

Never Alone

I had to go to hospital the other day for a colonoscopy, and as part of the preparation, you have to drink a special concoction, and there's some fasting involved.

That night, I woke up at midnight and went through to the toilet. I didn't feel good, at all. It was a cool night, but I was hot. I felt really weak, and for some reason I was shaking.

I felt a little nauseous, but I knew that there was nothing in my stomach to throw up because I hadn't eaten for over 48 hours.

Ever had one of those situations where you're alone, you feel awful, and it reduces your prayers down to total simplicity? I prayed a prayer I learned from a Macedonian. You're probably thinking: What the!

In Acts 16:9, Paul a vision. Nothing fancy like in the Book of Revelation or Daniel or Ezekiel. Just a Macedonian man standing and pleading, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

Prayer doesn't get much simpler than that. I said, "Lord, please help." I really didn't feel like much beyond that. Then my thoughts took a different direction.

I started to think about what Jesus suffered as He was scourged, forced to carry His own cross, and was then nailed to that cross. And I thought, "Wow, what I'm experiencing is absolutely nothing compared to that."

Question: Where do you think those thoughts came from? The Holy Spirit.

This message is entitled: Never Alone.

I want to share a few thoughts on this topic.

Mark 14:32-42

Then they came to a place which was named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, "Sit here while I pray." And He took Peter, James, and John with Him, and He began to be troubled and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch." He went a little farther, and fell on the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him. And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will." Then He came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "Simon, are you sleeping? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again He went away and prayed, and spoke the same words. And when He returned, He found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy; and they did not know what to answer Him. Then He came the third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? It is enough! The hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand."

1. The invisible realm

What's out there?

Who's out there?

Did you know that there's an invisible realm?

In 2 Kings, it tells us that the king of Syria waged war against Israel.

He'd consult with his military leaders, and they'd decide to attack in a particular place.

But every time he did, God told Elisha the prophet.

Then Elisha would send word to the king of Israel to let him know.

Wow, if only the US had had someone like Elisha prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor in WW2!

After this happened a few times, the Syrian king gathered together his officers, and he said, “Okay, who’s blabbing to the Israelites?”

They said, “Nobody. It’s the prophet Elisha.”

“He even tells the king of Israel what you say in the privacy of your bedroom.”

2 Kings 6:14

Therefore he sent horses and chariots and a great army there, and they came by night and surrounded the city.

The next morning, Elisha’s servant got up early in the morning.

And when he went out, saw the armies / horses / chariots, and raced back into Elisha saying, “What are we going to do?”

Elisha said, “Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” (vs 16)

I reckon the servant gave Elisha the look.

Ever had someone give you the look?

You say something and someone looks at you like this...

And you know you’ve said something dumb.

I reckon that’s what happened here.

We know that Elisha was bald because only four chapters earlier, there’s a gang of youths calling him baldie.

And I reckon that when Elisha said, “those who are with us are more than those who are with them,” and the servant looked around and saw the armies of the Syrians, he’s probably thinking, “Mate, you need to wear a hat when you go out in the sun.”

And he gave him the look.

And Elisha prayed, and said, “Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.” Then the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (vs 17)

They were surrounded by angelic beings.

And angels aren’t those stupid pudgy little things like toddlers with wings and a bow and arrow.

They are powerful spiritual beings.

So powerful that when angels destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, it only took two of them.

And just because we can’t see them, doesn’t mean they aren’t there.

My mother was only 5 feet 1½, but she was a feisty little Welsh woman.

She was a community care worker and had just finished visiting someone.

It was just getting dark. She got into her car parked outside facing uphill.

She put her key in the ignition and turned it. Nothing happened.

She didn’t know anything about cars.

But she wasn’t lacking in faith. She said, “Push, you angels. Push!”

Suddenly, the car started moving ... uphill. After a few seconds, the engine started.

Friends, you are never alone.

Okay so that's the invisible realm.

There are angels that we usually can't see.

2. The visible realm

There was a great storm in the middle of the night, accompanied by thunder and lightning.

Everyone was in bed and the parents suddenly heard their little boy cry out, "Mummy!"

His mother called out, "Go to sleep, sweetheart. Jesus is with you."

There was silence for a moment, and then a little voice called out, "Mummy, please come in here with Jesus, and I'll go in there with Daddy."

Don't we all sometimes need a flesh and blood person?

Someone we can see.

Let me explain a little bit about how I prepare a message.

I always pray because I want you to hear what the Holy Spirit wants to say.

And I often get stuck and say, "Lord, please help. I have no idea what I'm doing."

Other times, the message takes an unexpected turn.

As in this one.

And I find myself having to say some uncomfortable things.

It reminds me of years ago when I heard Johnny Ortiz speak.

He was an evangelist and author, and God used him powerfully in Argentina during the revivals.

One time, he started as the pastor of a church. He decided to teach on Love One Another.

Lots of people came and told him how good the sermon was.

The following week, he taught the same message on Love One Another.

A few people who hadn't been there the week before told him how good the message was.

Then the next week, the same message. The same on the fourth week, and the fifth week.

Finally, the elders came to him and said, "Pastor, that message on Love One Another is really good. But you've been saying the same thing for five weeks. When are you going to deliver a different sermon?"

He replied, "When you start doing this one."

So, on this topic of Never Alone, let's talk about what community means in reality.

The essential nature of the church is community.

But what does that mean?

We get an understanding of this from the Trinity.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit have always been in community.

The fundamental nature of which is love.

God teaches us about this when we read in the NT:

Love / serve / encourage / be kindly affectionate / prefer / have compassion / be hospitable to one another.

This is what community is all about.

