

#Call to Action

Matthew 9: 35 – 10: 8

The title of today's passage from Matthew's gospel in one of the Bibles on my bookshelf is *'Call to action.'* Today's reading begins with Jesus going through all the local towns and villages, teaching in their meeting places, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing many diseased bodies, and bruised, hurt lives. We're told that when he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd. *'The harvest is plentiful,'* he says to his disciples, *'but how few workers. Pray therefore for harvest hands!'*

And having demonstrated to his disciples what it is he wants them to do, he calls the twelve together and gives *them* the authority to do what *he's* been doing – to drive out evil spirits and heal every disease and sickness. He calls them each by name and sends them out with clear instructions about where they are to go and what they are to do. *'As you go,'* he says, *'preach this message: 'The Kingdom of Heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.'* You've been treated generously, so live generously.

Last weekend, despite pleas to the contrary, crowds gathered in major cities around the world and the UK to protest against the racial inequality that exists in society and to support the Black Lives Matter movement which has gained much momentum since the killing of George Floyd in America on the 25th of May. Started in 2013 in response to separate police shootings of two young black men, the Black Lives Matter movement came into prominence with its use of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag. Ever since, the phrase has been a rallying cry of those who believe there is institutional racism against African-Americans in virtually every aspect of society, but especially in police departments and the legal system.

It's a belief that exists in the UK too, backed up with evidence. Teresa May said these words in July 2016 that *'If you're black, you're treated more harshly by the criminal justice system than if you're white.'* You're more likely to be arrested, more likely to be prosecuted, more likely to be convicted, and more likely to be sent to prison. Teresa May was speaking after the publication of a report by the Equality and Human Rights Commission of the biggest review of race equality in the UK. The report underlined just how entrenched race

inequality and unfairness still is in our society, with people from ethnic minorities more likely to be unemployed, more likely to live in poverty, less likely to go to a top university, less likely to get a good degree, less likely to work in managerial positions and more likely to be a victim of a hate crime. And now, more likely to die from Covid-19.

If Jesus were looking out over the crowds gathered this last week, surely his heart would have broken. For Jesus was a social justice hero. He boldly spoke out against inequality, helped the oppressed, condemned the oppressor, and embraced the alienated.

Like today, many were drawn to his causes and could identify with his messages. He attracted crowds, followers, and disciples. But when it came time to stand with Jesus in solidarity – when he was arrested and about to be put to death by a corrupt government – virtually everyone abandoned him.

And so it is, right now in today's society: The masses cry out, but when it comes time to get uncomfortable and we're required to speak out against the powerful, privileged, and established norms, who will be brave enough to stand up for what is right – to stand with Jesus? What *should* our response be as Christians, as followers of Christ?

Jesus didn't just *verbally* affirm the causes of the oppressed. He wasn't a bystander, cheerleader, or passive observer. He devoted his entire life towards actively seeking positive change. He not only threw himself into the conflict, but he was often the one *creating* the conflicts by disrupting social norms, angering leaders, condemning officials, and criticising governments. By clearing out the temple courts of the moneylenders, by defending the woman caught in adultery, by healing on the Sabbath, Jesus acknowledged and actively addressed what he observed: inequality, systemic injustice, and an apathetic society and devoted his life on earth towards abolishing such evils.

The exploited, ignored, mistreated, enslaved, abused, objectified, despised; these were the people he particularly invested in. These are the specific groups he passionately involved himself with. He ate dinner with them. He listened to them. He befriended them. He defended them. He healed them. He encouraged them. He loved them. He was persecuted for them. He was arrested because of them. Eventually, he even died for them.

So while he absolutely loved *all* of humanity, he paid special attention to those who were the victims of injustice.

Many Christians have an ambivalent relationship with the Black Lives Matter movement. Leaving aside the public unrest and criminal damage that occurred at the weekend – the vast majority of protests were peaceful and violence should always be condemned – various comments regularly circulate about faith and politics. Comments such as:

‘The church should not get involved with politics.’

‘We agree black lives matter, but so do all lives.’

‘We agree social justice matters, but we shouldn't confuse social justice with the gospel.’

Let's look at those in turn. Firstly, if the church has a view of what makes for flourishing individuals and communities - which it does - then it's an institution with politics. Should the church have remained silent over slavery, or the lack of free medical care and education for the poor, instead of being at the forefront of reform in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? No. So why should we think it has nothing to say about racial inequality?

Secondly, the ‘All Lives Matter’ response to ‘Black Lives Matter’ seems to completely miss the point. *Of course* all lives matter, but the fact is that people of colour in our country have been historically and systematically excluded from that ‘all’. In reality, black lives don't appear to matter as much as white lives.

And thirdly, equally simplistic is the claim that social justice should not be confused with the gospel. At which I want to shout, ‘*Which gospel are we talking about?*’ Apparently not the one that Jesus preached. In his hometown synagogue, Jesus preached from the prophet Isaiah. Remember these words from Luke 4, ‘*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.*’ The gospel that Jesus came preaching was in fact inseparable from concerns about social justice - which is to say, about care for the poor, for the prisoner, for the disabled, for all those who find themselves oppressed by society's laws and institutions. Is there a different, better gospel than the one Jesus preached? I think not.

Earlier this year, Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, said he was ashamed of the Church's institutional racism. Speaking at a debate on the Windrush generation at the general synod, Welby said: ‘*When we look at our own church, we are still deeply, institutionally racist. Let's be clear about that.*’

He added: 'I'm ashamed of our history and I'm ashamed of our failure ... I'm ashamed of my lack of urgent voice to the church.'

Surely, *now* is the time for the church to have an urgent voice and to be unafraid to express that voice. Jesus sent out his disciples having demonstrated in advance how he wanted them to be, and what he wanted them to do. The disciples had a significant role model to follow. As do we.

If we as Christians claim to follow Jesus yet fail to hear the cries of the oppressed and refuse to act against systemic injustices, inequality, and suffering - we're not being Christ-like at all.

Social Justice is a Godly practice we should strive to do on a daily basis.

So if you're afraid of being labelled, judged, shamed, attacked, or criticised for being involved in a social justice-related cause, remember that participating peacefully in the Black Lives Matter movement, fighting to end human trafficking, standing up for gender equality, protecting the environment, promoting fair trade, and protecting human rights around the world is one of the most Christian things you can do.

'What does the Lord require of you?' the Lord asks in Micah 6 at the end of the Old Testament. It's this: *'To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.'* And it's the Holy Spirit that gives us power to be God's witnesses when things go wrong and somebody needs to speak up.

May we do as the Lord requires.

Amen.