

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 22”

Matthew 9:35-38

We've reached another milestone in this account that Matthew gives us of the life and ministry of Jesus, the Kingly Messiah who has come to fulfil the plans and promises of God for his creation. The way this passage starts (v35) is very similar to what Matthew writes in 4:23 and he uses these little summaries to mark the transition from one theme to another. In chapter 4 he uses it to move from the initial stories of Jesus' birth, temptation and baptism into a section of teaching (*The Sermon On The Mount*) and healings – the foundations of Jesus' ministry, if you like. Now the story moves from that into a section where the emphasis is now on mission.

In a sense that mission is a continuation of what has already been happening as Jesus pursues his itinerant ministry of teaching, preaching and healing (as we shall see). He 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 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. 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.

Maybe you can remember back to the news stories in the early 1980s of the famine in Ethiopia and you can recall the astonishing effect Michael Buerk's filmed report of dying children 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. 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 “*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 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 intended relationship with God, part of the result of our sin – 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: 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?” 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 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.

Beverley Nichols once wrote 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. HARVEST

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. When we were out at Whitemoor Lakes a month ago we each said we'd pray for three people to discover Jesus. Why not start with those three people?

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?

It's a tall order. But don't forget what today is. 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, on that first Pentecost Sunday, 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 Jill and Erik and the Nomad Team, 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?

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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.

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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. How can we get more of the Holy Spirit to help us in our work for God?