This is what church is all about.

Church has to be much more than a Sunday morning service.

So let me tell you about our experience of church.

We have people in our house every single week.

Because we believe that right at the heart of community is hospitality.

In Romans 12:13, it tells us that we are to be “given to hospitality.”

In the Greek, that word “given” means to pursue, to chase after.

It’s the exact opposite of showing an occasional, casual interest.

1 Peter 4:9

Be hospitable to one another without grumbling.

Who does that apply to? Everyone.

And you don’t get a free pass just because you think you’re too old / young / not the world’s greatest cook / don’t have the best-looking house on the block.

Or a host of other excuses people have.

But it applies to all of us.

Unless you’re way too sick or on your deathbed or in prison.

So, because we believe in the community of the church, and that hospitality is right at the bedrock of that, we have people in our house every single week.

But most Christians don’t seem to have anyone in their place ever, from one week to the next.

Not even for a cup of tea or coffee.

So let me ask this question:

Folks, does that sound like community to you?

It doesn’t to me.

Can we be so wrapped up in our own lives, that we don’t give a thought to the needs of others?

That’s more like a club.

Do you know what a club is like, as opposed to church?

In a club, you go to the meeting every week.

And then you go home.

And what happens in the lives of the other club members is ... well, whatever.

Because I get to take my membership, largely, on my terms.

But that’s not how it’s supposed to be in a church.

It’s on God’s terms.

Let me outline God’s terms for you again.

Love / serve / encourage / be kindly affectionate / prefer / have compassion / be hospitable to one another.

That’s why we encourage people to stick around for a coffee at the end of the service.

Instead of racing out the door.

Community is a lot more than a Sunday morning “how are you going?... See you later.”

Folks, changing this has got to be a high priority in any church.

And it’s up to each individual person in the church to be proactive in this change.

If we, as a church, rise up to the challenge, if we are hospitable to one another – which is where we learn to minister to one another – if we actually see this as important, and do it, then there will be a flesh and blood reality, when we say, “You are never alone.”

I don’t know about you, but I long for that in the church.

3. The presence of God

Let me say that the presence of God is a tricky thing for a lot of people.

First of all because ... He’s everywhere.

How annoying!

Especially when you’re doing something you ought not to be doing.

Like Israel’s King David.

Almost 1,000 years BC.

He committed adultery with someone else’s wife.

She got pregnant.

So he murdered her husband to cover it up.

And everything was going so well.

Except for God’s presence.

The One who is everywhere, and sees everything.

God told Nathan the prophet...

Kind of reminds me of an incident years ago when a pastor was having an affair with his secretary. He went overseas on a ministry trip and wrote a letter to his wife and another to his secretary. And put them in the wrong envelopes!

God has a way of bringing things out in the open.

Revelation 6:13-17

And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind. Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place. And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”

For those who resist God, or are indifferent to Him, the presence of God can be a terrifying thing.

But for those who are walking with Him, it’s a totally different story.

What a comfort and blessing the presence of God is!

Psalms 139:7-10

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, Even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me. (If I’m sitting on the toilet in the middle of the night, and as sick as a dog, even there You speak to me.)

You won’t find that last bit in the original Hebrew.

But God is everywhere.

So what does that mean in practical terms?

1. God speaks to us.

Duncan Campbell was apparently at a conference when he had a strong feeling to go to the Hebrides. When he arrived, he made his way up to the church where the cleaner was going about his work.

“What’s happening here?” he asked. “We have a speaker tonight,” said the cleaner. “What is his name?” “Duncan Campbell.” “But I’m Duncan Campbell! How did you know I was coming?” “How did you know to come?”

What that means for us is that, not only is God speaking to us, but we need to be listening.

When our daughter Mandah was 10 years old, I was giving her some instructions

After a while, I asked, “Are you listening?”

Mandah: Yes. Me: What was the last thing I said? Mandah: Are you listening?

I guess she got me on that one.

There’s not a lot of point in God’s speaking to us, if we’re not listening.

And I’m constantly surprised at what God talks about.

It’s not just the deeply spiritual things.

He’s interested in the ordinary, practical things of life too.

I think it was back in the ‘90s that I first got into music software. I remember I was typing in some music for my guitar students. I could put in any note on the guitar till I got to the bottom E. It would not let me do it. I tried everything I could think of.

I spent ages trying to figure it out. Finally, in frustration, I said, “Lord, please help me to figure this out.” Immediately, a thought came to me: Click on the note, and press the Control button at the same time. It worked.

You are not alone. God speaks.

And He can talk on a multitude of topics. He kind of knows a lot!

2. The presence of God brings us wisdom.

I don’t know about you, but I pray for God’s wisdom every day.

James 1:5

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

You don’t need to rely on your own ingenuity.

You are not alone.

And the wisdom of God is available for you, if you want it.

Like I said, He knows stuff.

3. The presence of God shapes our character

Acts 1:8

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be witnesses to Me...

In other words, the presence of God fell upon them.

And boy, did that change them!

They went from being a scared bunch of rabbits who fled for their lives, to boldly proclaiming the gospel at the risk of their own lives.

Now that's a character change.

There's so much more that God's presence offers.

But the key thought is that you are never alone.

If you need wisdom, God is there.

If you need strength, God is there.

If you need love, joy, peace, God is there.

He is there even when no one else is.

If we think back to our reading, Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before He was to die.

What's the one thing that He really wanted from His disciples?

Their support.

But He didn't get it.

But His Father was there.

He's there for you too.

When no one else is.

He can be trusted.

The question is: will you trust Him?

No matter what's happening in your life right now, you are not alone.

The Lord is there.