GATHERED AND SCATTERED

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If the gates of hell won't stand against the church, it's because the church is storming the gates, not the other way around.
Category: Observations

Before I get into the post; here is a bit of a public service announcement. I've got a some things happening over the next couple of weeks which will mean that I won't be able to blog as frequently as I'd like (you can read about one of them here). I apologise for the slight hiatus.

The thoughts in this post will appear in expanded form in a video/podcast at some point in the not too distant future, but I thought they it was worth highlighting the central theme in a blog post.

We are used to the idea that the church is a gathered community; a group of people called together to worship and serve the Triune God. The word generally used for the church in the New Testament is *ekklesia* which means a gathering or assembly of people and was used of town councils and such like before being applied to the church.

We see a pattern of "gathering" through the New Testament. Jesus called together his followers (the twelve plus others) so that he could teach and train them through his words and his actions. Through the book of Acts we see groups of Christians meeting together to break bread, sing and take in the Apostles' teaching. These patterns are repeated in the Apostles. The New Testament doesn't give a specific pattern of how churches should be governed or what our meetings should look like; but the notion of the gathered local community (which is part of a bigger, regional and global family) is clearly outlined in the Bible.

The importance of gathering together is repeated in Scripture and in the life of the local church. We are reminded that we shouldn't give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing. This is particularly important in an increasingly secular society which is turning its back on values that are sympathetic to Christians.

However, the fact that the church is gathered together needs to be held in tension with another factor; the church is scattered in the world. Jesus called together his followers and then sent them out to announce the Kingdom of God. In the first instance they only went to Israel, but after his resurrection, Jesus sent them out into the whole world. A new church gathered in Antioch, and then the Spirit called them to send out Paul and Barnabas to reach the Gentiles (Acts 13). Gathering and scattering are intrinsic to the life of the church. Part of the purpose of our gathering together is to prepare us for the scattering. Apollos was integrated into the life of the church in Ephesus for a short while, so that he could be prepared for service in Greece (Acts 18).

For most people, the scattering is in the form of daily life; work, shopping, the school run and so on.

It's not dramatic, but it does bring us into contact with large numbers of people who do not know Jesus and who may be actively hostile to the Christian faith. Others travel half way across the world to be involved in some sort of mission work. The logistics and geography differ, but the principle of gathering and scattering does not change.

Gathering is intrinsic to scattering. Fellowship with other Christians, the Sacraments and the study of the Bible prepares us (or should prepare us) to be faithful disciples when we are scattered. However, scattering is also intrinsic to gathering; it is part of its purpose. I have encountered people and churches who seem to imply that we have to spend as much time as possible gathered together, circling the wagons and protecting ourselves from the corruption of the world. It's no wonder that the world gets corrupted if Christians effectively absent themselves from it.

In Matthew 16, Jesus says that he will build his church and the gates of hell will not stand against it. It seems to me that, despite Jesus' words, many Christians and churches live in fear being attacked by the gates of hell. We gather together, sing our hymns and listen to sermons determined to ward off any attacks from the outside. The thing is, **gates are not an offensive weapon**. If the gates of hell won't stand against the church, it's because the church is storming the gates, not the other way around.

Post-Christian Britain is a tough place to be scattered into; it can be a hostile and uncomfortable environment. However, this isn't a reason to avoid being scattered, but we do need to ensure that when we gather we are forming and preparing people for their scattering - whether they are scattered round the corner to the shops or across the world. We have to prepare people to be missionaries.