

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 23”
Matthew 10:1-15

It’s time to get going! The real mission behind Jesus’ coming into our world is about to begin. We’ve seen that he has already been teaching, preaching and healing in the area of Galilee and in some of the surrounding areas and, last week, we noted that Matthew’s story is moving into a new phase (indicated by the words used in 9:35). We know that people have begun to follow Jesus and some of them have pledged their commitment to him. At the end of the last chapter, Jesus told his followers to “*ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field*” – there was an urgent task to fulfil as he noted the great need of the people for direction and affirmation.

That prayer is answered almost immediately as Jesus gathers around him a core group of disciples – twelve of them, possibly as a reminder of the twelve patriarchs of Israel – and he commissions them to get involved with the mission that he has already begun himself. Of course, there was a much wider group of people who also followed Jesus – we read of various people, particularly women, in other parts of the gospels – but these were, if you like, the key players. And some of them went on to be very important figures in the founding of the Church, as described in *Acts*.

The group of disciples, whom Matthew also describes here as “*apostles*” – or “sent ones” – is an extraordinary mixture of ordinary people. As far as we can tell, none of these men had any particular fame or notoriety. None was especially outstanding in his field, nor very wealthy or well-connected. We know that a few were fishermen and that Matthew was a tax collector (we read his story in chapter 9). There was also someone called Simon who was a Zealot – effectively a terrorist, who was part of a group working for the overthrow of the Romans in Palestine. To find such a man in the same group as Matthew, a traitor to his people and someone who had sold out to the occupying Romans, is pretty amazing. In any other circumstances, Simon would probably have assassinated Matthew, but somehow Jesus has made it work.

And having appointed this motley band of twelve diverse men, Jesus gets ready to send them out to get involved with his mission. In these paragraphs we read of the **arrangements** he made, the **announcement** they were to make and the **authority** with which they were to do it all. That’s actually the reverse of the order in which they appear in Matthew’s account, but we’ll consider them in that order this morning as we see just how this new phase of Jesus’ mission kicked off. And bear in mind that there is more to come in the following passage, which we’ll look at next time.

1. ARRANGEMENTS

Jesus gives his new team very clear instructions as to what they are to do and how they are to go about it. Some of it seems pretty sensible to us, no doubt. They aren’t to weigh themselves down with baggage and other encumbrances. They’re to look for accommodation carefully and be polite in all that they do – sometimes that might mean offering a polite refusal to those who aren’t in sympathy with them. They are not in this business for money or kudos or comfort: they’ve heard the message themselves without having to pay for it, so they are not to seek any payment when they pass the message on. There are actually some fairly salutary words here that we need to continue to heed today – both those who are called to ministry (“*Freely you have received, freely give*”) and those who are expected to provide for them (“*the worker is worthy of his keep*”).

All of that is probably fairly predictable, though, in the context of all that we know of Jesus’ teaching. What may come as something of a surprise to us, though, especially given what we know of the way in which Jesus’ ministry develops and how the Church began to spread across Europe and the world, is Jesus’ first instruction to them. They are to go first and foremost – exclusively, in fact – to “*the lost sheep of Israel*”. They’re to keep out of Samaritan and Gentile areas completely (which we know was

not always the case as the mission developed). Why should that be the case? And why should Matthew choose to highlight it like this?

Well, we know that Matthew is writing this gospel for the first Jewish believers who formed the majority of people in his church. We've seen already that he has taken great care to emphasise that the mission of Jesus is all of a piece with the mission of God as described in the Old Testament. Matthew is eager for his first readers to grasp that Jesus is actually the Kingly Messiah promised by the Hebrew prophets and preachers and that he is not breaking with tradition, but fulfilling it. In other words, it's OK to believe in Jesus if you're Jewish. So the instruction that the apostles should go initially only to the Jewish people fits in with Matthew's overall purpose in writing this gospel.

But he's not just making this up. He chooses to report something that he obviously knows Jesus said. Why did Jesus say it in the first place? Well, again, Jesus is clear here and in other places that he is to start his mission with the Jewish people. (We see an echo of that when Paul and the later apostles always start their preaching campaigns in the synagogue when they arrive in a new town.) But remember, too, that these newly appointed apostles are themselves Jewish. For the most part they will have mixed only with Jewish people. They know Jewish culture and the Jewish way of life. They're not very familiar with the Gentile culture. If they're just starting out, they should start where they are familiar, where they might expect a more sympathetic response. If they'd turned up amongst the Samaritans, their long-time enemies, they probably wouldn't have even got started on what they had to say before being turned away.

It's always good to start sharing the good news about Jesus with those who are familiar. You know what to say and how to say it. Of course, there are those who are called and gifted to go and preach to people in other cultures, but the majority of us are simply called, like these first followers of Jesus, to go and talk about Jesus in the places we know and where we are known, using the customs and idioms with which we are familiar. We're all called – if we are truly followers of Jesus – to announce the message of the Kingdom: and the best place to do that is right where we are. But what is that message? What are the followers of Jesus to announce?

2. ANNOUNCEMENT

The message they were to announce was the same that Jesus had already begun to proclaim: "*The kingdom of heaven is near.*" Two quick things about the words before we go any further. Firstly, Matthew, being a good Jew who cannot mention the name of God, and writing for Jews, substitutes "*heaven*" for God, which the other Gospel writers use. And the word translated by the NIV as "*near*" is translated by pretty well everyone else as "*here*" or "*among you*". In other word, Jesus had inaugurated the kingdom simply by his presence among them, he had begun to talk about it himself and he was demonstrating by his own life and by his actions in healing and liberating what the kingdom might look like.

