



Sermon

14th June 2020

From Passive Learners to Active Participants

Matthew 9:35 - 10:13; Exodus 19:2-8

© 2020 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

Over the last few weeks, we have heard the account of the equipping and sending of the apostles on mission. We have heard those great words from Jesus:

- "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. ... Receive the Holy Spirit."¹
- "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations ..."²

Now in the lectionary we continue with this year's traversal of Matthew's gospel. This is a very good place to find ourselves with Pentecost and Trinity under our belts. Jesus is moving the first disciples from passive learners to participants and that is what needs to happen to us as well.

Matthew introduced the ministry of Jesus with a description of his baptism and then the Temptation followed by his calling Simon and Andrew, James and John. Then we hear from chapter 4:23:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.³

What follows is the description of his ministry: teaching the Sermon on the Mount⁴; healing a leper, healing the paralysed servant of a Centurion, healing Peter's mother-in-law from a fever, freeing many who were troubled by demons and healing many sick people. We hear of Jesus' authority as he stilled the storm and set free the Gadarene demoniac.⁵ In chapter 9, Jesus healed a paralysed man and forgave his sins, raised to life a dead girl, healed the woman with the issue of blood as well as two blind men and delivered a man from a mute spirit.

Again we read in Chapter 9:35:

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

It is the same statement that we read in Mt 4:23. What Matthew has done is give us a heading of what he is going to tell us, then shown us examples and now said, there I have shown you how Jesus taught, preached and healed every disease and sickness.

¹ John 20:21-23

² Matthew 28:18-20

³ Matthew 4:23

⁴ Matthew 5-7

⁵ Matthew 8

What follows? Jesus saw the crowds of the common people and how vulnerable and harassed they were – like sheep without a shepherd. Moved with compassion, he tells his disciples to pray for them:

"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."⁶

Jesus had huge crowds coming to hear him and longing for healing. We know of the multitude at the feeding of the 5000 and 4000 and that was only the men, so it could easily have been double or triple that number gathered counting women and children.

The harvest was indeed plentiful and it had been largely if not entirely Jesus ministering. This was the first stage of their training – he showed them. When they had enough experience watching they were to practise it themselves – they became the answer to their own prayer!

Jesus commissioned them with the authority to do the job – that is to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness!

Then came the instructions:

Where to go: "Not to the Samaritans or Gentiles but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

You may wonder about the focus on Israel, but it was appropriate to that moment of history. In the Exodus passage God made a covenant at Mt Sinai with the people of Israel. He declared they were a Holy Nation – that is a special people set apart for himself. They were to be a kingdom of priests. Priests are intermediaries – they represent God to people and they represent people back to God. So a nation of priests will be representatives between God and the other nations – the gentiles.

Thus when Jesus develops his mission he confines it to Israel initially. They are offered the fulfilment of all the promises of the Old Testament. When they are sorted out they will be able reach out to the rest of the world – as some of them did – remember the early church was initially entirely Jewish.

Later, he would extend the mission, "Go and make disciples of all nations ..."

In particular, he tells the disciples to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He had been moved with compassion at seeing their plight. Lost sheep are without a shepherd. So what does a shepherd do for the sheep? He/she makes sure they have food and drink, protects them from predators, cares for them when wounded or sick.

Jesus meets those needs as he sends his disciples to provide spiritual food and drink through their preaching, to protect the people through deliverance and to heal their bodies.

What to announce: "The Kingdom of Heaven is near."

When Jesus sent the disciples out on the worldwide mission after his resurrection, there was a different emphasis: the gospel of forgiveness. We hear him describe it in Luke 24:47:

"... Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in [Jesus'] name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."

What to do: "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons."

This is what Jesus had been doing as described in the previous chapters; the disciples were given authority to heal and to deliver – now they are to do it.

For us, under the Great Commission, all Christians are authorised and commissioned to heal and to reclaim territory for Christ by sharing the good news and evicting spiritual squatters otherwise known as unclean spirits/demons.

What to charge: Nothing – "Freely you have received, freely give."

What to take: "Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep."

⁶ Mt 9:37-38

They were to go in vulnerability and dependence on this mission – that will always be the case. The way in which we will be dependent is endlessly variable. This particular set of conditions was not for all occasions – Jesus himself revised them in the Garden of Gethsemane for a new situation.

Luke 22:35-36 "When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" "Nothing," they answered. ³⁶ He said to them, "But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one."

How to start & where to stay: "Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there. Stay at his house until you leave."

This worthy person is called by Luke, "a man of peace." Jesus says to search for him when you enter a community. He is your way into the community. The man of peace is open to you and gives you entrance to the local community. In Kondoa in 2018, we were taken to the remote village of Nante, where there was a new church community – the gospel had first been preached there in 2017! What gave entrance for the gospel? This old man – he had been converted in the 90s by David Pearce the NZ missionary and had gone to live in his old age at Nante. Finding no Christians there, he sent word to the Bishop to send evangelists because the people needed to hear the gospel. Soon there was a new church planted there. The man of peace acts as a bridge to allow the gospel to come in.

In telling us about this mission trip, Matthew is laying before us an example not just a bit of history. This is the practical approach that we take on our trips to Kondoa. There, we are not so much evangelising as equipping the local church. We go into villages, tell them that the Kingdom of God is here and pray for the sick and cast out demons as the needs present. And the church grows! They see that Christianity is real and has power. The church learns to be able to do the same themselves. When Lindy, Anne, Helen and I visited Tarkwa, we trained them over three days. Six months later we met that pastor again, and he told us that they had started a weekly healing meeting. The church had grown from 30 to 160 and they had planted a daughter church in the next village.

Two days ago, we had a newsletter from missionary friends working in another part of Tanzania, the city of Arusha. In addition to their main work of training church leaders and school teachers and running a primary school, they have a team led by Elia who go each week to the local slum to pray for the sick and preach the gospel. They write,

Last week, [the team] met Mama Rose for the first time (she's wearing an appropriately pink shirt in the photo). She responded to the Spirit's word of knowledge regarding someone having a heart problem, adding that she also had a sizeable tumour under her breast. A short prayer later and her heart was back in rhythm and the tumour completely gone! She is marvelling at the grace of God and her backslidden son Ezekiel immediately repented and has returned to the Lord. We rejoice at the goodness of God.

You see, there it is working: They go out to the 'lost sheep'; preach the gospel, pray for the sick and that reality brings others to faith. Praise the Lord.

Remember that Jesus commissioned us to go as the Father sent him. We are his representatives. Later in this same chapter he says it explicitly, (v40) "He who receives you, receives me, and he who receives me, receives the one who sent me."

Can you be a representative of Christ as you go about your business, shopping, walking for exercise? Sometimes it may be an act of kindness, sometimes you will meet a person with a physical or spiritual problem and you can pray for him/her.

Paul wrote in Ephesians 6:19-20, "Pray for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains."

We are ambassadors for Christ – let us pray that we represent him well both in word and deed, here and abroad. Amen.