**6th September 2020**

**Call to worship**

Come, then, and worship – for Jesus says,
where two or three are gathered in my name,
I am there among them.

Together we come to worship,
individuals gathered as one
in the name of the Lord.
**Amen.**

**SONG: Come now is the time to worship**



**A prayer of approach**

O Lord our God,
we sometimes tremble as we think of who we are and who you are.
Bring us now, in this moment, to know you.
See us as we are, and see our yearning to be more like you.
May we lay aside anything that hinders our journey with you,
and with our friends and neighbours.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of confession**

In the higgledy-piggledy ways of life, Lord,
with challenges and changes pulling us this way and that,
we sometimes find it hard, in the heat of the moment,
to know what is right and what is wrong.
Forgive us for our failings and wrongdoings.
Forgive our insensitivities to the ways of others.
Forgive anything that cuts us off from each other or from you.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

God of the vastness of all that is,
of all peoples and communities,
here we are, part of this place;
gathering to worship and adore you,
marvelling at your love and care and your persistence with us.
You are beyond our imagining.
Again and again, we are engulfed in your vastness and love.
How can we do anything but praise you, again and again?
**Amen.**

**Lord’s Prayer**



**Matthew 18.15-20 & Romans 13.8-14**

**HYMN: 474 Brother sister let me serve you**

“Where two or three are gathered”. It is a well-known Bible verse and it seems really appropriate for our first Sunday back in church.

We live in odd times where gathering together is an exception and not the norm.[[1]](#endnote-1) For children and teachers, this week marks a return to school and life as normal - but we know that it isn’t normal. Schools have drawn up new codes of behaviour to reflect the times (eg. no aggressive coughing) and students are in bubbles to minimize contact and potential contamination. Apparently if a pupil starts coughing in class, they may get sent home – that’s an invitation isn’t it? Not sure they have thought that one through!

There is a need to reinforce and maintain these new boundaries whilst accepting the fears and anxieties both students and teachers have.

Where two or three are gathered: here we are doing church in a building again and also doing it online. This pandemic has caused us all to rethink what church is and how we do church.

The Gospel reading appears to be about life in the church, but if we consider that there was no formal church when Jesus was telling these stories, ‘church’ doesn’t mean what it often implies today! The Greek word for church, *ekklesia* (literally, ‘called out from’) could mean a gathering, an assembly, or a community.

What do we mean when we say ‘church’? People who meet up in a religious building? People who watch a service online? A community of people who try to follow Jesus’ example in their daily life? Something else? How does our understanding of the word influence and shape what we do as ‘church’ in our local context?

The pandemic has challenged our definition of church and whether being online is enough during these times.

In this month’s reform magazine Lucy Berry a URC Minister and poet says ‘*We’ve seen that online faith services can be a good short-term solution. They can be loving outreach, too. But the idea of normalizing church online should ring our alarm bells. For three reasons:*

*Firstly, there is an important vulnerable church minority which can never get online, but they often get to church with a little help. For the very frail, church contuse to make kind loving sense, long after other things don’t.*

*Secondly a percentage of any congregation really, really don’t want online. It isn’t real church – you don’t ‘gather’. This isn’t an age thing. It’s just a thing.*

*Thirdly, online church allows us to be insular. It is convenient and hermetically sealed. It can keep us safe from contamination of Covid 19. But it can also keep us safe from inconvenient real people, the sort that can wander off the street at any moment but can’t wander into an online service. We talk all the time about being open door churches. But there are no doors to church online. And it is the oddest fish that Jesus loved the most and who wander into our church services, hoping.*

So here we are. Where two or three are gathered…

But where two or three are gathered it can be messy and can lead to problems and fall outs. That is what described in this bible passage. You deal with other people.

Jesus’ teaching is that transgressions are not to be met with aggression but with love, gentleness, and grace.

This section is more about interpersonal relationships than church discipline. Jesus says we each have the responsibility to gently correct one another (taking due note of the warning in the sermon on the mount about seeing the speck in the other persons’ eye and ignoring the log in yours 7.1-4).

 When disciples stray because of sin, we need to name it in the hope that the one straying will see that their actions violate the values of the kingdom and repent. If they will not listen to us, then we should take someone else so there are witnesses of our concerns and the brother/sister’s response. Perhaps the witness will decide that we are wrong, not our brother/sister! Only if someone persists in blatant sin do we tell the rest of the community. The picture is of the community gathered together for fellowship and teaching.

