

ALL SAINTS WESTON

SUNDAY 5 NOVEMBER 2023

SANCTUARY

SHARING JESUS AND WORKING FOR JUSTICE

MATTHEW 10: 1 – 8

Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

So we come to the last in the way marks or signposts identified by Simon Reed in his book 'Followers of the Way' which is a guide to how we can be faithful followers, disciples, apprentices. He lists these things:

1. Always learning no matter how old in years or the faith you are
2. Having a soul-friend to accompany you on your journey
3. Maintaining rhythms work, rest and prayer
4. Living life as simply as possible
5. Celebrating and caring for creation
6. Healing whatever is broken
7. Being open to the Holy Spirit and listening out for the his voice to us
8. Praying and working for good to overcome evil
9. Pursuing the way of unity

And today we come to his final way mark:

Sharing Jesus and working for justice. Word and action going hand in hand. As Jim Wallis, another Christian and leader has written

The early Christians were known for the way they lived, not only for what they believed. For them, the two were completely intertwined. They were not called the people of "the experience" or the people of "right doctrine" or even the people of "the church." Rather, they were the people of "the Way." It is equally significant that the Christians were known as "the people" of the Way. More than just individuals who had been converted, they were now a people, a new community of faith, which had embarked together on a new

way of life. To follow Jesus meant to share Jesus' life and to share it with others.

The reading that we are using to illustrate this way mark is the one we heard – from Matthew's Gospel but it is also there in Mark and Luke. Jesus sending out of the twelve in six pairs, possibly six pairs of soul-friends.

Now before I get into the meat of this passage, here is a word of caution because if you are not careful you might easily get hold of the wrong end of the stick. This is one of those passages where you have to be careful and thoughtful about its interpretation. By this I mean, you have to ask even more carefully:

- Were these commands of Jesus just for those 12 people or for all Christians everywhere including me, including you?
- Were these commands of Jesus just for a few weeks in the life of the disciples or how they were meant to live all the time and how Christians are meant to live all the time?
- Were these commands of Jesus be taken literally or to be taken in a more spiritually or metaphorical way?

The answers to those questions are simple. The answers are 'well yes and no!'

I believe there were some aspects that were just for those 12 men at that particular time and in the context of their 3 year apprenticeship with Jesus. I do not believe that this is how they were expected to live and practise their ministry all the time. This was a short-term experience 'Go off with nothing for a few weeks and see what you can do and what you learn' It was not how they expected to live from then on. Nor are we expected to live exactly like that.

That said there are principles and guidelines in this episode for all Christians everywhere and in every century.

I'm going now to run quickly through each phrase, in this passage, knowing that I will run out of time before I can do it full justice but maybe one or more of these phrases and spurs of thought will spur you on to do more thinking. Or is that a forlorn hope?

Let's start with the opening sentence.

Jesus called his twelve disciples to him

The chapter opens with a call. The first step of our journey begins with a call. 'Come to me' says Jesus. He calls - we come. Of course this is not the first time Jesus has called these disciples to him. He called Peter and James and John and Andrew at the sea shore some time ago. He called Matthew when he was still counting the taxes he had extorted from people. He called Philip in Capernaum. He called Zacchaeus when he saw him up a tree. He called Nathanael when he saw him under a tree. But all those callings were perhaps a few months ago or maybe a year ago. Who knows quite where

they were on this particular day, but wherever they were, close by or a day or two's journey away, he calls them to him again for a special briefing.

Jesus' call to us did not stop when we first heard his call and responded. The call comes afresh every day to take up our cross and follow him and sometimes it comes particularly loudly or challengingly when we are called to a specific task or to share a particular word or message with someone. Maybe you can think of times in your life when this especially loud call has come and maybe you responded eagerly – or maybe you fought it but then did it – or maybe you let the call get quieter and quitter until you heard it no more and forgot about it.

