#  Psalm 119:33-40


# Matthew 18.15-20

**10th September 2023**

## Real Presence

**Introduction to the Theme**

*You are a Committee Man* June once said to me. This was many years ago when I was serving at a different church.

June meant it, I think, as a compliment, yet I was taken aback. I’d never seen myself as a *Committee Man,* yet on reflection she was probably right, after all people sometimes see you better than you see yourself!

For, although I don’t sit on any committees outside the local church anymore, there was a time, when I was June’s minister, that I could name at least three regional or national committees that had my name as one of their members.

And, on reflection, each of these committees had real power. For example, the Ministerial Selection Conference on which I served either opened or closed the door to people candidating for ministry, and the most powerful committee I attended, the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee, actually exercised legal powers. This group either gave, or withheld permission, for churches that were listed buildings to make architectural changes. Our decision was final and enshrined in law, yes you could put in new windows, no, you can’t remove all your pews. No wonder we were commonly referred to as the most hated committee of the entire Baptist Union.

Yet I remember the brief I was given when I joined that group. Someone from Church House had a quiet word with me to make me aware that there would be lots of representatives from the Georgian or Victorian Society, or from the Local Government Association in the group, but two of us were local ministers and we had been chosen to speak up for the churches, to see these applications not just through architectural eyes, but through the eyes of a local church community. I served on that group for over fifteen years and always thought it was my job to speak up, especially, for the little churches, battling to stay in their buildings and wanting to make them relevant.

Well, when they stopped serving lunches at Church House, I gave up most of the committees!

Today’s reading from the Gospel isn’t specifically about committees, but it is about the way we in The Church, come to decisions about our life together.

For many people, who believe a camel is just a horse designed by a committee, working together isn’t always easy. Indeed, although the last verse of our passage this morning goes: *Where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them.* One commentator I read said: *in reality it sometimes feels as if this verse should read, where two or three meet in my name it can be really hard to get along.*

A wise rabbi was pondering how difficult it is to make decisions, especially in any community. No one person usually has all the facts at their fingertips and different perspectives often bring a better sense of direction, so he said: *Judge not alone, for none may judge save One, that is God.*

This morning’s passage from Matthew is one of the hardest in the gospel to get to grips with. But it is tremendously important. Because the decisions we make affect the lives of individuals, especially those who sometimes have no voice of their own. And throughout this part of Matthew’s gospel there is a constant theme running, that we should treat the ‘little ones’, that is the vulnerable and marginalised, with respect and understanding.

And then there is the idea in this passage that our decisions, made by churches and in churches, are often seen by those outside the churches as being done ‘in the name of God’. And that’s an enormous responsibility reminding us that the way we live and act in this community of faith will make a statement about the God who is at the centre of our faith.

So, twenty years on from hearing June say to me, *ah, you’re a Committee Man,* I sense once more that how we talk, act, and decide together is a really important part of what it means to be The Body of Christ.

**The sermon**

I’m a bit of a fan of those pictures that can be looked at in different ways. For example, from one angel it’s an older lady in a bonnet, yet from another we see a younger one dancing. Perhaps what we see first says a great deal about us!

And maybe the same could be said about today’s gospel.

No one really knows what to make of the idea that what we bind on earth will be bound in heaven. It sounds on the one hand, as if Matthew is giving the emerging Church enormous power to speak, as it were, on behalf of heaven and of God. And down through the succeeding centuries, through its councils and synods, The Church hasn’t been shy of acting this way. *Speaking in the name of God* isn’t something that any of us should do lightly.

So, the emphasis that Matthew places on The Church to discern the mind of Christ together, rather than singularly, is surely welcome here. Today’s Gospel calls us to search for that common mind, and to embark upon a process of dialoguing, so that in such a spirit of congregationalism we find a way to live together that we pray honours God.

Now that is quite a different reading of the passage than one that emphasises the authority of a group that can, apparently by agreeing on earth, then invoke a divine imprimatur.

In essence today’s gospel asks a question, and maybe our Jewish friends would have put it this way *Where is the Shekinah of God to be found?*That word *Shekinah* means the dwelling or the presence of God. And Matthew points us in two direction this morning hinting that God’s presence is particularly found when people come together, and, even more so when they seek the compassion of God together.

So, firstly, when we come together to talk, to pray, to worship something dynamic can happen among us, we sense the whisper, or the shouting of the Spirit.

