

## Matthew 9:35-10:8

In this period of Covid-19, lockdown easing, people having mourned loved ones who died without family with them, loneliness through shielding and isolation, increased mental health issues, increased domestic abuse rates, economic uncertainty resulting in job-related uncertainty and finance worries, fear of infection, fear of transmission, and general suspended animation of our lives, we all feel beaten-up, if not quite broken, by the events of 2020 so far. Throw in the issues surrounding racism and the appalling death of George Floyd and the real difficulties we might feel navigating these issues, and the even more impossible-seeming task of solving racism once and for all, and we may well feel lost and helpless.

If any of this is you, then read on.

I'm going to concentrate on the first half of the reading this morning – Matthew 9:35-38 – because here we have a picture which will build on what we talked about last week with the Great Commission to go and make disciples throughout the world. Here, we see why the Great Commission is just so important.

Jesus has just finished some teaching and then performed a series of miracles before this morning's reading, and after the reading, he sends out his followers to do the same while proclaiming the Kingdom of God. So here we have a bit of a transitional reading which ties these two sections together. Up until now, Jesus has been teaching and preaching and healing people on his own, and after today, he sends his followers to do that ministry too. Today's is a short reading, so we'll take it verse by verse:

*Verse 35 - Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.*

Here we have Jesus' normal modus operandi. He travels, systematically visiting all the towns and villages of Galilee so that none would miss out on hearing what he has to say. As he visits he teaches in the synagogues, as any travelling rabbi would have done and as we read about him doing elsewhere in the gospels. And as he does this, he proclaims the good news (literally, the 'Gospel') of the Kingdom. He announces that God's kingdom has drawn near. And as we saw when we looked at the Lord's prayer a few months ago, one of the signs of the coming kingdom was that the sick were healed, the lame enabled to walk, the blind given sight, and the poor and needy fed. It is no surprise, therefore, that as Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God he also healed anyone who was sick, no matter what was wrong with them. Jesus wasn't just talking a good game, but he was showing the reality of this kingdom too.

*Verse 36 - When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*

This verse is where we see a change from simply a summary of Jesus' ministry around Galilee. Here our camera closes in on Jesus himself as he stares out at the crowds, bringing their sick, coming for guidance, and needing to hear Jesus' comfort. And what we read in Jesus' face is compassion.

We hear in the media that our doctors, nurses and other carers are suffering with compassion fatigue during the Covid pandemic. They have seen so much, lost so much, and perhaps like many of us who care for others, feel like they have been rolled out too thinly and something has finally snapped. As the pandemic eventually ends, we will need to care for those who have cared for us.

But Jesus' compassion in this narrative isn't human compassion. Sure, we read at various places of Jesus trying to get some time by himself to rest, but he never gets compassion fatigue. The reason, very simply, is that this is divine compassion. As we picture Jesus staring at the crowd coming towards him, there is no sense of him running dry, instead, it is divine, limitless compassion that drives him to care for those who need it. The word for compassion in the Greek is one which has associations of being moved in one's bowels, which were thought back then to be the seat of love and pity in the person. It's where we get the idea of something being 'gut-wrenching' from, or a disaster being a 'body-blow'. Imagine the crowds approach for a moment, and witness the gut-wrenching, desperate compassion that Jesus had for them. There was no professional distance. There were no boundaries where he could go and recuperate. Jesus simply embodied God's own divine compassion for his people.

What spurred this compassion? It was that Jesus saw the crowd as 'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd'. I've spoken about sheep before. They're not good in a crisis. They aren't even very good at finding food for themselves. If you've seen one stuck somewhere, they tend to panic, or just lie down. They need to be led, and they need looked after.

The image of sheep without a shepherd that Jesus uses is one which appears in the Old Testament in Numbers and in 1 Kings. In Numbers, Moses asks God to send a leader to take over from him when he is gone or else the people would be like sheep without a shepherd. In Kings, it is a prophet who predicts that if a King goes into battle his troops will be let scattered and helpless. There are also other Old Testament images, of sheep where they are in the care of bad shepherds and are therefore butchered, unprotected and endangered.

