

Sunday 3rd May 2020, Park Road Baptist Church
“Do Not Be Afraid”, Matthew 10: 1 – 33

Is this 6 weeks into lockdown? I’ve lost count, partly because we put ourselves into something resembling lockdown before it was actually announced, partly because the days and weeks seem to be running into each other without the “normal” routine of doing specific things on specific days. Who has been worried about the Covid-19 virus? Who has been afraid, of going out, of having contact with someone who might have it without knowing, of passing it on to someone else because you don’t know if you’re one of the people who have it without symptoms. It is a scary time for many.

Matthew 10: 1 – 33, The disciples have been gathered, they have walked and worked with Jesus for a while now. They have heard teaching of a kind they have never heard before as the things of God are opened up for them to understand. They have seen miracles, healings. Jesus has asked them to pray for workers to take out the Gospel message to others. I suspect that might have been a very well attended prayer meeting with prayers rising from the hearts of those who’d seen the work of Jesus first hand.

Matthew 10:1, Then, Jesus calls the inner core group of 12 together and “gave them authority” to drive out demons/evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness”. We’ve already met the phrase “every disease and sickness” before, it is used to describe Jesus’ ministry at Matthew 4:23 and Matthew 9:35. Jesus is commissioning the inner core of 12 disciples to do the work he has been doing so far.

Jesus gave them authority. Later on Jesus would be questioned by the religious leaders and challenged to say on whose authority he taught and healed and performed miracles. Here, these disciples have heard and seen the authority of Jesus. Now, he shares that authority with them for this task at this time.

What is authority? External authority is about hierarchies, positions of power, status. The Queen and the Prime Minister have external authority. Your boss at work or principle at school/college have external authority. It is authority that comes from being appointed to a specific role. We are suspicious of external authority, we want transparency and accountability, and rightly so because we have seen so many scandals and so much abuse of power. Jesus had no external authority. He had no worldly authority or position.

What Jesus had, and this came up in the Gospels, was an internal authority. He was recognised by others as someone with authority. People listened to him, encountered him and recognised the truth within him and as a result they ascribed authority to him. And as a result of discerning the internal authority of Jesus people followed him. Matt 7:28-29 “When Jesus had finished saying these things the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the Law” (same Mark 1:22, Luke 4:36)

This is the authority that Jesus bestowed on these 12 disciples. They are called together as a defined group for the first time and their function is to do the work of Jesus.

In verses 2-4, we find the 12 named. Some we have heard of, others we don't know. Is Bartholomew called Nathaniel elsewhere? Who is Thaddius? Some are described in terms of family relationships, some by their occupation (or former occupation). Not all disciples get famous!! To be a disciple a person has to follow Jesus and respond to the call of Christ. That's what these 12 did.

And these were the instructions Jesus gave to them, verses 5-16, Go to the lost sheep of Israel (the Gentiles and Samaritans would be taken care of later but first, go to God's chosen people). Preach the message that the kingdom of heaven is near, heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.

Don't be weighed down with possessions or money. Those who work for the Lord deserve to be supported. As the church grew, in its early history, there were many who made a living or a fortune setting themselves up as preachers and teachers and they were, quite rightly, condemned by the church leaders. Self-appointed messengers of God, making money out of the people of God, are very different from disciples, called and sent by Jesus with the authority of God.

When you go into a town or village, don't look for the best lodgings, look for someone who is "worthy". Stay there, speak your blessing on the house. If someone/somewhere doesn't welcome you then shake the dust off your feet and go elsewhere. God will judge those who reject or abuse God's messengers. Now that is scary, that is something to be afraid of.

Jesus says to the group being sent out "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves". It all sounds very exciting so far, heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers. Jesus needs them to be realistic about mission in his name. There will be opposition.

Matthew 10: 17-25, Be on your guard. Jesus wants them to expect opposition. Because of their teaching about Jesus they will be persecuted and arrested. Arrested!! Excuse me?! For what? For speaking out in favour of Jesus and his teaching. In v. 19, "But WHEN (not if, when) they arrest you, do not worry about what to say because the Spirit will be giving you the words you need". Don't be frightened, don't worry, God has it covered for you.

People will hate you because of Jesus (v.22), Jesus will split families (v. 21), But stand firm. Be like Jesus, imitate Jesus.

Matthew 10: 26-31, the theme of FEAR is at the beginning and the end of this section, like a set of bookends. Jesus speaks of healthy fear and unhealthy fear. In our current situation some people can have an unhealthy fear of the virus. Others seem to have no fear at all and dismiss all the advice to isolate and risk spreading the virus. The healthy way is to recognise the problem and take all reasonable steps to prevent and protect. Having outlined the problem, that disciples will be persecuted, Jesus wants them to have healthy, productive fear. This is the fear of God who holds power over life and death. A healthy fear of God is good and wise. It is much better than an unhealthy fear of other people, persecutors, who can only harm the physical body but whose authority is short and restricted.

I was fascinated to read that where it mentions sparrows in v. 29, sparrows were the food of the poor. I hadn't known that before despite reading this passage so many times. Rich people kept them as pets and poor people bought them for food. You,

says Jesus, are of greater worth than many sparrows and God, who knows how many hairs are on your head, will be with you. Do not be afraid.

And to round this section off, Jesus said that if disciples acknowledge Him before people then He will acknowledge that disciple before God in Heaven.

Imagine standing before God, with all our smut and failure, and Jesus saying quietly "It's OK Abba, this is one of mine, they are with me" Wow!

This is a powerful passage to commission those going out and going forth in mission. But we are in lockdown. What can this passage, this word from God, speak to us in our situation today?

- It reminds us that those known and unknown can be commissioned by Jesus for the work of the Lord. As the church is established so is a pattern where workers were commissioned by the church, they didn't just go off and do their own thing independently. Is there a work of mission that we want to test with the leaders? A work we feel called by God to do? A work for the church? Submit it to the Leadership and we'll discern it together, in lockdown or for after lockdown. It could be that the thing on your heart is already being done by the church through a different team, it could be that God is speaking to a group of people separately. Submit, share, listen to God together
- This passage begins with Jesus sharing authority. This break in the normal routine could be a good time to ask God to speak to us about our attitude to authority. Do we want to be in charge? Do we react when we don't get our own way? External authority is not the way of Jesus, not here, not in Philippians 2:5-11, not in Matthew 20: 25-28. Not in the past, not in the present, not in the future. Jesus gives authority to heal and forgive. The authority of Jesus stands up against those who would harm and who are exercising authority in non-godly ways. "Search my heart O God".
- We are reminded that there are healthy and unhealthy fears. It may be that we were brought up to submit to fear, to do as we are told for fear of consequences? It could be that we were brought up to confront fear and stand against those things that make us afraid? We'll all have different feelings toward fear, reactions to fear. Jesus reminds us that there is a healthy fear, fear of the Lord, and unhealthy fear (fear of those who could persecute or even kill us). God isn't telling us that it is wrong to feel afraid, this passage is telling us that when we are afraid we can trust in God. Fear is normal, if we can learn to cast our fears upon the Lord we are less likely to be driven by anxieties.

These disciples are being sent out on a travelling mission. We are in lockdown! How can we spend the time in lockdown preparing for mission once we are free to move around again? If you look back, Jesus had called the disciples to prayer before commissioning them and sending them out with the good news of the Gospel. Let's offer ourselves to Jesus in prayer in these days of resting and waiting, and preparing for mission in whatever shape Jesus puts that mission before us. Amen