

With Vigour

Exodus 19:2-8a | Psalm 100 | Romans 5:1-11 | Matthew 9:35-10:8

MATTHEW 9:35-10:8

³⁵ Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; ³⁸ therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.' ¹ 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. ² 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; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. ⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶ but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷ As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." ⁸ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

INTRODUCTION

It was Saturday, March 4, 1933. The scene was the East Portico of the United States Capitol building in Washington D.C. The newly elected President placed his hand on a Dutch family Bible from 1686 and swore an oath to serve his country. He had become the President at a precarious moment, a moment characterized by anxiety, by fear, by hopelessness. In the two decades leading up to this, the world had seen 22 million die in the Great War—now known as the First World War. The Spanish flu pandemic took another 17 to 50 million lives. And the Great Depression had plunged the US and the rest of world into the worst economic crisis of the 20th century. Early in 1933, as the depression was reaching its lowest point, the US was looking to its new President. That day, the President finished his oath and then gave a 20-minute inaugural speech. One of his first major points began this way:

So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is...fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and of vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory. And I am convinced that you will again give that support to leadership in these critical days.¹

Franklin D. Roosevelt had identified a critical risk. The challenges of that moment—what he calls the 'dark hour of national life'—had the capacity to paralyze the country. It had the capacity to cripple the nation's ability to recover. It had the ability to abolish hope.

¹ The details of the inauguration and the quotation from the transcript were accessed from the records of the *Joint Congressional Commission on Inaugural Ceremonies*: <https://www.inaugural.senate.gov/about/past-inaugural-ceremonies/37th-inaugural-ceremonies/index.html#theme>.

Over the next few weeks, our Gospel readings address the second great discourse of Matthew's Gospel, what is known as the Mission Discourse. In this chapter, Jesus pivots his followers to look outward, to engage in the mission of the kingdom. And it could not come at a more critical moment in the calendar for us—where the challenges of this dark hour, be they financial deficits or a seeming lack of motivation and momentum, or whatever—have the capacity to paralyze us, to keep us in survival mode rather than reaching forward and reaching out. And so, let us consider the first portion of this discourse. Its main argument, I think is this: Compassion should move us to a missional conviction. Compassion for human beings should inspire us to participate in the mission of the Kingdom of God. And with our passage, we see three aspects of this mission. Let me show them to you briefly.

1. THE PURPOSE OF MISSION (9:36-37)

In the first verse, we hear that Jesus went about the region doing three things: teaching, preaching, and curing. This verse is a summary of the ministry of Jesus, a nearly word-for-word repetition of what Matthew had five chapters earlier.² Between these two statements are five chapters of example, of Jesus doing those very things: teaching in his first, longest, and most famous discourse in chapters 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount, and healing numerous people in chapters 8-9. And it is no coincidence that Jesus is about to commission his twelve primary disciples for these same activities in 10:7-8, proclaiming the good news and curing the afflicted.

But the first thing that Matthew notes, however, is why Jesus sends his disciples out. It's right there in the second verse: *"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* It's a reference to Ezekiel 34, where the prophet compares the people of God to sheep who have been scattered by bad shepherds, maimed by their incompetence, and left for dead. But Jesus, feels compassion—literally, he feels it in his gut, a profound sense of sympathy for their spiritual and physical condition. And I say both spiritual and physical because the prescribed antidote is both the proclamation of the gospel and the miracles of healing. This is neither merely evangelism nor only social justice and welfare—but both. And it is a deep compassion. The Gospel of John picks up this same picture and adds that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the one who will lay his life down for the sheep.³ Jesus's compassion runs so deep that he is willing and indeed does give his life to save these sheep. Brothers and sisters, it should be a challenge for us. Even in these dark days, where is our sense of compassion?

2. THE PERSONNEL FOR MISSION (9:38-10:4)

The next section asks not the question of why, but the question of who. Jesus looks at his disciples and says: *"The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest."* Jesus is very direct here. His immense compassion is in proportion to the need. The harvest is plentiful. And it will take everyone to bring it in. He's speaking metaphorically, of course. The harvest is people—like those lost sheep—those whose need is great, both spiritually and materially. And it will take a large work force—all those who believe, who have faith, to bring it in. In other words: Who should go? Everyone who can. Who should be on mission? Everyone who can. Who should be working toward the

² Matthew 9:35, cf. Matthew 4:23.