He gave them authority

These disciples of Jesus do not go in their own name or on their own authority. They are like ancient heralds or ambassadors. Ambassadors when they are sent out by the head of state to another country go to the head of state of that country and present letters of credence, signed by the sending head of state. These letters state that the ambassador is appointed in the name of the head of state and speaks on behalf of the head of state. Jesus sends these disciples and all who profess his name in spirit and in truth, he sends them with authority to speak and act in his name. This is a privileged position and it is also a position of great responsibility. If the ambassador speaks wrongly, rudely, ignorantly great damage can be done. So it is with all Christians. We are ambassadors. The apostle asks the Ephesian church to pray for him that

whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

This is a prayer that we can all pray for one another and especially for particularly those Christians in public or prominent positions where their voices are heard by a congregation or by tens of thousands.

These are the names

Matthew lists the names of the 12 that Jesus has especially chosen to be with him and to continue his work as leaders after his departure. Last week we joined in a service at a church called Tube Station in Polzeath in Cornwall. It is a church partly started by the Christian Surfers UK because Polzeath is a great beach for surfers. On the ceiling of this simple church there are 12 surfboards each with the name of one of the 12 disciples on it.

Jesus firstly called first four fishermen, Peter, Andrew, James and John when they were at their place of work by the sea shore. He called Matthew at his place of dishonest work collecting taxes. He called Philip who called his friend Nathanael but Jesus had already spotted him under a tree and he spotted Zacchaeus up a tree. So Matthew lists the 12 names.

Jesus of course had many more disciples than 12 and at another point in his ministry he was able to send out 70 people – 70 disciples who went in his name. And there would

have been even more disciples – many of them fervent, sincere and anxious to follow him. Notice that Philip is in the 12 but not Nathanael. Yet In John chapter 1, Nathanael tells Jesus *'You are the son of God, the king of Israel'*. This was the first declaration of who Jesus was – yet he was not one of the twelve. I wonder if Nathanael was disappointed that he was not one of the twelve? Was he disappointed not to be picked in the A team?

I heard this week of a 9 year old girl who is in our church family and who goes to WASPS school

Anyway this young girl was complaining to her parents that she never got picked to be one of the actors in the Open the Book assemblies that a number of us do. I expect all of us have had a sense of disappointment or even anger at not being chosen for this or that job, to be in this or that team, to be in this or that circle. And as a result we can feel rejected, worthless – and that can happen spiritually. But in the kingdom of God everyone has a role and place and the places and positions of greater honour, if there are such places, will not necessarily be the most obvious ones. In that enormous banqueting table, there may well be apostles and bishops and even the odd pope towards the top of the table but there will also be humble saints who hardly anyone has ever heard of.

These are the names says Matthew. But it is not just these names that God knows and has recorded. God knows everyone of us by name. Every one of our names is engraved on his hands alongside the nail prints. Everyone has a name in his book of remembrance if we are have committed our lives

to him, however simply and however long ago or only just recently.

These twelve Jesus sent out.

The chapter begins with Jesus calling them to him. Now he sends them out from him. He calls and hopefully we come. He commissions and hopefully we go out. We have not been called by him just for our own spiritual wellbeing. We have not just been called to rest in him. We are called for a purpose. Ephesians says *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.'*

One of the things churches struggle with - and we are no exception - is the balance between coming and going, between resting and being busy, between having fellowship together and going out into the world, between sitting at the feet of Jesus and tramping the streets in his name. That said coming and going are both necessary in the kingdom of God. The balance will be in one direction for one person and in another for a different person but there must be both of those ways of being in all of us is I venture to say.

We are called in in order to be sent out not to stay at home. We are to enjoy Sabbath rest primarily so that we are better equipped to serve in the week ahead. We are to take physical and spiritual refreshment whenever we can but we do so in order to be refreshed to go back into the fray. When soldiers have been on the front line for some time they are brought back behind the lines for rest and recuperation. But this is only

so that can go back stronger to do what has to be done in the front line.

Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.

I'll pass quickly over this one but essentially Jesus is saying 'Start at home. Start with whom you know best. The rest of the world will come later, don't worry. The kingdom of heaven and the good news of freedom in Christi is indeed for everyone.'

