"THE HARVEST IS PLENTIFUL"

Matthew 9:35 – 10:1

If you've looked at the latest update for the Ignite Youth Ministry, you'll have seen that they mention some words of Jesus that are at the heart of this reading this morning – and they're words that I've heard others use around the church recently, especially in connection with the *Talking Jesus* course many of you have followed. Talking to his disciples Jesus takes up the often used image of a harvest to refer to the gathering in of people who respond to his teaching and says, *"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few"*. So, particularly with the outreach of the Baseball Camp less than twenty four hours away, it seemed a good place to focus our thoughts this morning andf to look at that sentence in the context in which it was first spoken.

As part of his itinerant ministry of teaching, preaching and healing Jesus is bringing the *"good news of the kingdom"* to the people of Galilee and the wider region around. He tells stories which give hints about the kingdom, the coming rule of God, and he demonstrates in his own life what life in that kingdom will be like. He offers glimpses of this kingdom in the way in which he improves the lives of those who come into contact with him, often by healing them, but also by liberating them from powers and influences which are preventing them being the people, the human beings that God wants them to be.

And Matthew here gives a brief insight into the motivation for this ministry, the reason that Jesus acts as he does when confronted by people in need. In *v36* he writes that Jesus *"had compassion on them"*. When he saw the crowds of people who were flocking to see and to listen to him, he was deeply moved. We probably don't quite grasp the depth of Jesus' compassion for them as that English word is one which is very common and used in all kinds of situations. But Matthew's Greek word here isn't a terribly common one and is used only of Jesus by the gospel writers. (Paul and the other New Testament writers use a different word.) The root of the word Matthew chooses is a Greek word meaning *"guts"*. Jesus felt a real gut-churning emotion as he looked at these people. He was moved emotionally and that had an almost physical effect on him.

Every now and then we hear on the television news or read a report in the newspapers of something that really upsets us, don't we? The classic is maybe the impact which Michael Buerk's filmed report of dying children in Ethiopia back in the 1980s had on the nation, leading to such initiatives as Live Aid and so on. Well, that's the kind of emotion Matthew seems to be trying to convey here. Jesus is almost sickened by what he sees.

And what Matthew says causes him this great surge of love and pity is not the diseases which he is healing. It's not the poverty of the people or the struggle that they are having under foreign occupation or

the harshness of their lives in a rural subsistence economy. It's their helplessness: *"they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* Disease, poverty, oppression, struggle – they are all things which have been part of the human condition down through the centuries and they are still rampant in various places in our world today. But so is helplessness – and that probably touches far more people, certainly in our culture, than many of those other things. Even when people are healthy, wealthy and wise, there is a deep feeling of helplessness in the lives of many, many people. What's life all about? Where are we going? What can I do about all this? Let's reflect on that for a few moments, because it may be something that you can identify in your own situation or in the situations of those who are close to you.

1. HARASSED

Once again, the force of the Greek word Matthew uses here is a bit diluted in translation. Jesus looked out over these people and saw a crowd of folk who were *"harassed",* who were *"greatly troubled"*, who were weighed down by the burdens of everyday life. For some of them, no doubt, there was a crisis in their life. Things weren't going as smoothly as they wanted. Maybe that was the result of illness or injury. It may have been economic. It may have had something to do with broken relationships or dysfunctional families. But they were struggling with particular issues.

Others may have been grappling with the issue of uncertainty. They had no idea where their life was going. They couldn't see how their situation was going to develop. They lived from day to day, with no real hope for the future and no awareness of any eternal dimension to their lives. They were constantly anxious because they weren't able to plan ahead as they'd like to.

Yet others were just unable to work out why they were there. What was the point of life? Where was it all going? How could they find some kind of fulfilment, some sort of satisfaction in their day to day existence? Life was generally getting them down and they couldn't work out how to change that.