Jesus' compassion involves a gut-wrenching vision of his people as sheep with no shepherd, wandering aimless and unprotected. But worse than that, they are harassed and helpless. These shepherd-less sheep are wounded or torn by thorns or wild animals – that's the ideas of the Greek words here. They are lying prostrate and helpless on the ground with no-one to help them and nowhere to go. Perhaps seeing the image, you can now begin to imagine Jesus' gut-wrenching compassion.

Jesus' response is in verses 37-38.

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

Perhaps he is painfully aware at this point that although his compassion is divine, his reality is human and limited. He cannot be everywhere at once. Or maybe this is a teaching moment for his followers, but either way, you can hear him with tears in his eyes just comparing the size of the task with the size of the workforce.

You'll remember that the government asked furloughed people to consider spending some time picking fruit. Harvesting isn't just the kind of thing that can be done at any pace. It must be done before the fruit spoils on the vine, or before the damp destroys the crops. Jesus sees the crowd,

helpless, aimless, wounded and beaten; and he knows that the harvest must be gathered before it withers and dies.

Harvest is an image used a lot by Jesus, many times in relation to judgement. But here, we see the emphasis is on the mission aspect of the harvest. It must be gathered so there must be workers to gather it. That doesn't exempt us from looking to the fact that one day there will be a final harvest, but in this picture, it is the work of harvesting that is urgent, in order to save the crowd from their predicament. The crowd were lost and helpless sheep a second ago, and now they are a harvest which needs gathered in order to save them from being those lost sheep. The metaphors mix, but relate. Those who are harvested, gain a shepherd.

So for us, in 2020, this passage is very important. As I said at the start, many of us feel confused, beaten, wounded, grief-stricken, depressed, anxious, fearful and so on. We may well identify with those lost sheep – harassed and helpless, struck down and bleeding, listless and aimless, sucked dry and grieving. For us, we can feel in this passage, the gut-wrenching compassion of Jesus as he turns his tear-filled eye towards us. The divine gaze does not miss us in the crowd, and neither is it exhausted by the mountain of need set before it. We may feel like sheep without a shepherd, but the Good Shepherd is here and sees all. So if this is you, please pray about it and ask Jesus to see you, pick you up and help you become one of his flock again. If prayer is a new thing for you, then perhaps take this opportunity to picture that gaze of Jesus and that compassion and know that God will never turn you away.

For others it may be that we also are burdened by the size of the harvest – by the size of the crowd of lost, harassed and hard-pressed sheep we see around us in our communities and our nation. We may find ourselves following Jesus' gaze, as if standing next to him as one of his followers, and seeing a churning mountain of need and not know where to start. Jesus' words are to us: 'Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.' We are led to pray. Later, Jesus sends out his followers in teams to do his ministry, but first we pray that God would call us and others to serve and protect his sheep and to round them up and bring them home. As we leave lockdown, there will be plenty of sheep emerging, blinking, into the sunshine, and these will need care. Pray that God's sends harvesters before these people are left to wither. We also need to be aware that as we pray, God may call us. Jesus tells his disciples to pray for harvesters, and then immediately sends them out to do the work. Let's be open to the call of God.

Finally, let those of us who have grown weary of fruitless harvesting in a mission context listen carefully – there is now, perhaps as not seen for years, a harvest field of lost and hurting sheep. What the sheep needed most in our reading was a shepherd. What the sheep in lockdown and as they come out will need most is also a shepherd, Jesus. This shepherd will do the work of binding up wounds, of providing direction, of leading to nourishment and of talking to the lonely sheep. The harvest has never been bigger of people who need Jesus. That's not said to swell church numbers necessarily, though that would happen as a result. Instead, if you've tried to get into the gut-wrenching compassion of Jesus, then it is this compassion that drives the harvest. It must be gathered in or else we will allow it to grow rotten and die. Let us pray for workers, but also offer ourselves as workers who teach, proclaim the coming of God's Kingdom in Jesus, and heal the wounds of our village and our society. Amen.