

Two or Three

Psalm 119:33-40; Matthew 18:15-20

How many people does it take to make a Church? What are the things that that Church has to do? When I was on holiday, I worshipped in a congregations of 50, and 15, and 200, and 60. At our 9.30am service we get around 20, and at this service anything from 120 to 150. Dependent on the weather, or if there's rugby on the television!

But how many does it take to make a Church?

Matthew uses the word *ekklesia* – which means Church, or gathering, only twice in all of the Gospels. Matthew is reflecting on the Jewish requirement for ten people to be present for corporate worship; but here the number is foreshortened to two or three. Such is enough to make the prayer of the community valid. There was also the familiar Jewish statement which said: 'When two sit down together and engage themselves with the words (of God's Law) the (presence of God is in their midst.'ⁱ

The context, probably a reflection on the nature of the Church after the resurrection but inserted by Matthew as he wrote his gospel, has to do with the promise of Jesus to be wherever and whenever His disciples call His Name, however few in number they may be. In this reading it has also to do with maintaining discipline within the Church community and society. When someone has done something wrong, these words, set within how the community is to behave towards the wrongdoer, redefines the goals of confrontation or intervention in seeking to rescue and forgive, and to offer care in a spirit of humility. The Church as a gathering of the people of God sometimes has to face hard things, and hard times, and hard people.

Scholars think the words about witnesses and confrontation are unlikely to have been spoken by Jesus. They reflect one of the developments in the early Christian Church, and probably a more conservative Jewish Christian Church at that. Remember, Christianity was originally a reforming branch of Judaism, before it developed away.

What is proposed in this reading is difficult for us to hear, and it can and has been misused. It has to do with how we treat people who seriously break the rules of society and faith. We find ourselves in the area of wrong-doing often turning a blind eye – because it's too difficult or embarrassing to call out or deal with; or we become outwardly, or inwardly which is worse, overly judgemental, with a desire to seek vengeance, or compensation. Not an attempt at correction and reconciliation. Are we really, as the passage suggests, when dealing with someone who utterly refuses to acknowledge their sin or crime or wrong-doing, treat them as a, "Gentile and a tax collector", that is to expel them from the community and shun them?

Some Christian communities still do this: the Amish in parts of North America. Shunning is seen an attempt to make plain to the wrongdoer the seriousness of their misdemeanour, as well as to protect the order and well-being of the community. Whether or not we think this has a place in Christian Churches, it seems to me that the practice is still alive and well in modern society, whether we think it right or wrong.

Nurse Lucy Letby was found guilty of killing at least seven infants in her care and allegedly harming several others. Public revulsion at the horrific crimes was amplified by the popular press, particularly when Letby refused to attend her sentencing, and face justice. A form of virtual shunning took place. Letby, like other criminals convicted of unimaginable crimes, has been shut away from society. It's what happens to wrongdoers when they refuse to come to repentance.

“Bringing wrongdoers to repentance is fraught with peril. Concern for and exposure of someone’s sin or crim might be nothing more than a pious veneer masking anger, vested interest, or petty agendas. No wonder Christians have not done this sort of thing for a long time (in most communities). The potential for abuse, shame and harm is great.”ⁱⁱ

Healthy communities have boundaries that, when respected, ensure that everyone is welcome and safe. Being a Christian does not mean refusing to set boundaries because we adhere to the ‘gospel of don’t speak with your mouth full and be nice’. It’s why we have a Safeguarding policy across the Church of Scotland. We are committed to welcoming all people, but it does not mean we neglect those who may be harmed if we allow unacceptable or dangerous behaviour. Where we set the boundaries, and how we deal with those who cross them disruptively or illegally, is why we need the *ekklesia*, the community of believers, the Church, the two or three gathered together, or more, to make sure that we are all held accountable and work together for the good of all.

Lucy Letby was tried, judged and condemned. The community needs to be protected from her, and she needs to be protected from herself. It may be that those skilled and trained and strong in dealing with people who have broken the law do not give up on even the most broken and dangerous of individuals. The uncomfortable challenge of our Bible passage requires the community to confront and, within careful parameters, reclaim the offender. And however remote the possibility, find some justifiable way to reconciliation. I don’t say that road is ever easy, or even possible. But it is still there.

It is still there because of Jesus. Jesus ate and drank with ‘Gentiles and tax collectors’ – the people excluded from polite society. Amongst the two or three gathered together, amongst the saved, and amongst the sinners, Jesus is there. Working in community with us to change lives, as well as to stand by justice for victims and perpetrators. This is the tough love of our Gospel, and it rightly

causes us pause to think and reflect how we, in great ways, or small ways, work out with others what Jesus is saying and meaning in the hardest of situations.

I told this story on Good Friday this year to underline the toughness of what Jesus means by His presence amongst us, and His desire for justice, and His desire for reconciliation and mercy. A few years ago I visited Broadmoor Hospital. This high security establishment contains some of the most dangerous men in Britain. A new chapel has been incorporated into the new building. Services are held there regularly for the patients, with a hard-working multi-faith chaplaincy team, led by a Church of Scotland minister.

When you go into the wards, like any hospital, you see the list of names of those who are 'in'. Except many of the names you recognise. Whilst there is great help given and kindness shown, there is also watchfulness. I was invited to meet with a discussion group that gathered on a regular basis. Each man present came with his own 'minder'. They'd had a chance to discuss the questions they wanted to put to me. They didn't often have a visit from a Christian leader. It was a few days after Easter and clearly it had been on their minds. We sat around a table with these men who were serving lengthy sentences for crimes committed, and who were receiving extensive psychiatric and psychological treatment.

Their first question: "So then, this Jesus you Christians talk about. Did He die for the likes of us?" What on earth do you answer to a question like that, in a situation like that? I found myself saying, "Well, what do *you* think?" I will never forget the conversation that followed. Some had lots to say, some said nothing. At times like that and in a place like that and with men like that, all those great theological, ethical, moral, and Biblical questions become very sharp. Did Jesus die for the likes of them? More than two or three of us had gathered there in His Name. Was He there in the midst, and what was He doing? Did Jesus die for the likes of those men in Broadmoor. Or Lucy

Letby? Where does confession and personal responsibility play their part? What about justice not only for the perpetrator of crimes, but for their victims?

When we come to make these hard decisions as a nation, church, community, or individual, and work out what we think and we believe, we are not left on our own. There are guidelines to work through, and behaviours to follow, and hard thinking to be done. We have our work cut out for us. "For where two or three are gathered in My Name, there am I in the midst."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Leith Fisher, *But I Say to You*, pps230-231

ⁱⁱ James C Howell, *Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew Vol 2*, p95