Maybe some of that rings a bell for you. They are still the issues that are at the root of people's struggles with life today: people harassed – greatly troubled – by uncertainty and anxiety, people who don't know what the future holds, people who wonder what the point of it all is. There's no consensus, no direction, no sense of hope about the future – long-term or short-term for many people. And, having created human beings with a purpose in mind – the co-management of this amazing world with God and a full, fulfilling relationship with him – God looks on us and is filled with compassion, he has this gut-wrenching sense of pity for people who have lost their way and need to rediscover their purpose in life. But where do they go

to find some kind of resolution to this dilemma? William Barclay quotes a writer (Geoffrey Heawood) who says that *"the great tragedy and problem of this age is that we are standing at the crossroads and the signposts have fallen down"*. Barclay wrote that in the 1950s, but it is as true today as it was then, as it was in Jesus' day, as it has always been. And the reason for that is that not only were the crowds Jesus looked out over *"harassed"*, but they were also *"helpless"*.

2. HELPLESS

The difficulty was not simply in the situation in which they found themselves – as we've already said, that's part of the human condition, part of the result of our fall from the perfect relationship with God that he intended, part of the result of the influence of evil in our world and sin in our lives – but it was perhaps exacerbated by the fact that there was no-one to show them the way out of the mess they felt they were in. There was nowhere to turn.

As Matthew makes clear again and again in this gospel, the people whom you would have expected to offer some help – the Jewish teachers of the Law and the various religious leaders – were incapable of seeing the problem, let alone offering a solution. And that continues to be very much the case today: it seems there is no-one offering moral leadership, offering any signpost to the way out of our dilemmas and distress.

We now live in a society where each person is considered to be their own teacher. There is a plethora of different attempts to offer an answer and we are left to make the choices ourselves. Look at all the different religious options that there are – and all are said to be equally valid. Look at the various philosophies that are touted around – some original, most cobbled together out of bits and pieces of other philosophies and religions. Any attempt at certainty is met with disdain and ridicule – "How can anyone know the truth?" *This Is My Truth, Tell Me Yours* as the Manic Street Preachers titled one of their albums. Those who claim to have set their faith in any kind of Christian spirituality are dismissed as gullible or ignorant. Science claims to have answers – and certainly that can, indeed, help us discover ***how***, but not ***why***.

And because of the idea that we all have something valid to contribute to the debate, no-one is ever prepared to take any responsibility and say, "This is the way, this is what we should do." You can see it in politics, in education, in the church even. It's now considered more valuable to be asking the right questions than giving any answers.

The journalist Beverley Nichols once put together a book of interviews he'd had with famous people and one of the people he spoke to was Hilaire Belloc, the author, poet and a very well-known Catholic. Nichols wrote, *"I was sorry for Mr Belloc because I felt he had nailed at least some of his colours to the wrong mast; but I was still sorrier for myself and my own generation, because I knew that we had no colours of any kind to nail to any mast"*. Once again, words that are as true now and were as true when Jesus was preaching and teaching as they were in Beverley Nichols' day. Harassed people with no chance of any help.

3. <u>HARVEST</u>

And it's in that context that Jesus turns to his disciples and says those memorable words in *vv37,38*. "Look," he says, "there are crowds of people here just waiting to hear the message of the Kingdom. We need more people to get on and tell them about it." There is a whole world of people who are searching for answers – what are you waiting for? People are just desperate for someone to help liberate them from this feeling of harassment and you have something to offer them in the Good News about Jesus.

Isn't that brilliant? But the problem is that few people are prepared to go and offer the answers. They've been brainwashed into believing that anyone with an answer must be an arrogant fool; that no-one has the right to tell someone else about the things that have transformed their life; that any answer is valid, so you can leave it to someone else. Basically, what it comes down to is that we don't look out on those crowds with the same gut-wrenching sense of compassion, love, pity that Jesus had. We have lost the urgency of the gospel.

There is a desperate need for people to share their stories of the Kingdom, to tell other people about the amazing promises of Jesus, to witness to the transformative effect of Jesus on their lives. Maybe what scares us is the enormity of the task – we know we can't reach the world ourselves. We don't think we can talk to crowds as Jesus did. But we can talk to our neighbours, our colleagues, our family members. We can share the gospel with people one at a time. Many of you have just finished the *Talking Jesus* course, looking at ways to share the good news of Jesus with those we live amongst and work with each day, and the main thrust of that is that people actually do want to hear about your story, they are prepared to hear about Jesus. And as part of that course we each said we'd commit to pray for five people to discover Jesus. Why not start with those five people?