Listening is so important and a willingness to listen out of love.

I love walking in the mountains, I got a bit of that last week whilst away on holiday. I remember on one walk how I had read the guidebooks and planned my route carefully. During the walk, as I prepared to climb the stile to enter a field, I met a man walking the other way. He advised him not to cross the field because there had been a storm the previous night and the field was extra boggy. But, instead of heeding his advice, believing that I knew better, I walked through the field, and sure enough I got stuck in the bog.

Sometimes when we are walking the wrong way, we need to listen to advice from those who have walked the path before us!

I wonder if you have changed your behaviour as a result of what someone said to you?

When I was younger someone accused me of being tight and ungenerous. And they were from Yorkshire! They said I was the kind of person who always begrudged paying for things, the last to the bar, the last to make an offer of time or money. My natural inclination was to become defensive and be offended by such a remark and tell the person who had made it to mind their own business, in words to that effect. But then it made me stop and think about my behaviour and attitudes and it was a painful but useful learning experience. Was it true? Did the cap fit?

What if someone tells us we have done/said something wrong, and we don’t agree – how do we react then? What might help us to decide whether something is right or wrong, or just a different way of seeing or doing? Can we – do we – welcome and work with those who see things differently from the way we do - people who believe different things, who behave differently?

This is all the messy work of when two or three are gathered together. It a laboratory of love – that’s the positive spin on it. And its no mistake that Paul’s great chapter on love in 1 Corinthians 13 is not in the context of romantic weddings where it is often quoted and used, but in the context of a church that had disagreements. The romans passage stresses the commitment to love one another.

Verse 15 starts by saying if your borther or sister who sins. The words ‘against you’ (NIV) in verse 15 are not present in many ancient Bible manuscripts. Who decides what sin is? Is it something personal or communal? Can it be ‘against you’ or is it always and only ‘against God’? Is it about conforming to the normative behaviour with ‘the church’ or something broader? How does our church view dissenters? Or questioners/doubters?

Is the first interaction mentioned in the reading an invitation to listen to the one who is not conforming in order to understand their perspective (rather than promoting ‘our’ particular viewpoint and scapegoating those who don’t share it)?

The second meeting advocated in the reading is to be with a few church members. Might this be an invitation for the ‘non-conforming person’ to meet with a support group to help them through their issue? We might think, for example, of Alcoholics Anonymous, debt counselling, drug or gambling addiction groups. A wider circle of support and reference.

To treat people as a Gentile or tax collector (v.17) seems ironic in this reading, because it is clear that Jesus had a bias for the outcasts of his community, and preferred to mix with the people on the fringes of society – especially those who were outcasts because of religious rules. So, what does it mean here? In some safeguarding cases strict exclusion might be necessary for the good of the community, or some members of it. But in other situations, a relationship should be developed and maintained with the ‘other’ person. Much can be learnt and gained through these relationships – about other people’s perspectives on life, about our own behaviours, and about God.

Verses 18 to 20 then put this all in the context of what church is all about

***18****‘Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be[*[*e*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+18&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-23746e)*] bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be[*[*f*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+18&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-23746f)*] loosed in heaven.*

***19****‘Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.****20****For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.’*

 The community we are part of is not just a club, it is the kingdom of God; Jesus is at the heart of it – so how we live matters. Jesus’ words echo the language previously used of Peter

*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be[*[*d*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+16&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-23692d)*] bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be[*[*e*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+16&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-23692e)*] loosed in heaven.’*  (16.19):

Every disciple is equally able to discern the mind of God in Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 2.15). Here the passage comes full circle and picks up the question about status: we are all equal.

‘Binding’ and ‘loosing’ are about things and issues, not people (the words are gender-neutral), so probably refer to the actions of the straying brother or sister. Jesus says that we are able to discern right and wrong behaviour (because we have heard his teaching; see Matthew 28.20) and have a duty to point it out. The clue to how this works is in the tense of the verbs relating to heaven (v.18). They are future perfects, indicating that we are let in on what God has already decided – that is, through prayer and the Scriptures, we discern God’s mind and communicate that to each other and God, asking him what he wants us to ask him (v.19).

This is possible because we are the community of Christ (v.20). Jesus looks beyond the resurrection to when he will truly be our Immanuel, God with us all the time, at the heart of all our gathering, however small (cf. Matthew 1.23; 28.20).