Jesus had come to make real the sovereign rule of God – a rule which would overcome the influence of the powers of evil and the effects and consequences of sin in the lives of men and women. He had come to bring answers to those who were harassed by the pressures of life and the apparent futility of it all and who didn't know where to turn for help. He had come to bring hope and to point to a better future, an eternal future, with creation restored to its original perfection and humanity restored to their original relationship with God.

And Jesus had accompanied his announcement of the arrival of God's Kingly rule with signs that what he was talking about was real. Yes, he had spoken forgiveness to people who needed to hear it. Yes, he had spoken words of hope to the hopeless. Yes, he had countered the words of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law with words of truth and grace. But he had also healed the sick, raised the dead and driven out demons. He had actually shown the crowds what life in the Kingdom would be like – a life of wholeness and of liberation from the influence and effects of evil. It wasn't simply words.

Now he's telling his followers that they are to do that as well. They are to announce the arrival of the Kingdom, then show people what it's like by replicating those acts of kindness and restoration. There are no conditions attached to this, no set of criteria to gauge whether it's right to attempt the miracles – just get on and do it: *“Preach this message ... Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.”* People need to hear the announcement of the Kingdom and experience its effects.

Is that what we should be doing? We're OK with the preaching bit – as long as it's someone else doing it, very often – but what about the rest? There are plenty of ways round it – it was only for that time: it was a special command to the first apostles: things have moved on a lot since then. But maybe we are just too timid to try. Maybe our faith isn't quite strong enough. Maybe we ought to take the command to demonstrate the signs of the Kingdom a bit more seriously. Something to discuss in your housegroups!

But whatever we do, the message still needs to be heard. As we saw last week, there are still plenty of people around who are *“harassed and helpless”*, desperate to hear the announcement of the Kingdom. In his book *Finally Comes The Poet*, Walter Brueggemann uses the idea of the message of the Gospel, the announcement of the Kingdom as a poem and the people who proclaim it are the poets. This is how he ends his book:

“Despite the seeming odds against the poem, despite the awesome challenge of the task, perhaps better, because of the odds and the challenge, the preacher must speak. Our lives wait in the balance, hoping, yearning for the promissory, transforming word of the gospel. In the end, all we have is the word of the gospel ... We have only the word, but the word will do. It will do because it is true that the poem shakes the empire, that the poem heals and transforms, that the poem enters like a thief in the night and gives new life, fresh for the word and from nowhere else.”

That's what the followers of Jesus – Peter, James, John, Thaddaeus, Bartholomew, Judas and the rest: you and I – are called to do. We are called to announce the Kingdom, to speak of and to demonstrate the transformative power of God's kingly rule, the amazing grace of Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, to all those around us. It's a scary prospect – but there's help at hand.

3. AUTHORITY

I've left this to the end, but Jesus starts his commissioning with this. *“He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority ...”*. When we accept the challenge to go and share the gospel, announce the arrival of the Kingdom, then we are given the authority of Jesus. You will remember, I hope, that one of the things Matthew has particularly noted in his Gospel so far is the comments of the people each time he preaches or teaches or heals or frees someone from the evil influence of their demons and they often say that they have never seen anyone speak or act with such authority. Jesus demonstrates his God-given authority – and he hands on that authority to those who follow him. He mentions it again at the very end of Matthew's Gospel as he gives his followers the task of taking the good news of the Kingdom not just to Israel but to the whole world.

Once again, I suppose we could quibble about whether this was meant just for those first disciples rather than for people like us today. We don't quibble about the call of Jesus to us to preach the gospel, to witness to evangelise, though – and this seems all of a piece with that. Jesus tells us to get on and do it – and he will back us up. He delegates his authority, his power, his own commission to all of those who want to follow him. And that authority, that power is made real to us, as we remembered last week, through the promised presence of the Holy Spirit. Speaking in the name of the Jesus, with his authority can make a real difference. No doubt you've read stories about it – in the rest of the New Testament, in the stories of the saints of God since then. You may even have experienced it yourself. I remember very clearly the effect of speaking out in Jesus' name on a man who was clearly possessed by demonic forces. It was scary, but it worked!

As we go out from here once again this morning to live and work and witness amongst our friends, neighbours, colleagues and classmates in the week ahead, we need to go assured of this fact – we have the authority of Jesus. We are going in response to his call and in his name. I've been into various places during my life where I have had to make clear that I am coming with some authority – in schools, in hospitals, in other situations – and the mention of the authority with which I come has opened many doors (sometimes when I've used bogus authority, but we'll draw a veil over that!). We are sent out with the supreme authority, so we can speak and act with confidence as we allow God's Holy Spirit to work within us and as we accept that we are doing it in Jesus' name – not in the name of the church, not in our own name, not in the name of some organisation, but in the name and with the authority of Jesus Christ, the Kingly Messiah. May we follow faithfully in the footsteps of all those who have gone before, from Simon Peter onwards. And may we expect to see great things happening for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

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Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think Jesus chose only men as his apostles?
2. Is the command to heal, raise the dead and drive out demons valid today? Or should we only be preaching? Why/why not?
3. Why does Jesus want the apostles to go exclusively to the people of Israel? What does that have to say to us today?
4. What do you understand by the Kingdom of heaven/God?
5. How can we know and convey the authority of Jesus?
6. What is your response to this passage?