

## Introduction

One of the reasons I love the Gospels is because when you read them you hear the authentic voice of Jesus through the pen of people who knew him and were there with him. 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

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needed to minister his healing and forgiveness to the people they met and he also gave them detailed instructions. 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>1</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.”

On Thursday it was 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 three 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,

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as we seek to share the Good News with the people amongst whom we live.

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.

Looking back over the past thirty years life has changed immeasurably but not more so than in the past three years. We have lived through a pandemic with all the challenges of lockdown, we have faced the cost of living crisis with a huge reduction in living standards and real fear for the future. These years have been difficult and painful and have needed courage and perseverance to deal with them but they have also shown us new possibilities.

Our worship has changed for several reasons; when we were worshipping on line we were able to use different more modern music which has enhanced the quality of our worship. We found that difficult to do in individual congregations but it has changed our worship. We have also now made sure that we record a service every week and make it available on line and on CD.

My attitude to church attendance has altered. I confess that in the past, before the Pandemic, when people stopped coming to church, either through ill health or other commitments that made it difficult I didn't focus much on finding other ways of including them and helping them belong. I would take home communion to people and visit them in hospital but now I am aware of the possibilities for connection that weren't in my frame of reference. The use of zoom and facetime, praying with someone over the phone, visiting people who cannot come to us – all of these things have made me much more outward looking and have challenged me to find different ways of connecting with people.

In the past year in all of our churches we have been introducing more informal worship, we have thought about meeting families in the village hall and engaging them in ways that are more attractive to them. We are thinking of ways of welcoming people into our churches, with café provision and a stop for dog walkers.

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When we went into lockdown we had to think seriously about who our community was, what their needs were and how we could reach out to support and connect with them. We learned to sit in gardens and chat. To bring cake out to people's doors when we couldn't do tea and chat, to use the website to keep people informed and connected. Our magazines became more important. I am amazed how many people read my contributions to the magazines and how they want to discuss them with me.

The significant thing about this chapter of Matthew is that it is all about the disciples being sent out. About going to people where they are, in their own situations, about bringing the gospel to their homes and where they spend their lives. Over the years the church has become almost fortress like. We have developed and cherished our worship, and although we may try to make it accessible by its very nature it is alien to many people in today's society.

The language we use, the sermons we preach, the inclusion of children – we try but often it doesn't engage. Where else in today's society do we have community singing – apart from at football matches? Where else do we expect people to sit and listen to a monologue for twenty minutes – or more if you are unlucky. It might happen in lecture theatre and at University but even there technology and experiential ways of teaching are used. For too long we have depended on people coming into our churches and joining us. We have expected them to conform and to enjoy what we do. If we want to reach our community we need to go out as the disciples did.

*As Jesus instructed "7 As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'* That means we need to show GFod's love to people at work, in the pub, in the supermarket,. At the school gate, at the garden gate. We need to show them God's love and make them curious about what it is that motivates us, what it is that fuels us and enthuses us. Then they will want to listen and to meet Jesus for themselves.

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And as we returned to worshipping together it wasn't the same. Some people haven't returned to be with us. We sing together and socialize but it has take a while to take the offering in church, we still don't take the common cup. Some of our attitudes have changed but we are still expecting people to come to us. We need to learn to go out to them.

We should not try to go back to "normal. 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 wrote at the height of the Covid Pandemic towards the end of the lockdowns. 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 said 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 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.*

**Readings**  
**Romans 6:12-end**  
**Matthew 10:40-42**

**The reward of ministry**

**Thriplow/Shepreth**