

MATTHEW 10-11

10: 1-15 – The 12 Apostles and their Mission

In this passage the “disciples” (learners or students) are called “apostles” (those who are sent out) for the first time, and this action of Jesus is aimed at addressing his concern in 9:37 - the harvest of need in Israel is plentiful but there are precious few labourers who are equipped and prepared to go out.

The apostles are named and we can see what a diverse, motley crew Jesus has assembled. This is not the kind of list that would have impressed the elite of Jewish religious leadership. But it does represent a cross section of Israel, and the renewal of Israel which must reflect the 12 tribes.

The 12 are sent first to Israel. Only after Jesus' resurrection are they to go out to the wider world. At this point, gentiles who come to Jesus, come on their own initiative. There is an urgency to reach Israel first, because the coming judgment will be fierce upon them. All of Israel, beginning with the leadership, are hell bent on a program of defeating and overcoming their enemies, using the methods of darkness to defeat darkness – hatred, violence, sword and spear. Jesus has come to bring God's new kingdom of light. His methods are compassion and forgiveness. His results are healing, peace and reconciliation. Jesus is so off the mark of popular messianic expectation that even John the Baptist questions whether he is the one.

The 12 are to live simply, to take no payment, but to accept food and lodging from those who will offer it willingly. No one can accuse them of trying to make money on the misery of others, of trying to deceive and manipulate for the sake of their own advantage. They are preaching a message of peace. Their rejection is its own judgment, because if Israel continues on its path of violent hatred, they will be destroyed. That is Jesus' prophetic prediction.

10: 16-42 – Preparing Apostles for what is to come

“I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” Jesus knows that if he is being accused of serving Satan (Beelzebul), his apostles will not get a smooth ride. But the key is how they will develop trust (faith) in what he is teaching them. They will be saved, vindicated, upheld in the truth and justice of what they are doing. But there will be hard suffering on the journey. The resurrection will only come through the way of the cross. This is not God's intention. It is because the world is as it is that the cross will come. But the resurrection is the surprise follow-up to the cross. God's justice will not be defeated.

The reverse will take place. Those who suffer the cross must trust the long-term outcome, namely eternity beginning now and transitioning beyond suffering and death.

So how do the apostles maintain their innocence, their commitment to “turn the other cheek”, remain compassionate, honest, gentle, forgiving, etc.... yet also vigilant and careful, anticipating all the ways wicked, malicious, deceptive, manipulative people will use to trap and defeat them? We have already seen how Jesus avoids the title Messiah and discourages people from telling others about him. Herod is king and he has little patience for anyone else who would be called king (messiah) by the people. John the Baptist was telling people that the great King of Israel was coming, and he was imprisoned for it. Jesus was being careful – wise as a serpent, yet innocent as a dove – planning his every move.

To be wise as a serpent without innocence of a dove, is to manipulate and deceive to one's own advantage, sacrificing others. To be innocent as a dove without having the wisdom of a serpent, is to be naïve and foolish. Both qualities need to be developed in those who would follow and serve Christ.

The kingdom of heaven is about peace, yet Jesus speaks about a sword. The reality is that his message, its achievement and spread, will cause conflict and division among friends and neighbours, within families and communities. In the next chapter Jesus will denounce his own town (Capernaum) and neighbouring towns, for their majority rejection of his message and the kingdom he has brought. They want no part of it. But those few who join the kingdom and follow Jesus, those who offer peace and compassion, healing and forgiveness, will receive the kind of reward that is not tangible, one that is eternal.

11: 1-19 – John the Baptist and Jesus

Even John does not understand how what Jesus is doing is connected to the role of the Messiah. Divine judgment upon the leadership of Israel, beginning with king Herod, and then upon the Romans, was what was expected. Jesus offers John a counter-vision – the healing, compassionate revolution of peace that he has come to bring as King of a renewed Israel. Will John and others accept this new understanding of the Messiah?

Jesus has only great things to say about John, even though John is a very different person. John is the greatest of prophets, and Jesus calls him the resurrected Elijah who is supposed to re-emerge in Israel to prepare the way for the Messiah. But John is still part of the old order. In the old order, the kingdom of heaven is to be established by violent, judgemental means. Jesus has come to establish a new kingdom, one that is being established as a movement of peace, healing forgiveness and the justice of love. There is no place for coercion or fear in the kingdom. People must join it willingly and from faith, not forcefully and under threat.

Jesus is also tired of the popular attitudes of people. When they don't like what they hear, they find a reason to reject the messenger. John is an ascetic prophet. They claim he is demon possessed. Jesus is more social, enjoying good food and wine with mixed company. But they call him a glutton and a drunkard, one who associates with sinners and is therefore tainted. But the truth is known to those with genuine, open, child-like hearts.

11: 20-24 – Judgment on unrepentant Cities

Jesus' ministry so far has been in Galilee. The cities he names are part of Galilee, and Capernaum is where his family has settled. Even though there are many who come to him for healing and listen to his message, the vast majority of people reject the substance of Jesus' vision. In spite of all the healing signs Jesus is doing, they want none of his vision. Jesus is warning them of the coming judgment. Such passages are included in the gospels, because they are written after these things have taken place. In AD 70 Jerusalem was burned to the ground, the temple destroyed and many people were slaughtered and killed. Those who had planned and supported a military uprising vastly underestimated the power and will of the Romans to crush them. Jesus is warning them that the methods of darkness will only increase the darkness.

11: 25-30 – Jesus thanks his Abba (Father) God

In a moment of wonder, Jesus thanks his Abba God for how things are unfolding. Those who are simple, sincere, child-like and gentle, respond to Jesus message. Those who are hell-bent on violent resolution of Israel's troubles, full of hatred and political maneuvering, refuse to ponder Jesus' vision of what Israel's mission as a divine blessing to the world, could mean. Jesus offers true rest, even though the journey of following him is costly. Jesus doesn't make huge demands on people for perfection, like the Pharisees. He is not legally and religiously driven. Rather, he wants people to open up their hearts and discover their deeper humanity, made for communion with God and with each other. Unless the world is inspired by a different vision of communion, destruction is inevitable. Can Jesus turn the tide? It's hard to imagine that he can. But he will keep trying.