

UNITED PRAYER

Matthew 18:19-20

Our gospel reading today is very short, just two verses – you can find these on page [***] of the church bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen.

Let's look at those two verses:

“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

(verses 19-20)

So if two or more of us pray in agreement for the same thing, then not only will our prayers be heard, but Christ promises to be with us and amongst us. Isn't that amazing. Isn't that wonderful. What an encouragement for us to come together in corporate prayer – why don't you come along and join in with our next monthly prayer breakfast.

Of course, as Giles told us a few weeks ago, corporate prayer isn't the only kind of prayer we should be engaging in. Jesus often withdrew to pray by himself (Matthew 14:23) and he chose to pray his last prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane alone (Matthew 26:36). Indeed, Jesus specifically taught the importance of our praying alone and in secret:

“But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Matthew 6:6 NIV)

But, as we see from our reading this morning, praying together in agreement with like minded Christians is also important and carries the special promise of Jesus's presence with us. It's interesting that the Greek word used here for agree, *sumphoneo*, literally means to symphonise – it's the word from which we get our modern word symphony. So when we pray together we're to be in symphonic

harmony with our prayer partners, just like the musicians in an orchestra.

The promise of Jesus's presence with us in verse 20 is interesting in the context of Jewish culture and tradition. For Jewish worship to be valid at least ten men had to be gathered together, that's why at least ten men were required to start a synagogue. Also, the Jewish rabbis had a saying that when 'ten people sit together and occupy themselves with the *torah*, the *shekinah* abides among them' (Aboth 3:2). That's amazing! The *shekinah*, the glory of God, which was absent from the second temple, the Temple in Jerusalem in Jesus's days, was manifest when Jews were gathered around studying and obeying God's Word. Now Jesus replaced the *torah*, the Law, by himself. When disciples are gathered praying in the name of the Messiah, he is in their midst; the *shekinah* shines among them and from them. That's really amazing! Here Jesus is clearly looking forward to the time when the resurrected risen Christ will be present amongst his earthly followers as they gather together in His name.

Now, at first sight, our reading seems like a *carte blanche* for two or more of us to get together and ask for absolutely anything – perhaps I should get together with Pauline and ask for us to receive youth and good health and unimaginable riches – and on the basis of these two verses it sounds as if we'll get what we ask for. But actually things aren't quite so simple. It's always dangerous to take just a couple of verses from the Bible literally without carefully considering their context; without considering how they relate to the material that surrounds them and indeed how they relate to the whole of scripture. That's certainly the case with these two verses.

Here, the immediate context of our two verses is, that Jesus is talking about the handling of disagreements in the church community. Look at the immediately preceding verses:

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three

witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 18:15-18 NIV)

Initially, the idea of treating a fellow Christian as a ‘pagan or a tax collector’, sounds harsh and unforgiving – especially when we remember that the Jews despised tax collectors as traitors, working for the Roman occupiers and generally collecting more tax than was required to enrich themselves at the expense of the local population. But we need to remember that Jesus didn’t simply ignore pagans and tax collectors he loved them into repentance and new hope. Matthew would have had good reason to remember that, for he himself had been a tax collector until Jesus called him into a new life.

So the verses of our reading today need to be seen within this context of discipline amongst church members. These verses give a beautiful promise about answered prayer, but primarily within this context of discipline amongst members of Christ’s body. In such a disciplinary situation prayer helps enormously. Indeed it’s essential. So often the disagreements which need to be resolved are spiritual battles, not merely human failings and misunderstandings. That’s why prayer is essential. I think we can be sure that prayer will be answered in such a context. We’re being told that prayer offered for reconciliation is in line with God’s will and will never fall on deaf ears in heaven.

