

Reading for the Day – Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples,

‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.’

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.

These are the names of the twelve apostles:

first, Simon, also known as 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 Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.

You received without payment; give without payment.

‘The Harvest is Plentiful, But the Labourers Are Few’.

An address by Jim Hogg, LLM

First of all, I’m aware that, in these odd days of chance, there is more than a passing likelihood that a number of you are sitting there saying, “Who on earth is this guy that keeps popping up?”

Well, in answer to that question, my name is Jim Hogg and I’m what used to be called a Reader, but am now rather grandly entitled a “Licensed Lay Minister” for the North Leightonstone Benefice. I’m a sort of ‘jobbing lay preacher’ ... I’m tempted to say a “Sorcerer’s Apprentice”, but that might not reflect too kindly on my boss, Mandy.

So, hello all.

I must say, this is the first time I have preached in an empty room and I find it a rather odd and unsettling experience. For all I know, while I sit here, you may be searching for the off switch. An uncertain experience.

Thinking about today’s Gospel reading, I rather guess the twelve disciples had, over the time they had spent with Jesus, found their experience rather odd and unsettling.

This King, this Messiah that the prophets had foretold, was not turning out to be quite what was expected. He was not the hoped for warrior King who was going to give the Romans a black eye and set Israel free. God and Jesus’ plans for mankind were far more subtle, far more long term and built on an entirely different foundation of faith, hope and love. But, at long last the disciples were beginning to get the message.

Did I just say ‘disciples’?

In the Gospel reading, we just heard:

¹ Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. ² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew;

James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

Did you notice? The first five words were: “*Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples*”, but in the next verse, “*These are the names of the twelve apostles*”. Why the change? Because, in between the use of these two words, Jesus “*gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness*”. Jesus has handed the disciples their commission. They are no longer disciples but apostles.

The distinction between the two words is highly important. We often use them interchangeably, but they are quite distinct. In the ancient world, a disciple was a follower or adherent of a teacher, but the word Apostle comes from Latin, apostolus, which in turn is derived from the greek apostolos, a messenger.

Jesus was at last getting them ready to send them out in the world, to stand on their own, albeit, uncertain feet.

In fact, I would suggest that the watchword of the day is “uncertain”.

When you think about it, when Jesus picked out his twelve, he did not demand a substantial set of qualifications. There were no job interviews. He didn't seem to care whether they had unusual spiritual insight or proven ability. He didn't seek the best and brightest, but the ordinary.

It is hard to avoid concluding that Jesus wanted, for his twelve, people who were quite ordinary. And his trust in them was enormous. He sent them out to do the very work he had been doing and to continue that work after he was gone.

It would seem that Jesus knew He needed down-to-earth, vulnerable, and ordinary people – the very kind of people who were representative of the general population and understood, first hand, their pain and fears.

The important lesson for today is that we Christians of the 21st century *are* the current “apostles” of Christ.

Of course, in Western societies, certainly, the dangers we face are seldom as dramatic as those faced by Jesus' apostles. But, remaining faithful in following Jesus remains a formidable task. But, there again, there is hope because we bear significant resemblance to the commonplace apostles.

Who among Jesus' dozen was really suited to carry out God's work – and who among us is qualified to proclaim the Gospel to an unbelieving world and share God's love in action among those around us? Who, in any generation, is qualified to heal a broken world in Jesus' name?

Every one of us who proclaim ourselves Christian is empowered to do so, not because of our abilities or readiness, but because of the Holy Spirit. To give us the certainty we may lack.

Jesus seemed to delight in taking ordinary, everyday people – those who did not seem to possess great qualifications or credentials - and calling them to become, not his disciples, but his apostles. To be messengers of God.

And the Holy Spirit makes available to us all we need to be successful as we remain faithful to Jesus and his mission. All we have to do is grit our teeth and take the plunge. He sends us out to proclaim the word of salvation to an uncertain world, to offer faith, hope and love.

Amen