

Romans 6:12-end

Matthew 10:40-42

## Introduction

One of the reasons I love the Gospels is because when you read them you hear the authentic voice of Jesus. His voice has many nuances: it can be comforting, challenging, confusing, joyous, astonishing, informative and transformative.

As we read the Gospels we meet with the person of Jesus. We hear about what concerns him, we see his compassion and concern for the people he meets, we see his power to change, we hear his impatience with those who cannot see him as he is. His personality shines through the pages as we read them and we meet with him.

Over the past three weeks we have been reading in Matthew chapters 9 and 10 and have seen Jesus' concern for the people he met. We read, *"<sup>6</sup> When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*

Jesus understands human beings deeply. He embraced our humanity and knows our need. He came specifically to rescue us from our 'lostness'. His response to the human predicament is twofold.

First to encourage his followers to pray:

*<sup>37</sup> Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. <sup>38</sup> Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*

And then to ask his followers to be the answer to their own prayer by sending them out to preach the Good News to those he met upon the way.

He didn't send them out unprepared. We read in verse one of chapter ten

*"Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness."* He gave them the power and authority they needed to minister his healing and forgiveness to the people they met and he also gave them detailed instructions.

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He told them what to say: <sup>7</sup> *As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'*

He told them what to do <sup>8</sup> *Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy,<sup>[a]</sup> drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.*

And he told them what to expect. He warned them that the message he was giving them – the news that God's rule was close at hand would cause division and a violent response. He warned them that as a result of God's rule being established families would be divided and they themselves would be persecuted and called to give an account of themselves by the authorities.

Jesus wasn't asking them to do anything he himself wasn't prepared to do and he reassured them. "Don't be afraid." "Don't be afraid." "Don't be afraid."

Tomorrow is The Feast of St Peter and St Paul, two of the greatest evangelists; the leaders of the early church. They went with Jesus' message of love and challenge and transformation to the ends of the known earth and suffered for the message they carried. It is on this feast, known as 'Petertide' that the Church of England traditionally ordains its ministers. Thirty years ago this week I was ordained deacon at St Mary's Church, Walthamstow. Looking back over the years I see that it is the clarity of the calling that I received from God that has sustained me, and resourced me and enabled me. Serving Jesus isn't easy. It can't be because he leads us where he has gone before and that is in the opposite direction to the world in which we live. The message of the Gospel is one of hope and forgiveness but it is also one of challenge and so sharing it is not easy.

This chapter of Matthew's Gospel is a comprehensive handbook for Jesus' followers, not just ordained ministers, but all of us, as we seek to share the Good News with the people amongst whom we live.

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And our passage this morning gives two principles that I have used as the foundation of my ministry

<sup>40</sup> “Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

We often think that we need to preach the Gospel by quoting the Bible at people, by telling them they are sinners that need to repent – which was a mistake I made at the age of sixteen when I told my mother that. In fact it is actually more powerful to live the Christian life so that people can see Christ in us and meet with him. A very helpful saying that has influenced me is “You may be the only Gospel someone ever reads”. It is being with people and living as Christians that we have most influence. We don’t need to soften the message to attract them we just need to present Christ to them. And we also can relax and leave the result to Jesus.

I well remember my despair when as a staff nurse in a hospice I was about to give a young woman an injection that I knew would put her into an induced coma. I remember saying to God, ‘I can’t do this. She hasn’t turned to you yet. I don’t want to put her beyond your reach.’ And I clearly heard God say to me, “Angie, no one is ever beyond my reach. Leave this to me.”

The second principle is:

<sup>42</sup> And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.” And Jesus expands on this in the parable of the sheep and the Goats where he tells his disciples that anyone who extends love and compassion, help and support to anyone in need is actually ministering to him personally. That was the principle by which Mother Theresa always lived and it is one I have tried to follow as well. We need to seek to see Jesus in everyone we meet and serve him in them.

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Looking back over the past thirty years life has changed immeasurably but not more so than in the past six months. These months of lockdown have been difficult and painful and have needed courage and perseverance to deal with them but they have also shown us new possibilities.

They have taught us different ways of worshipping

Internet

Praying over the telephone

Listening to services over the telephone

Worshipping alone and in our own homes with cats on our laps and dogs at our feet

And as we gradually return to worshipping together it will not be the same. We will not be able to sing together for quite a while, we will not be able to linger over coffee or greet each other at the door or exchange the peace. We will not be going back to "normal" – and neither should we. We have discovered new ways of being Christian, of being Church and of worshipping that have taught us much, that have taken us beyond the walls of our churches and have connected us with our communities in new ways. We need to learn from that and move forward. We need to live our faith for others to see and serve Jesus in everyone we meet.

I just want to finish by reading something that the Archbishop has written. He and I were at college together though he was a year behind me. We are fortunate to have him as our leader in these difficult times.

Justin says this:

*As we prepare to gather together again, we do so knowing that many will be returning bearing new burdens of grief and anxiety. Others will be filled with hope and excitement. But we do not gather just by ourselves. We are gathered in the embrace of God who holds our griefs, fears and hopes, and*

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*who walks with us into this new and uncertain future, lighting our path along the way.*

*So please pray, not just for our return to our beloved buildings - with all the safety precautions that we must get right - but also for our return to each other. As we meet again, pray that we do so in the knowledge that God is calling us anew to be communities that truly care for one another, support those in need, work for justice and the common good, and boldly proclaim the good news of Jesus.*