

Sunday 6 October 2024
Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity
Choral Evensong for Harvest

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Joshua 3:7-end
Gp: Matthew 10:1-22

It doesn't take much imagination to see how the disciples would feel hearing Jesus speak. I am sure everyone here this evening can think of the time when they have had to do something for the first time on our own be that driving a car, playing the organ or standing in a pulpit. We take that first step with nervousness and trepidation: *'You want us to do it? By ourselves?'*

Matthew takes this opportunity to give us a list of the Twelve themselves, calling them for the first time 'apostles', that is, people who are 'sent out', as Jesus was now sending them, and so later send all those who witnessed his resurrection.

The number twelve is itself of course full of meaning, as anyone in Jesus' world would recognize; at the heart of what Jesus was up to was his belief that through his work God was at last renewing and restoring Israel, which traditionally had been based upon the twelve tribes. But now the Twelve were not just to be a sign that God was restoring Israel; they were to be part of the means by which he was doing so. But hadn't Jesus come for everybody? Didn't he himself say that Gentiles would come flooding into the kingdom? Hasn't Matthew already told us that even at the time of his birth foreign stargazers came to pay him homage?

Yes, and all of that matters. Jesus will, after his resurrection, reverse these instructions and send the disciples out to all the nations (28.19). But there is an immediate and urgent task, before the wider mission can be built into the programme. Israel itself must hear the message, must be given a chance to repent before it's too late. So far, the Gentiles who have appeared have come at their own initiative; Jesus has not sought them out and won't do so during his public ministry.

If he and his followers had started taking their message to the Gentile world at this stage, no self-respecting Jew would have paid them any more attention. It would have confirmed his enemies' taunts: he was in league with the devil. But he isn't. He has not come to destroy but to fulfil. Israel's God is indeed the creator God, who loves the whole world and intends to save it, to call the Gentiles as well; but the way he will do that is precisely by fulfilling his promises to Israel. That is Jesus' particular and focused concern, as the later church recognized. The time for the Gentiles will come soon enough. For the moment, every effort must be made to tell the chosen people that their great moment, the fulfilment of their dreams, has arrived. in 10.1-15 The Twelve Are Sent Out.

The instructions Jesus now gives his followers, which must have made them even more nervous, one would imagine at that fulfilment, give us a clear idea of what that fulfilment looks like. They are to be healers, restorers, people who will bring life and hope to others, not grand status to themselves.

The detailed instructions for their arrival in a town must have made them realize just what a responsibility they were carrying. This wasn't a take-it-or-leave-it option. They weren't suggesting to people that there was a new religious experience they could have, a new teaching which might help them with the tricky moral decisions they faced. They weren't even offering people new assurance of God's salvation after their death (though that would come too, in due time). It was more urgent still. God's kingdom was rushing upon them like an express train, and they had to get ready for it.

The healings the disciples were to perform, important as they were for the people concerned, were signs of something more important still: God's new life breaking into the life of Israel, beginning the new day that was dawning with Jesus. If people honoured that message and welcomed it, well and good; if they didn't, solemn actions should be taken to indicate that they had chosen to stay in the night rather than welcome the new morning.

There was coming a day, very soon, when those who had chosen Jesus' way of peace would be rescued from a great cataclysm, while those who insisted on the way of violence would wish they had lived instead in - Sodom and Gomorrah! Jesus is warning that an even worse fate will befall those who refuse to see God's new day as it dawns and prefer to stick with the old ways which were leading Israel to ruin.

These instructions were very specific, for a particular situation. But Matthew has recorded them in detail, presumably because he thinks they remain relevant to the church even after Jesus' death and resurrection. How might they apply to the mission of your church, today?

Jesus knew, from what had already happened in his public career, that he was running into opposition. It hadn't come as a surprise. He knew well enough that the agendas his contemporaries were following, particularly those who were eager for violent revolution against Rome, were diametrically opposite to the message he was advocating.

The disciples were persecuted, beaten, imprisoned and killed. The message of Jesus did indeed divide one family from another, and even split up parents from their children, brothers from brothers and sisters from sisters (Jesus' own brothers and sisters don't seem to have believed in him in his lifetime). But Jesus doesn't think it will take very long for all this to happen. Verse 23 indicates that he sees it all coming very quickly. Though he's sending them out urgently now, the strange event which he refers to as the coming of the son of man' will happen all too soon, before they have even managed to complete a full tour of all the towns of Israel.

What exactly Jesus (and Matthew) meant by this has been much discussed and puzzled over. Some have thought that it refers to Jesus' 'second coming, or 'Parousia', but, as we shall see with other similar phrases, this is unlikely. The phrase echoes Daniel 7.13, where the 'coming' of the son of man' is not his coming from heaven to earth, but his coming from earth to heaven: exalted, after suffering, to be the judge and ruler of the world, and particularly of the 'beasts' that have opposed the people of the saints of the 'most high'.

What seems to be meant here is this. The disciples will face the harsh fact of persecution, in which, when called to account for themselves, God will give them special wisdom to make appropriate answer. Families will be divided; they will find themselves chased from town to town; they must hold on and be patient. Eventually the moment will come when God's judgment will fall on those who oppose them; in other words, tragically, on the towns and villages where their message of peace was not accepted. In particular, as we shall see later, it will fall on the capital city, Jerusalem itself, which will reject Jesus and his gospel.

The end of verse 23 is thus a promise, not simply a warning: continue your mission, because God will vindicate you quickly. Faced with this awesome challenge, Jesus' sharp advice to his followers was: be shrewd like snakes, but innocent like doves.

Christians often find it easy to be one or the other, but seldom both. Without innocence, shrewdness becomes manipulative; without shrewdness, innocence becomes naivety. Though we face different crises and different problems to those of the first disciples, we still need that finely balanced character, reflecting so remarkably that of Jesus himself.

If we are in any way to face what he faced, and to share his work, we need to be sure that his own life becomes embodied in ours.

Fr Bill Addy