

Bishop Jonathan Gibbs – Sermon for Trinity 1 – 14th June 2020

Bible Reading: Matthew 9:35-10:8

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is good to be with you to share in your worship today. Thank you for all that you are doing to support one another and the life of our churches and communities during this strange and difficult time.

When I was reading this passage a few days ago in preparation for writing this sermon, it struck me that it is very much a text for our times. What Jesus *sees*, how he *feels* and how he *reacts* all resonate with the situation we are facing and have much to say about how we as Christians should respond. Let me explain what I mean.

At the start of this passage, Jesus is out and about in the towns and villages, fulfilling his ministry of preaching the gospel and healing the sick. He sees the crowds and recognises, in Matthew's words, that "they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." How contemporary is that, and how like what so many people today are feeling? As this crisis goes on, and as the picture if anything becomes more and more confusing with each day, so many of us are feeling rather harassed and helpless!

We may also be feeling a little like sheep without a shepherd because of the constantly changing advice we are getting from government and the media. There are news bulletins every hour and government briefings every day, and that's all confusing enough, but if people are keyed into social media and are picking up messages and notifications on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and from goodness where else, then the whole thing can be quite overwhelming. Add into that the issues that have arisen since the awful death of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis police and the demonstrations that have followed in the USA, in this country, and in other parts of the world, and things can seem even more scary and confusing.

Part of what is going on, I think, is to do with the fact that many people are feeling fearful and frustrated as a result of the Coronavirus crisis and the lockdown, and this has been part of the context within which other issues have been focused and amplified. That is not to say that these issues are not of great importance – and it may even mean that they have a better chance of being addressed as a result. But my point is that we can see perhaps more clearly than before that people today, like the crowds that Jesus saw, are feeling *harassed* and *helpless* – and we need to see and understand that, just as Jesus did. So that's the first thing here, seeing and understanding the **confusion** that people feel.

The second thing concerns Jesus' *reaction* to what he saw – in particular how it affected him and how he felt about it. He was not just a dispassionate observer looking down on the fray. No, Matthew tells us that "he had compassion on them" – he was *moved* by what he saw, he felt for them, he identified with them. This was a heart response, not just a head response. The word **compassion** has as its root meaning the idea of *suffering with* someone; it is about coming alongside someone and sharing their experience, so that to some extent it becomes our experience – as a result of which we want to do something about it.

And that compassion is and should be at the heart of our Christian response to what we see going on around us, because compassion in the sense of feeling with and for people who are suffering is the basis for our engagement with them. It was *compassion* that the Good Samaritan demonstrated when he got off his donkey and went to the aid of the man lying in the ditch, even though this put him at risk from the robbers.

Compassion in this deep sense *is* about what goes on in our hearts, but it is not and cannot be *just* about our emotions. It has also to be to do with our choices and our actions. Compassion that stops with our feelings and does not issue in action is not worthy of the name. It is right therefore that we should be moved by what we see going on around us, whether it is those who are suffering as a result of the Coronavirus crisis or as a result of racism; but we then need to go beyond that and make decisions about our choices and our actions. Christians should be people of compassion and our churches should be places which give us the space to consider our response to what we see around us, in the light of the compassion of Jesus for the suffering, for the harassed and for the helpless.

And that brings us to the third and final thing that we see here, which concerns what Jesus *does* as a result of his compassion for the crowds and their confusion. Bear in mind that Jesus has already been engaged in ministry in the towns and villages, preaching the gospel and healing the sick. But what happens now marks a *new phase* in his ministry, because what he does next is to choose and **commission** the twelve apostles, whom he sends out in his name to extend the reach of his ministry.

This is the first stage in Jesus' handing on his ministry to the apostles, who in turn, after Jesus' Ascension into heaven, pass on that ministry to others, and ultimately to us. We in our generation are those who are *commissioned* to carry on the ministry of Jesus to the people of our day – to the crowds who are harassed and helpless on the one hand, and to those who are lost and lonely in their own homes on the other.

As we go forward during the current lockdown and beyond, we as Christians and as churches need to be reflecting on and planning for what God is commissioning us to do for the people and communities among whom we live. It is of course vitally important that we should be supporting and helping one another, and especially the more vulnerable people within our church families; but we also need to be thinking about what we can do to *go out* into our communities to share the good news of Jesus Christ and to bring his hope and healing to those who are hurting.

I can't say what that could and should look like for you in your church, or in the town or village in which you live. That is for you to work out together under the guidance of God. But I do believe that each and every one of us has been commissioned by Jesus to *play our part* in that task, however small and however limited our resources may be.

So three things for us from this very contemporary and very relevant passage of scripture: Seeing the **confusion** of the crowds. Responding with **compassion** to what we see and hear. And accepting our **commission** to share in the ministry of Jesus, sharing the good news about him and bringing his healing and hope to those among whom we live.

Thank you for what you are doing already, and may God give you the wisdom and the grace you need for the days ahead. Amen.