³ John 10:11-18.

fullness of the kingdom of God through sharing the gospel and serving those in need? Everyone who can.

Jesus follows this general statement of need with two specific tactical responses. First, pray. He never departs from prayer as an effective means for mission. Pray that the Lord would send his people—persuade them, mobilize them—pray that we would not be paralyzed into merely surviving or doing nothing at all. And second, that’s exactly what he does. As Lord of the harvest, Jesus commissions the twelve, calling them by name and sending them out.

3. THE PARAMETERS FOR MISSION (10:5-8)

The third and final section of our passage moves beyond the who of mission to the particular parameters for the mission. I can be especially brief here as I already noted that the basic outline of the mission simply continues the ministry of Jesus: proclaiming the good news and addressing the physical needs of the afflicted. It is important that Jesus is quite specific in his commissioning. This is not the Great Commission to go to all the world, but a very specific commission, sometimes called the Little Commission, for a particular group (the apostles) for a particular audience (the lost sheep of the house of Israel) at a particular time.⁴ Of course, the disciples themselves were deficient for the greater mission as they had not yet come to understand or believe in Jesus’s death and resurrection. Yet, it doesn’t stop Jesus from sending them on a specific and strategic mission. How much more should we—we who have the benefit of knowing the fullness of the gospel and have the greater commissioning to go into all the world—how much more should we get to work?

4. THE PRESENT MISSION

Our Lord’s compassion is plentiful. The harvest is plentiful. Shouldn’t our compassionate conviction to participate in the mission be plentiful?

But, what does it look like? How do we participate in the mission of the kingdom of God? There are thousand ways. I noted just three weeks ago that our Church Council is not being deterred by this pandemic and the financial challenges of the moment, but investing in the long-term mission of this church through improvements to the sanctuary sound system. Members of our church have likewise, under the leadership of Alexander Rösch, already begun serving at the soup kitchen again. Several people have come forward to form our new audio-visual committee. Over the last several weeks, my Saturday mornings have been spent in the church—watching with admiration as Vivian carefully and lovingly arranged flowers and Herbert ran cable for cameras and installed ductwork and a camera mount and repaired a cabinet door—once again reminding me through his quiet, humble work, as only he could, the meaning behind that Austrian greeting *servus, servus humillimus, domine spectabilis*—at your service. And these are just some of the example about which I know. Friends, there are thousand ways to be on mission—as many ways as there are people and moments. Maybe it is strengthening someone’s faith through encouragement. Or praying with them. Or challenging them. Maybe it is taking food to a neighbour in need. Or working in the church

⁴ It is important to note that Jesus isn’t anti-gentile. He already healed the servant of a Roman centurion, commending the man for his faith, in Matthew 8:5-13. Jesus also healed the daughter of a Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28. And of course, the Great Commission, found in Matthew 28:16-20, specifically includes gentiles.

shop. Or volunteering to help refugees. Or standing up for racial equality. The opportunities are endless.

CONCLUSION

I was reminded recently that we have spent the last three weeks leading up to, and including Pentecost and Trinity Sunday, thinking about work of the Holy Spirit. Yet, I wonder if we really appreciate how he is at work, in a thousand ways and in a thousand places among us. And so, pray that the labourers may be many. Pray that the Spirit would show us the way forward. And then examine how you and I might find some of those thousands of ways to participate in the mission.

Don't miss out. Don't be, as President Roosevelt beckoned the American people in a dark hour, don't be paralyzed by fear—fear of failure or fear of inadequacy or fear of any sort, including a fear of fear itself. But find your compassion, as our Lord did when considering us, follow his vigorous leadership, pray for labourers, then and then put on your work clothes and find your way to the harvest.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, fill us with the compassion of your Son and strengthen us with your Spirit that we may come to your mission. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*