out the terrible sin of slavery. One could go on, at great length. Never, ever underestimate the power of “two or three”.

And where two or three are gathered together in the name of Jesus, he promises that he’ll be there among them. To experience the power of God doesn’t require large crowds. Even the smallest gathering can carry infinite spiritual weight through the presence of Jesus in prayer, word and sacrament. He’s no more impressed by sheer numbers than was God when Gideon fought the Midianites.

Yes, of course we all like to see numerical growth. But obsessing about it – as the Church tends to, at least at the institutional level, focussing on metrics and judging success by statistics – overlooks how completely Jesus decouples spiritual power from numerical size. And of the two, it’s clearly the former that he’s looking for, not the latter.

It does, though, impose upon us the obligation to recognise our wider responsibilities, and to acknowledge that grace is mediated through our relationship with the whole body, not by just using our little group to push our own idiosyncratic agenda upon everyone else, without proper corporate discernment. Ours is a faith of community – yes, sometimes just of twos and threes – but even those twos or threes can never operate in isolation. We can never, as Christians, be, in John Donne’s words, “Island[s], entire of [our]sel[ves].”

So today we hear Jesus making clear how important we should be to one another – at the “micro” level as well as the “macro” level (if you’ll pardon the jargon). He’s thoroughly realistic, and knows that it’s sometimes hard for people to get along without occasions of conflict; but this is set in the context of what we can achieve when we unite in his name, and allow the values of God’s Kingdom to permeate our own values and perspectives. We’re to come together, to stay together, to pray together, and to work together – so that the power of the Spirit may transform our lives and the lives of all God’s children. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I

among them.”