But then the problem with verses like *v38* is that we think that praying for God to *"send out workers into his harvest field"* absolves us from the responsibility of going ourselves. Maybe this is a real occasion

when we become the answer to our own prayers. This word *"send out"* is a good one. The Greek word is *"ekballo"*, which has the word *"ballo"* at the root of it. That's word from which we get our English word "ballistic". *"Ekballo"* means to "shoot out", to launch. Jesus paints the picture of people being launched out into the harvest field, shot out to get amongst those people who desperately need help in their harassed state. Might that be you? The workers are here – a church full of them!

Because look what happens in the next chapter. Those very people to whom Jesus has said these things, who have been made aware of the issue, are the very ones who get sent out! Jesus has told them to pray for workers and then says, "Right – you're those workers!" There's no point praying for people to do things you can actually do yourself, so get on and have a go. Maybe this week, as we welcome dozens of families with no church connection to the Baseball Camp activities in Beacon Park or here in the evenings, you might get into conversation with one of them. They are people – children, teenagers, young people, parents, spectators, curious passers-by – who desperately need to hear about Jesus and the difference he can make to their lives. Tell them what a difference he's made to you. Or just tell them we're from a local church and then let them ask the questions.

It's a tall order. Jesus was here talking to disciples who probably felt like you and I do – inadequate, poorly equipped, scared. They listened to his teaching over the next three years. They saw how he reached out to others. They saw his approach to the *"harvest field"*. And then, as Jesus went back into heaven and left them to continue his mission, they received the shot in the arm they really needed, the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. That same Holy Spirit is available to us today. We've all got a bit of it within us – that's what identifies us as Christians – but we can keep praying for more of the Spirit to energise us, to inspire us, to motivate us, to equip us.

Maybe that should be our prayer this morning as we reflect on the people around us who are *"harassed and helpless"*. As we consider this amazing harvest field of people just ripe to hear about Jesus, our prayer should not be simply that God will launch workers out into it – people like those who will be involved in the Baseball Camp this week, people with particular ministries – but that ***we*** will be launched into it, filled with the Holy Spirit and equipped by him to share the Good News about Jesus, wherever we are, to whomsoever we meet. After all, if someone has helped you to discover something amazing, shouldn't you be sharing that information with other people who are looking for exactly the same help? As the late, great Donald Coggan, one-time Archbishop of Canterbury put it, *"Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."*

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The difficulty was not simply in the situation in which they found themselves –but it was exacerbated by the fact that there was no-one to show them the way out of the mess they felt they were in. There was nowhere to turn. And that continues to be very much the case today: there is no-one offering moral leadership, offering any signpost to the way out of our dilemmas and distress.

3. HARVEST

And it's in that context that Jesus turns to his disciples and says those memorable words in *vv37,38*. People are just desperate for someone to help liberate them from this feeling of harassment and you have something to offer them in the Good News about Jesus. But the problem is that we have lost the urgency of the gospel. The problem with verses like *v38* is that we think that praying for God to *"send out workers into his harvest field"* absolves us from the responsibility of going ourselves. Jesus paints the picture of people being launched out into the harvest field, shot out to get amongst those people who desperately need help in their harassed state.

Jesus was here talking to disciples who probably felt inadequate, poorly equipped, scared. But on Pentecost Sunday, they received the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. That same Holy Spirit is available to us today.

Questions for discussion

1. Do we really have any sense of compassion for those around us who do not know Jesus?

2. What things do you notice that suggest people are harassed?

3. Why are people so helpless? How can we help to rectify that?

4. Have we lost "the urgency of the gospel"? If so, how can we regain it?

5. Where is your "harvest field"? How do you propose to start working in it?

6. If your housegroup has followed the *Talking Jesus* course, share any stories of the opportunities you have had to talk about your faith.