John Wesley said, ‘The world is my parish.’ Perhaps we should be thinking well beyond the local when reflecting on this Gospel reading, and well beyond the individual. What are the great sins in today’s world? Not looking after the poor? Not caring for the planet in the way we live? What would we highlight, and why?

In America protests continue against police brutality and systemic racism. We often take Jesus’ words to be about what we do when someone sins against us directly, but some sins can be built into the way organizations and societies work. Again, the call from Jesus is to confront such sin, not aggressively but with a clear sight of God’s truth that all people are made in God’s image and are worthy of love and respect. Just because a ‘sin’ is not directed against us personally does not excuse us from seeing where something is wrong and standing with those affected.

Most people don’t do confrontation though. Imagine a sliding scale of confrontation where #0 is crossing the road to avoid the situation and #10 is running up to a person screaming “STOP THAT RIGHT NOW!!”

What are the steps on the scale in between? Would #1 be a disapproving look? What about ‘tutting’ or shaking your head? Where would you place “excuse me but that’s not okay?” on the scale? How about silently acting to undo hurt done?

Imagine some scenarios such as noticing someone drop some litter, jumping a queue or becoming aggressive towards a shopkeeper or not wearing a face mask! Where on the scale would you feel comfortable responding to each situation. Does that fit with Jesus’ words in the gospel reading? What would help you take more action when you see something which is wrong?

News released in the past weeks has shown us something of how our lives have been shaped by the coronavirus. Builders are busy working on extensions and loft-conversions, sales of sofas are up as people have spent more time on them and the sales of LEGO have surged as families look for things to do together with their children. Lego bricks themselves are (in my opinion) beautiful things. Simple, nearly indestructible but able to fit together in so many different ways due to their clever design.

Similarly, Jesus’ words remind us that we are made for community, designed to fit together in a variety of ways.

However, for us to be united like a finished LEGO model, we need to be able to address behaviour that can upset or hurt other people. Jesus is clear that we do this in a loving way, never becoming aggressive, but seeking support if someone will not listen.

Together we build each other up in the body of Christ for where two or three are gathered, Christ is with us.

**Prayer**

Loving God, we confess that sometimes we see sin in the world around us and within us and turn away. Sometimes we see people acting in ways that hurt themselves and others, but we look the other way, putting our own comfort ahead of the good of others. Sometimes we are reluctant to look at our own shortcomings and listen to what others may say about us. Forgive us and help us to address the wrongs we see in truth and in love.

Lord God in the abundance of your mercy

Hear our prayers.

Eternal, ever-living God,
we pray for those who this day need our prayers:
those we see around us…
those we have left at home…
family and friends near and far…
strangers and communities we will never meet or know,
but whose peril we hear of and see on our screens…
those whose life is ebbing away
consumed by old age, frailty, illness or neglect…
those who grieve deeply for lives and loves lost…
those who cause grief and chaos in society
and who live seemingly with different values from ours,
for them and their victims and their families…
those who are forgotten, unnoticed, unloved, unmissed…

Lord God, in your abundance of mercy,
hear our prayers.

We pray for our schools and universities and colleges as they resume their teaching. We pray for heads and principals, teachers and tutors, pupils, and students, that you would help them all to adjust to changes and new routines. Keep them safe and enable an environment that still nurtures growth and understanding

Lord God in your abundance of mercy,

Hear our prayers

We pray for all key workers, thankyou for their efforts and work to keep us well and safe, bless them and protect them

Guide those in leadership of our nation

Guide those in leadership of our church

May wherever and whenever we gather, make us mindful of your presence

Lord God in the abundance of your mercy

Hear our prayers.

Sometimes, O God, I wish I was on my own, not troubled and disturbed by those around me, not jostled and tussled this way and that, but just left to my own devices. But I am not just me, I am part of the community in which I live. Give me patience with those around me, give me love and compassion for those in need, give me understanding of people who are so different from me and give me, above all else, a yearning to do your will.
Amen

Lord God in the abundance of your mercy

Hear our prayers.

**Amen.**

**Notices**

**HYMN: 635 Put peace into each other’s hands**

**A Blessing**

Here we are not alone, O God. Here we are together.
Young and old, good and bad, well and ill,
new to the journey or old hacks in this Christian thing,
here, we are together in community.

Where two or three are gathered.
we are joined together in your name.

And we go in your name to love and serve.

May your blessing, the blessing of the Father Son and Holy Spirit be with us as we go now and always. Amen.

1. Steve Taylor, <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/109-september-october-2020-a/proper-18/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)