

Sunday 14 June 2026

Liverpool Parish Church

The Second Sunday After Trinity

OT: Exodus 19:2-8a

NT: Romans 5:1-8

Gp: Matthew 9:35-10:8

As you might know, I work at Liverpool Hope University. It has a fascinating history: it is a product of Anglican and Roman Catholic teacher training colleges together. In the heady days of the 1980s, when ecumenical barriers were finally coming down, a lot was made of that fact that the two great cathedrals of our city are joined by Hope St. So, when it came to naming the fledgling higher education body, it was a natural choice: Liverpool Hope it became.

But there is a problem if you work there for any length of time. The word hope gets used over and over – in marketing and prospectuses, in pep talks to staff and students, in the naming of campuses and canteens. It's not surprising, but it can get wearing: hope as a brand. Over time, it's easy to find yourself having had enough of hope (don't tell my line manager).

In a church context, something similar could be said about the word mission. Over twenty years ago we had 'mission-shaped church'. Ecumenically, we have the 'five marks of mission'. In our diocese, we are supposed to be getting 'fit for mission'. Bishop Ruth has announced a new phase of missional growth. Mission, mission, mission: but what is it all for?

Cynics will point to declining numbers going to church – and to financial shortfalls. I'm reminded that Liverpool Hope was created partly in a spring of ecumenical promise, but also in a winter of financial necessity.

But surely, we are often told, mission should be at the heart of what we do? After all, we are sent into the world to make disciples. The tricky thing is working out what this means and how to do it.

Many of us do not believe that the church has exclusive hold of the truth. Nor do we think that everyone outside the church (or our version of church) is doomed to everlasting damnation. This all seems to make a mockery of the mystery of God. It puts limits on God's love.

At the same time, we know we are not meant to be a holy huddle, backs turned to the world. We have something we want to share, something that overflows from the riches we have received. We can't keep it to ourselves. We can't ignore the suffering of the world and of creation.

So how do we engage in mission, without it becoming something arrogant, or hectoring – and without giving up altogether?

I think our gospel reading today can help us. It falls into three sections: in the first, we see Jesus going to the harassed and helpless crowds and offering them healing. In the middle

section, he gathers his twelve disciples, all of whom are named (just as we are called by name) – and what a motley crew they are. And then they are sent out to do what Jesus has been doing: find the lost sheep and ‘proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near’.

In that first section, we see that Jesus is driven by compassion. The word translated ‘compassion’ refers to a person’s inner organs – originally, to the entrails of a sacrificial victim. This is not just a vanilla pity. This is visceral. Jesus rages, burns with compassion. He is consumed by it, so that he has to express it. He has to offer himself. Offer his heart. Jesus’ mission is not something he does, it is something he is. It is a spring flowing from the very deepest part of him.

Likewise, when Jesus calls his disciples and sends them out, he’s not just asking them to do a job, or perform a function. He’s not even primarily asking them to get recruits. Jesus seems happy enough with a tiny group of followers. He is sending them out as agents of compassion. Because when they go and show people a life that is healing, mercy, forgiveness, *then* the kingdom of heaven comes near. Then, people change, because they are actually touched by that compassionate presence.

‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ The kingdom of heaven is the gospel of Matthew’s term for what other gospels call the kingdom of God – it is the same thing. Either way, its main meaning is not a future world, or a world above. No: it draws near, it comes upon us, it is in our midst. It is wherever God reigns. It is wherever God’s heart is poured out for the world.

Jesus does not give his disciples a set of beliefs to spread. He sends them out to live the kind of life that he lives – the kind of life that knows itself utterly graced by the outpouring of God’s love. A life that no longer needs to compete, dominate, or fear. No longer needs to fear even death itself.

He is not naïve. A little later in the gospel, he says he is sending the disciples out like sheep among wolves. He tells us that people will try to bring in the kingdom with violence, take it by force. Haven’t we seen this over the last days on the streets of Southampton and Belfast? Forces of decision, exploiting grievances, using violence to try and bring in their own version of the kingdom: one where the stranger is not welcome. But this is not God’s kingdom. God says, unequivocally, ‘You must love the stranger’ as he does (Deuteronomy 10.19). As sheep among wolves, we offer the free outpouring of God’s heart. We must be true to that heart.

There is a wonderful connection here with our second reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans. It might seem we are in a very different world: where Jesus preached the kingdom, Paul preaches the crucified Christ. There’s no doubt Paul was very busy planting and strengthening new churches. But there is also a deep continuity. Paul writes that ‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.’ He writes of us sharing in the suffering and endurance of Christ, as we die and rise with him.

With him, we let go of hard hearts and grasping fingers. We let go of abuse and hatred. We let the heart of God pour out its riches through us.

This is never about us proving ourselves or earning God's favour. That is God's business. As Paul puts it, 'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us'. Christ meets us as we are, with a love that is freely given. Our mission is to live the life that Christ lives in us. It is to share the heart of God, in whatever way we can, in whatever relationship, community, job or situation we find ourselves in.

If we offer that compassion as a real experience, if we meet the helpless and harassed where they are, if we bring forgiveness and healing, if we refuse the powers that kill and enslave – then the kingdom is brought near. And people will be drawn into that circle of grace. Maybe they will come to church, to taste something more. But that is a second moment: if we make recruiting people the first aim, we may well miss the point.

In our first reading from Exodus, God calls the Israelites a priestly kingdom. We might think priests are just those busy with religious matters, shut away in temples and churches. In reality, a priest is simply someone who makes offerings. We are a royal priesthood, every one of us. Our mission is simply this: to offer to the world what God has offered to us, the deepest compassion of his heart.