

Matthew 9:35 - 10:8 - Workers for the harvest - that means you!

Can you believe that my 6 months as Vicar has already come and gone! It seems like just yesterday I started my Vicarage. At that time, I looked out at a church that had over 100 people in it, today I look out on a church with less than 10 in it! It has surely been a very interesting 6 months and certainly not quite what I (or anyone else) expected when I started back in December. I have really enjoyed my time here, and have found it to be a very happy and beneficial experience, and there have been years experiences crammed into the 6 months I have been here!

Our text this morning is the set text from the lectionary, it is not some special text chosen simply because it might fit with the idea of the vicar leaving, to then be sent out into the harvest field. While that might be one way of looking at the text. There is more to it than that, and some aspects in it have a lot more to do with you than you might think.

Jesus is going around to the synagogues in the towns and villages that he is visiting, teaching and healing the people. As he does this, notices that the people are not as they should be. There is something wrong. Their shepherds are not looking after them correctly. Instead of leading the flock towards the truth the Pharisees are leading the flock away – as we read in the verse immediately before the beginning of our text today The Pharisees said of Jesus, “It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons’.

Consequently, Jesus has compassion on the crowds because he can see how harassed and helpless, they are. Those words harassed and helpless are interesting and they deserve a bit more attention because they don't really capture the essence of the Greek words used here. The Greek words literally translated would be closer to troubled and cast out.

Troubled and cast out are words that could be used to help describe how some people may be feeling about the last 6 months. Have you felt troubled and cast out over the last 6 months – for example have you been troubled by the fear of the Coronavirus, troubled by the restrictions imposed on us, or even troubled by the way restrictions are being lifted? Perhaps you have felt cast out because we have literally been cast out from regular worship? Or perhaps the COVID 19 restrictions have prevented you from visiting or being visited by family members leaving you feeling cast out of your own family?

Jesus had compassion on the crowds in our text today and therefore you can be assured that Jesus has compassion on you at this time. He is there walking with you through your troubles whatever they may be. And as Jesus tells us at the very conclusion of Matthew's Gospel, he is with us always to the very end of the age, so you can be assured that you are never cast out from him!

Because we are never cast out from Him, God can use these troubled times to bring about good. Often, we don't see that at the time, but God is certainly working through the troubled times that we have been experiencing.

For example, remember our second reading today from Romans - we may have suffered by not being able to meet in worship, but that has produced perseverance – we have persevered by finding ways to worship and support each other in these troubled times. This has shown the true caring character of fellow Christians and now we have hope that gathering together as a congregation in the church for worship will soon be possible.

These challenging times have certainly reminded us that simply being Christian does not stop trouble from coming on us, if anything it adds to the trouble. It adds to the trouble because Satan wants to find ways to attack us and our faith hoping to prise us away from the loving arms of our Saviour. He thinks that if we are troubled, we might think that God is not all powerful and he really doesn't care for us after all. Because if God really cared for us, then we would not have to deal with any hardship, pain or want in our earthly life.

But we know that life doesn't work that way, as humans we are constantly harassed by sin and we are helpless to do anything about it. This does not mean that God is absent or doesn't do anything about it, in fact it is quite the opposite.

That is precisely why Jesus was sent into the world - God shows his great love for us by sending his own Son into the world to suffer, die and then be raised again to save us and reconcile us to himself.

The presence of sin and suffering in our lives, rather than driving us away from God, drives us closer to God because we know that we cannot save ourselves. There is no way we can overcome sin and suffering without the divine assistance of Christ's saving work. Jesus sees all people and he has compassion on them in their sin and suffering.

Jesus has so much compassion that he removes the stone and goes willingly to his passion.

Through his death and resurrection, Jesus heals much more than just people's physical afflictions, he heals people's spiritual affliction.

In our text, when Jesus healed people's physical ailments it meant that they were free to go and worship God in the Temple – something that was impossible when they were afflicted by illness or disability. He offered them spiritual as well as physical healing.

He went to the cross taking all that sin on himself and through the helplessness he experienced on the cross he won the victory over sin death and the devil for all people including you. His resurrection proves the victory.

So how do we respond to this victory?

The message needs to be spread. It needs to go out to all people, Jesus died for everyone, so it is a message that everyone needs to hear. It is a message that was freely given to us so, it is a message that should be freely passed on! But, isn't that what the vicar is being sent out to do once he graduates?

Sending the Vicar out is fine – but that is only part of the solution!

Did you notice in our text what Jesus told his disciples to do after he noted that the harvest was plentiful but the workers were few? He tells his disciples to ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers into the harvest field. We should all be asking the God the Father to send out workers into the harvest field.

So, the first part of the solution is prayer – pray that people will hear the call and respond to it and be sent out to spread the good news. Yes, you can even pray for the Vicar as he goes out. But as I said, that is only part of the solution.

The workers in the harvest are not restricted to the disciples or pastors. Think of the parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20 – where the landowner goes and hires labourers to work in his vineyard - who are the workers? Not just the Pastors and the disciples. Every one of us is a worker. Yes, even you.

We are all workers in the harvest. Being a Christian isn't just going to church (or listening to service on Sunday) Being a Christian is a way of life. Each one of us in our vocations live out our Christian lives as workers in the harvest field. It also means that the vicar needs to keep praying for you.

When a harvest is gathered there are lots of different jobs that need to be done to bring the harvest in from the fields and they are all important – if just one of them doesn't get done, the harvest doesn't come in.

It is the same with the harvest of souls. We all have different gifts and roles in life, so your work in the harvest field may be different from your neighbours. A life well lived as a mother pointing your children to Christ is just as important as a vicar heading out to wherever he is sent.

A farmer who takes care of the land and uses it wisely and seeks to provide for their family is just as important as the vicar.

The child who diligently works at their school work and listens to and honours their parents is just as important as guess who? The vicar!

It is about trusting in God, serving him and using your gifts for the glory to God in your everyday life, whatever your everyday life may look like.

You are just as much a worker in the harvest field as I am. You are part of the answer to the prayer for workers.

But none of us can do any of this on our own.

We are sinful fallen human beings. It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit, that we can accept and understand what Jesus has done for us and put our faith and trust in him. In response to his life death and resurrection the Holy Spirit works with and through us to gather the harvest.

That means when we go out, we do not rely on our own abilities, but instead we rely on the power of God. The power of God can do amazing things – look at the list of the disciples, humanly speaking, none of them were great or amazing people, but through the power of the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus they were able to heal the sick, drive out demons and spread the Gospel.

God worked through the disciples and he can and does work through you as well! So, let us go forward not apart but together – working together through the power of the Holy Spirit wherever we are to aid in the great harvest that is there to be gathered.

May God grant us each of us the strength, wisdom and perseverance that we need as workers in the harvest until the day we are called home to eternal rest with Jesus in glory forever.

Amen