

Mission Matters (Matthew 9.35-10.4)

Pentecost 2

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‘The church today is not as enthusiastic about mission as she was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’, FD Bruner writes in his commentary on Matthew (2004.445). There are reasons for this, including our growing awareness of how earlier missionary endeavours were often tainted by imperialistic thinking and action. ‘Yet’, Bruner maintains, ‘there is never a good theological reason for a diminished commitment to mission in the church’, and certainly, mission is a strong theme in Matthew’s gospel. In the reading set for today, mission is front and centre – indeed, this whole section of Matthew is sometimes called ‘The Sermon on Mission’. One reason is that this section opens with a summary statement strikingly like the one that prefaced the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ (cf. Matt 4.23). As this summary states, Jesus’s pattern during this time was to travel around to ‘all the cities and villages, teaching... proclaiming... curing...’ In other words, his way was: (i) to go to all people – not discriminating against some, (ii) to share good news – not judgment and condemnation (bad news), and (iii) to respond to *their need* – not adding to their burden. This has not always been the church’s pattern and perhaps explains a certain wariness about mission.

A. The heart of Christ for people

‘And when he (Jesus) saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like a sheep without a shepherd.’ (9.36)

Why do we engage in mission? Because Christ, our Lord, cares for people. The Greek word translated ‘he had compassion’ here means literally, ‘he felt in the viscera (gut)’; more than an emotion, there is a physical (bodily) dimension to this. It is a sign of engagement and vulnerability. Compassion comes from the Latin *cum*, ‘with’, and *passio*, ‘suffer’, it means ‘suffering with’. Compassion is the ground and source of Christ’s mission, not disgust for people or some imperial drive to control and dominate. It is motivated by his loving commitment to the world’s flourishing.

As Jesus immerses himself in the world, those who are stressed, depressed, possessed, oppressed, and suppressed (harassed and helpless) receive his loving response. We care to get involved because Christ is in our hearts, and Christ cares.

B. The prayer of disciples for workers

'Then Jesus said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.' (9.37-8)

Jesus is attentively compassionate, and he is realistic – the number of workers engaged in this mission is paltry. This can cause us to feel discouraged? 'Lord, what can I (we) do in the face of such need and suffering; there are so many challenges ('wicked' problems) and many seemingly unscrupulous and/or anxious people exploiting the situation; not only that but I (we) don't have it all together either?'

It is easy to feel overwhelmed and defeated by this, but Jesus seems clear and hopeful. I notice for example, that he used a different metaphor. Instead of speaking further about desperate need (crowds of harassed and helpless people) he switches to speak about a *harvest*. Synonyms for harvest include: yield, return, fruitage, ingathering. '*The harvest is plentiful*', he says (i.e. abundant, copious, overflowing, bounteous, lavish, profuse). This metaphor conveys a sense of opportunity and possibility. Where there is need, there is receptivity – perhaps a longing to be loved and recognised, included and made well.

The success of mission is not at stake (*his* mission BTW, not ours!!). The 'Lord of the harvest' ensures a bumper crop. No, the issue is labour – workers to bring in the bounty of the beloved community. And actually, for him, this doesn't seem such an issue either. Just '*ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest*' (38) he says, seemingly matter-of-factly.

The task can look overwhelming and hopeless from a human perspective. But, for Jesus, statistics are not ultimate, God is. Which means prayer is key to the whole endeavour – 'asking God 'to send out labourers into his harvest.' Christian mission in Acts was born (humanly speaking) in prayer (e.g. Acts 1.14; 4.24-31, 13.1-

3), and history is replete with examples of what happens when churches pray as directed here. These days, churches anxious about their survival (not a foundation for mission as set out in this passage!!) talk a lot about mission. I have been a part of the so-called ‘inner-north conversation’, and we have spent months talking about strategies for reaching this part of Canberra. However, Bruner contends (450), reflecting on Jesus’ injunction, ‘attempts to augment mission that largely bypass prayer and depend mainly on reorganisation or pleas for more generous stewardship are doomed to fail’. Are the existing congregations in the inner north praying about this? It’s important.

And, interestingly, it is workers (not highly trained specialists or skilled specialists or high-tech machinery...) that we are encouraged to ask for. ‘Workers’ (labourers) is a humble word. God uses ordinary, obedient, patient souls to fulfil this vital role; we do not need to be young, good looking, highly educated and great at talking (etc). Also, the instruction is to ask for labourers to be sent out. It suggests that the people are there (in the church); they/we just need to be released – ‘into the world of adventure and need, into the breathtaking work of harvesting the field of God’ (Bruner, 451).

C. The gifting of disciples for ministry

‘Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.’ (10.1)

As we transition into chapter 10 of Matthew’s gospel we focus in on ‘his twelve disciples’ (1) who are themselves ‘sent out’ (5). And here, we discern a further basis of mission, namely the authorising and gifting of Christ. This does not contradict the earlier bit about simple workers. In truth, the disciples were an ordinary bunch. Save for lessons learned (slowly, in most cases!) during their time with Jesus, and the authority, gifts and strength he bestowed, they surely would have struggled. They were ordinary *and* *graced*, and that’s the point, as Jesus engages his disciples in mission, he also endows them.

It is not the case that all of us receive the gift to exorcise and heal as these first disciples did (though some will, e.g. 1 Cor 12.9, 28-9; Jas 5.14-6), though we can all pray and care for those with physical, emotional and spiritual ailments. However, as members of his body (the church) we are each uniquely equipped for the ministry and mission of Christ (see, for example Romans 12.4-21; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4.4-13). Which brings us to a fourth pillar of mission in this passage.

D. The apostolic fellowship of the church

'These are the names of the twelve apostles: first Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee and his brother John...' (10.2-4)

The final foundation and resource for mission hinted at here is the fellowship of other disciples. Did you notice in these verses how the twelve apostles (apostle meaning 'sent one') are listed in pairs? Matthew (unlike Luke), does not mention that they went out two by two. However, the fact that they are coupled here suggests as much. *'Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil'*, it says in the OT wisdom book Ecclesiastes (4.9). The twinning of apostles in this list points to the principle of company and cooperation. In Christ's mission we work together; we need one another – for encouragement, support, protection, learning, enrichment... Collaboration is synergistic – the combined effect of such effort is greater than the separate effects, (which helps to explain how we can meet such daunting need).

So, here are four pillars, foundations of Christian mission – the heart of the loving Lord for hurting people, the prayer of loving disciples for faithful workers, the gifts of the authorising Christ for ministry, and the companionship of one another in the work. *'We need Christ, we need prayer, we need gifts, and we need each other'*, Bruner writes (457), with all four, *'we are a missionary church.'*

Ref. Bruner, Frederick Dale (2004) *The Christbook: Matthew 1-12*, William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.