In the Hebrew tradition it’s put like this: *God’s Shekinah is promised when two or three gather to study the Torah.*

Part of my life as *The Committee Man,* as June called me was to be Moderator of a Regional Association of Churches that were, it pains me to say, somewhat fractious and divided. I once had to chair a bit of a bumpy meeting and I was pretty sure that all sort of calls would be made from the floor that could potentially collapse the meeting. I spoke to the Board of Trustees and shared my fear that it could all become ecclesiastical chaos and one wise minister suggested a great plan of action. He said to me, if it gets too difficult for you up there, pause the meeting, call us trustees to join you on the platform and we’ll gather around you and figure out the next move together – you don’t have to feel you are alone.

I slept easier in my bed that night! Somehow facing a challenge together instantly made the process better and how comforting to think that instead of one mind, six or seven minds would be willing to come together and seek the Mind of Christ.

What does the passage say: *For where two or three meet together in my name, I am there among them.*The theologians and church historians among us will be aware of the endless hours of debate that Synods and Councils have given to the idea of *The Real Presence.* The focus of that idea is the bread and wine and if, and how, it contains something special and of God.

I love the way some bible commentators work with today’s gospel reminding us of something very precious. The idea that God’s presence, God’s real presence is so often experienced in community.

Maybe, say, in a Church Meeting as a confusing issue is discussed, yet as a result of all the listening and talking together a way forward is found. In a housegroup, in the security of a smaller number of people, as different understandings of scripture are shared together – there’s that word again, together, as we talk together, we sense an encounter with a deeper understanding. In a time of worship as we sing, pray, celebrate, and hold silence together, God breaks in and we become the holder of a new or deeper truth.

In all these ways, and so many more, something of the Real Presence of God, is made manifest among us and we are glad whether it’s a whisper or a shout, as it were, from heaven.

Of course today’s passage from Matthew sprinkles a sense of reality in our understanding of Church. For that Real Presence of Christ we long to see expressed at the centre of every congregation is often mired by factions and disagreements. So, in this chapter, described by some as *The Little Rule,* a process is chronicled to show how conflicts might be handled. It’s like page one of the manual.

It's a three-stage process – and it must reflect Matthew’s contemporary situation of a young church already finding harmony elusive.

Stage one isn’t to gossip about a person but to privately have a word. This isn’t the church being ‘nice’ but being ‘real’.

If things remain tricky meet together as a bigger group and see if you can find a way forward.

If they remain sticky, then let the whole congregation seek a way together and come to a common mind.

Of course we can interpret these general guidelines with a stridency they don’t deserve. Some 18th century Puritan congregations would even pass ex communication judgements on the young people of their community for playing billiards on the Sabbath. We still have the church record books that chronicle their rush to judgment.

And maybe such enthusiasm fails to notice the compassion locked away in Matthew’s Little Rule. Because the final course of action advocated here, to someone who won’t change his ways is, and I quote, to *treat him like a tax collector.*Well, there is surely an irony here, because these are the words of Jesus and it begs the question, *how did our Lord treat tax collectors?*Didn’t he eat with them? Didn’t he talk with them? Didn’t he even invite one called Matthew, whose gospel we read today, to leave his collecting booth and come, follow me.

Yes, in chapter 18 we are given a process, a procedure is advocated, talk privately, then as a group and maybe as a church – yet in the end, if we really take seriously the way Jesus treats tax collectors, then keep the door open and let mercy and forgiveness flavour our judgements.

The cleric and friend of Wordsworth, FW Faber put it this way in a hymn:
*For the love of God is broader
than the measure of our mind;
and the heart of the eternal
is most wonderfully kind.*This summer, around the end of July, Songs of Praise came from the Corrymeela Community, in County Antrim, this year celebrating its 60th birthday.

I found it a very moving broadcast as we learnt about its founder’s dream, the Presbyterian minister Ray Davy who longed that through encounter and conversation Catholics and Protestants would come to value that there was more to discover about each other than fear from each other.

One part of the programme has stayed with me. In Corrymeela’s beautiful conference lounge, overlooking the ocean, the Shankill’s Women Centre from north Belfast were meeting. These women came from both the Protestant Shankill Road and the Catholic Falls Road, but as their wonder convener, Eileen Wier said on the programme, here at Corrymeela *they found the space where they didn’t need to look over their shoulders.*

What a wonderful tribute to Corrymeela’s dream for peace and reconciliation, that through encounter and conversation something of the Real Presence of Jesus might be found, the spirit of Jesus who always kept loving, who always keeps the door open.

Together we can discover the mind of Christ and together we can offer each other the love of Christ. And that, surely is the Real Presence that we all long and pray for.

May that be both our longing and our experience. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 7th September 2023*