

As Sheep Amongst Wolves

Please note that this article is also available as an audio file if you wish to hear it read instead of reading it yourself.

The reading this morning is found in Matthew 9:35 – 10:16

Introduction

Two weeks ago, on Pentecost Sunday, heard about how the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and empowered them to carry out the mission of the Church. And this week we read in Matthew's Gospel a detailed account of how Jesus sent out the Twelve Apostles to preach the Good News in the towns and villages of Israel. This is how Matthew recorded his account (*read Matt 9:35 – 10:16*).

The Gospel of the Kingdom

Reaching out with the Gospel (which means 'good news') is the main focus of this reading from Matthew. So let us be clear at the outset - Jesus has called us, His followers, to go forth in His Name to preach the Good News of God's forgiveness and salvation. The message we have to proclaim is also clear, namely that the Kingdom of God has come to us; has broken into our reality in the person of Jesus Christ. And we, Jesus' followers, are to tell others about that, and invite them to respond to Jesus. He is sending us out into the world to call people to repent and believe in His Name, to accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour and to take their place in His Kingdom.

Reaching out in this way to those around us, with this Gospel message, is all part and parcel of the responsibilities we take on when we choose to become followers of Jesus. Telling others about Jesus – who He is, what He has done and what He asks of us – is our duty as His followers.

Why Bother?

Now you might be thinking to yourself, why bother? People just don't seem to care today, they don't want to hear about God or Jesus. If people want to come to Church, well they know where were are, so why bother with all the hassle of trying to reach out to them? Well, quite apart from that fact that to deliberately choose not to tell others, not to reach out, would be in direct disobedience to Jesus' own command, there are very good reasons why we should embrace the Great Commission (Matt 28:19) be ready and willing to share the Gospel of Christ with those around us.

First and foremost, our primary motivation for reaching out with the Gospel message, must surely be love. In verse 9:36 of our bible passage today, we read that Jesus had compassion on the people. He looks at the crowd and sees that they are like sheep without a shepherd: they have no guidance, no-

one to lead them or teach them the way of God. He sees that the people are lost - both spiritually and morally. But nevertheless, He had compassion on them. In love He wanted to reach out to them and lead them back to God the Father. Yes they were lost, but lost people matter to God and they should matter to us also. If we love our neighbour, then we should tell them about Jesus, but do so with gentleness and respect.

No Shepherd

As I mentioned in my first lockdown address, entitled “A Wake up Call” - over the last 40/50 years our nation has effectively turned its back on God and chosen to go the way of the world. We have exchanged theology for science and swapped worship for entertainment - and in so doing, we have cut ourselves off from the Shepherd. We are now a nation that has effectively lost its way. Many people are lost in a sea of apathy and confusion; lost in a sea of conflicting and competing ideas and values, where once familiar standards have fallen away. As a result people have embraced a DIY morality, with everyone doing what seems right in their own eyes.

Few it seems, give any thought at all to what God thinks or what He wants. As far as the vast majority of the population of this country are concerned, God simply doesn't matter and His Word is largely irrelevant. And each day in the newspapers and the media, the results of this are plain for all to see.

Speaking of the media, the news over the last week or so has been dominated by the Black Lives Matter protests, and some of the injustices of prejudice and racism have been highlighted, not just in America, but around the world. Whilst I cannot condone violence and looting, I do fully support the BLM campaign, and echo what has been said by other church leaders, that there is no place for racism in the Church – or anywhere else for that matter. But I would want to go further and say there is no place whatever in the Church for injustice or prejudice of any kind. Yes, BLM, but I would want to emphasise that all lives matter to God – all lives; and they should matter to us as well. As followers of Christ, we are to treat everyone with respect, regardless of their skin colour, ethnic background or gender. We are all made in the image of God. Hence Jesus' command to go out into all the world and proclaim the Good News to all nations and all people; you will never meet a person that God doesn't love.

Still Hope

I'm aware that, as far as the Christian presence in this country is concerned, I've perhaps painted a somewhat gloomy picture of a nation that has turned its back on God and His Word. Certainly as Jesus' followers we are facing a seriously uphill task, and there are plenty out there who long to see us fail. And, as Jesus Himself said, “I am sending you out like sheep amongst wolves.” (Matt 10:16). But despite all this, there is still hope – I mean real hope; and we must never forget that.

Jesus looked around in His day and saw that the harvest was plentiful. And I believe that is still true today. Yes, our modern secular society makes the Gospel hard for people to hear and even harder to accept, but there is, nevertheless, still a harvest out there – and Christ is sending us out into the field to gather in those who belong to Him.

And it is our duty under God to respond positively to His call in whatever way we can, using whatever gifts God has given us, to help people find faith in Christ; but we need to be willing to be used. We need to be willing to witness to Jesus and share our faith story with those around us, whenever an opportunity presents itself; indeed, we should be praying for such opportunities.

Whatever situation God may call you to, it's unlikely to be as demanding or as dangerous as that faced by the early disciples, and as we read in Matthew, Jesus equipped them for the task they faced in their time and their culture. And we need to pray that Jesus will no less equip us for the task we face today. Our situation and culture may have changed radically from Jesus' time, but God remains the same. His power and His promises are undiminished and as sure as ever. Amen.