[At first glance this seems a bit hard, a bit divisive and not at all like Jesus. I thought he was supposed to like Samaritans you say – and rightly so. Why is he stopping his disciples going there with this wonderful message. Well I think the answer is that it is to do with timing and priorities at the time. It is more a case of Jesus “on this trial run, this gold DofE adventure that I am sending you out on, I want you to go firstly to the home team, to your families, to the people who know you well and who know your background and whose background you now. Don't run before you can walk. There will be time for the Samaritans and indeed all the nations of the earth later. Let's see how you get on first with the lost sheep of Israel.]

As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'

It is a surprisingly short message and script that Jesus gives them. Just six words – only five in Greek. IT is no the full gospel message. It is a message of preparation. The full message would not be possible until the day of Pentecost. The message

of the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of eternal life through faith in him. No this is the warm up act and it would resonate with the Jewish people to whom they had been sent. The coming of the kingdom of God or heaven was a day all Jews would have looked forward to. The day when justice would prevail, when the oppressors of the Jews would be overcome, when peace and plenty would once again flow through the land. Maybe this was what those 12 spoke about quoting the Old Testament prophets and saying that the kingdom of heaven was near because the king of heaven himself was near.

In every day and age the church is called to find ways of expressing the good news of the kingdom of God in ways which are true to the gospel and understandable by the culture. You know that when bible translators are working on bible translation, it is very often the case that there is no equivalent word or even concept for some of the most important words in the gospel – maybe a word like grace or repentance or justification or even the idea of a single overarching God. Those translators have to work with native speakers to try to find a word or phrase or even make up a word by joining two words together to make the idea understandable. The church and preachers and ordinary witnesses have this awesome responsibility to try to take the core of the gospel and make it speak to the people and the culture of the day. And there is no doubt that this is increasingly difficult in our day. Biblical language and ideas even in modern translation are more and more alien to modern western ears and minds.

Of course it helps if the words are accompanied by powerful actions which speak more loudly than words. The instruction given to the 12 was

Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.

As Tom said recently, if even one of these things were to happen now in our congregation, the crowds would flock to hear the words. So why don't they? Well that's a difficult question. Or a whole series of questions. And to answer them would take far more time and wisdom than I have.

For most of the church's history Christians would have said that those miracles were confined to the time of Jesus and the apostles and the very early church. Since the birth of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, the thinking has been that these demonstrations of the power of God to be seen as much today as they were then. Well that's a big debate. I think what we can say is that we should expect to see the evidently miraculous more than we do see it. But it would be a ministry only exercised by a few and is not to be expected to be a common part of our experience. Otherwise it would be the miracles and the hope of quick solutions to all our illnesses that would be the attraction not the Lord himself. What we can say with 100% confidence is that Christians should be engaged in relieving distress of any kind – whether that be caused by illness, poverty, circumstances, injustice. Whether that be homelessness, hunger, discrimination, abuse, slavery, the search for cures to illnesses. As individuals and as churches and as branches of Christianity we should be known – as

sometimes we are – for our full-hearted engagement in relieving and overcoming distress and injustice.

Freely you have received; freely give.

What a lovely phrase that is. No other gospel writer had it, not even in the passages in Luke and Mark which parallel this one. Freely you have received, freely give. This is a message which we can say without reservation is a message for all Christians everywhere in all time. No ifs no buts no qualifications.

In second Corinthians we read these lovely words.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

And in Ephesians 1, we read that *God has freely given us the riches of his grace which he has lavished upon us*

Freely has God given to us. Freely have other people given to us. Freely, gladly, generously are we to give. Whether that be to Christian in the church or those outside the church, Freely we are to give our time, our prayers, our words of encouragement, our words of challenge, our deeds of kindness, our acts of justice to show by one means and another by any means that the king of heaven is near and that indeed the king of heaven is standing waiting to receive all those who will turn to him in faith and trust and obedience.

We are not apostles. We are not famous writers, preachers, leaders. But we can all speak in our words and through our

lives of him who first loved us and gave himself for us. As we continue to travel along the way, a church on the way, may we be faithful ambassadors and heralds for Jesus Christ.