

“Sent with Good News” – Mat 9:35-10:8 – June 18, 2017

This week Elizabeth’s sister Cathy stayed with us for a couple of days. She’s recently retired from a long career in the movie industry, a noted figure in the props department – when you see all the gadgets and special clothing and such stuff in films like Wonder Woman (her latest project) she has been responsible for locating and acquiring those items and making sure they are available for shooting on the set. (She was also the A&W Root Bear, but that’s a whole story in itself!) Naturally she is a movie buff, and constantly talks with Elizabeth about films, most of which are available on HBO. We didn’t subscribe to HBO, so Elizabeth was at a bit of a disadvantage, so a couple of days ago I added it. While testing it out, I got sucked into watching the recent film *Risen*, a story following a Roman Tribune immediately following the crucifixion of Christ, his Resurrection, and the sending out of the disciples just prior to his Ascension. While of course a bit speculative, and prone to mixing stuff from various gospels, it is fairly nicely done, a bit better than the usual Hollywood mishmash. In a similar vein albeit it from a different moment today’s reading also focuses on the act of Jesus sending them out. Matthew’s account seems a straightforward enough text and yet it also curiously raises some very perplexing questions at the same time.

To begin, quite literally with the first verse, the opening of our reading is not an opening but actually the closing of a huge section of Matthew’s account of the life and ministry of Jesus. Some five chapters back Matthew opened this account with the same words with which he closes it here – “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.” In between these two bookends are the expanded details of that teaching, that healing, and the proclamations of the good news of the kingdom of God being at hand.

That declaration would be all well and good if that’s all there was – a record of the activities of one man, a great man even, inspired by and filled with the goodness of God, bringing healing, compassion, and hope to a floundering generation. We could all look back and say, “Wow! What great things he did!”

But that’s not all there was to the story. Just as that concluding bookend is but the very beginning of our reading, so too this was the moment when Jesus called together his closest followers and made it clear that the story of God’s mercy and grace in him was only beginning to unfold.

One of the foundational characteristics of a good leader is to be believable, and that is best engendered by the leader setting an example for others to follow. “Watch and learn” is a way better approach to leading than “do as I say”, and provided a classic example of ‘watch and learn’. Set against a ministry of caring and healing, inspired by an immeasurably deep compassion, Jesus now says, “go and do likewise.” He knows it is not going to be easy for them, and indeed soon follows these instructions to go forth with a fairly detailed description of just how bad it will get, and how much they will suffer for the cause. At the same time, however, he assures them that the Spirit of the Father will be with them, and I think it’s pretty clear that his disciples also take comfort in being able to look at his example.

The task to which Jesus commissions his disciples is fairly simple and straightforward, in the telling if not in the implementing. “... 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.” Well, OK, curing the sick seems simple enough as miracles go, and it gets a bit more challenging with raising the dead, but the twelve were just given authority over unclean spirits, even to cast them out, and the power to “cure every disease and sickness”, so with a bit of confidence in their leader they should be able to (and by many accounts actually did) go forth and follow both his commands and his examples.

But before we look further into this story, there is a ‘rough spot’ that needs to be faced. According to the text, Jesus also told his disciples here, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but rather go to the lost sheep of Israel.” At first glance, this seems a simple enough command, defining some limits to both the work the disciples are to do and the area in which they will do it. However, it sounds extremely exclusivist, and that is troubling if for no reason other than we are classed as ‘Gentiles’ – does this mean our faith is invalid, that somehow we are illegitimate Christians??

This narrow restriction appears nowhere else, in the other Gospels, for example. It is also difficult to reconcile this exclusive statement from Jesus with what he had to say to the Centurion who came to him for healing for his daughter, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” [8:10b-11]. Neither does this restrictive command from Jesus sit well against his closing command at the end of Matthew’s gospel, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” [28:18b-20]. Certainly this command doesn’t fit well against the very examples of Jesus, such as his compassionate talking with the Samaritan woman at the well – who could be described as the first apostle to the Samaritans!

We shouldn’t be too embarrassed if we find it confusing – there has been a great deal of thrashing and flapping in academic circles over this contradictory passage. Some see it as highlighting the chronological development of the Christian mission: to the Jew first, then to the Gentile. Others see it as reflecting the position of a very conservative Jewish Christian community, who argued that one had first to become Jewish to become Christian.

How then can we make some sense of this ‘rough spot’? There’s no really clear and simple answer, but I believe the subsequent warnings of how rough it will get for the disciples gives us a clue, along with the statement, “When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” I believe that Jesus issued this restriction to his disciples out of concern for them, worrying about how they would handle the rough times ahead, particularly when they too would be “like sheep without their Shepherd”, and that he was acting out of a deep desire to protect them.

Even more confusing, however, is that the disciples would get into such trouble by following Jesus’ commands to “proclaim the good news, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons.” You’d think that such good works would result in acclamations of glory, of untroubled expressions of gratefulness, instead of the violent expressions of anger that greeted the disciples, now commissioned as apostles, as they followed their leader’s example.

So what can we learn from this turning point in the lives of the Twelve? Our main objective would be to learn by example, both by the example set by Jesus in his compassionate healing and teaching and by the example set by his disciples, transformed into apostles as he sent them with good news for the hungry, the thirsty, the grieving, the disheartened, the poor in spirit. We could learn that we begin by being disciples, students, followers, studying and learning what Jesus did, what Jesus said, and the good news of God’s saving grace displayed throughout the ages. We could learn also that at some point we too will hear Christ’s commission to us, sending us as apostles with the good news that the kingdom is close at hand, to cure the sicknesses of poverty and neglect; to raise up those who have died a thousand deaths and have lost all hope; to oust the demons of oppression, abuse and hatred.

Will it be easy? Probably not. Will we be ready? Probably no more than the original Twelve, and most likely less so. Will we be alone? At times it might feel that way, at least at those times when we forget Jesus' promise to be with us always. Will it be frightening? Certainly, but we have faith, and better yet, the example of Jesus and those who have already and those who still are living out his command to proclaim the good news.

There's one last thing that we might learn, and that from that puzzling and vexing command to limit the scope of action. Perhaps we might hear that as guidance to begin with 'baby steps', to start our journey of proclamation in our own neighbourhood. It's nice to go to far-off lands to proclaim that good news – it's often much more difficult to proclaim that good news to our next-door neighbour. More difficult, perhaps, but every bit as rewarding, if not more so. At home, in the neighbourhood is a good place to start, and we already have some experience with that over the years in the West End. Further opportunities will arise once we're in our new facilities, and perhaps then with increased resources we will look further outward, into our city, our province, our country, our world. But to us all, whether here or abroad, the instruction from Jesus is the same – "go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'" Forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life are here for the asking.