Now, having limited the application of the promise of verse 19 by virtue of the context in which it appears, I do want to make it clear that it *does* have application to prayer more generally. The linkage of our verses to discipline amongst members of Christ’s body is not absolute, indeed some theologians don’t agree that there is a link – although personally I think a link does exist. The fellowship of believers coming together in agreement is being contrasted with the situation of believers in disagreement. But, even in a wider context, we’re not being given a blanket promise that *all* prayers agreed by two or more believers will be answered. Jesus isn’t listing *all* the conditions that apply to prayer but simply making it clear that God is

always ready and willing to hear the prayers of even two of his disciples gathered together.

Scripture more generally limits God's response to prayer in a number of ways. Firstly, God will answer prayer by giving us what we *need* rather than what we may *desire*. The Lord's prayer instructs us to ask for our 'daily bread' not for fine garments and great wealth. The 'good things' which God will surely give his children don't include everything His children might like to have. Secondly, God will only grant petitions that are in line with His will. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed that he might not have to go to the cross (Mark 14:32-40), although I don't believe he seriously expected his prayer to be answered because he knew that he was not praying in line with God's will.

Further, the words of verse 20 limit the breadth of the promise of answered prayer. This verse tells us that Jesus will be amongst believers where two or more come together in his name and link the presence of Jesus to the answering of the prayer requests of those who have come together by the use of the word *for* at the beginning of the verse. Of course, coming together *in the name of Jesus* implies that the coming together is for purposes that are in line with Jesus's teachings because when we are doing something in the name of another we act as that person's representatives and must do what we know that person would want and approve of.

When we gather for prayer in Jesus's name we must appreciate the fact that we are acting in the authority which we have been delegated by our Lord. When Columbus discovered America, he claimed the newly discovered lands in the name of the king and queen of Spain. In doing so, he exercised the authority delegated to him by those he represented.

Likewise, we are called on to pray on the basis of the authority delegated to us by our Lord. How do we do this? By praying in agreement with God. Exercising our delegated authority through prayer to enforce God's heavenly decrees. If our prayers are to be

answered we must always act in agreement with God's heavenly decrees (Matthew 5:19).

It's interesting that verse 19 speaks of two or more believers agreeing about anything they ask for. This corresponds to the need under Jewish Law for two or more witnesses to confirm any testimony that might be given, although the introduction of a third person – Jesus – in verse 20 makes sense only in the context of looking forward to the presence of the risen Christ amongst his earthly followers. As I said a moment ago, the use of the word “for” at the beginning of verse 20 makes it clear that the presence of Jesus amongst those who are praying forms the basis for expecting united prayer to be answered.

When we pray corporately we must pray in agreement and fellowship with God and in fellowship and agreement with one another. That's one of the reasons why the unity of believers is so important. Paul calls us into unity as believers:

“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 15:5-6 NIV)

and Jesus himself prayed for the unity of believers just before he went to the cross:

“I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one.” (John 17:11 NIV)

Furthermore, there is great power when believers are united in prayer and are praying in line with God's will, look at what the early church was able to achieve by being united in such prayer:

“On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: ““Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their

stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." (Ac 4:23-31 NIV)

So this morning we've learned that we should pray together in agreement with one another and that this praying in agreement with one another must also be in agreement with God. We can pray together in agreement with God for one another and for others and when we do this Jesus will be present with us making sure that our prayers are answered. Intercession is most powerful when believers pray together in agreement with God. Indeed Pauline and I have felt and have been upheld by the faithful prayers of our HTC Prayer Group praying for us and for our daughter Rebeka.

If you don't already pray with anyone else, find a prayer partner. It could be your wife or husband as the case might be or it could be someone from your home group or a Christian friend. But, do make sure you regularly pray in unity with a Christian prayer partner. It's good to pray in larger groups as well, come along and join in our monthly prayer breakfast. Don't let that detract from your times of individual prayer, corporate prayer doesn't replace individual prayer, it supplements it.

The more of us who learn how to pray together in agreement with the Father's will for ourselves and for others, the more we will experience the power and provision of God – and as a result we will know and experience the Lord's presence in our midst. So let's get together and get praying in agreement with one another and in agreement with our Father. Amen.