**Matthew 9:35 to 10:23 1st Sunday after Trinity 14th June 2020**

Here we are in mid-June and it is 3 months since the official lockdown started. It is hoped that in just over a weeks’ time, we may be able to start opening the churches once more for private prayer and then perhaps in July, we can start services in our buildings again. For those with underlying conditions, or in the ‘more at risk’ categories, they may unfortunately have to continue to stay away from church for the time being.

The isolation seems to be becoming increasingly difficult for many of us, and I wonder if part of the issue is that the Christian faith is based on relationships. Our Creator has made us in a way that we know true fulfilment through interacting with others. We relate to the community around us, and the Lord has blessed Christians with the gift of being united with Him through faith. He Himself has always been in a loving relationship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But He has also given us the joy of communing with our fellow Christians. Our brothers and sisters, who have also been adopted into the eternal family of God, will become every bit as close to us over time, as our blood relatives in this world. And so, we can find ourselves longing, like homesickness, after that special contact with our families, and also for our church families, once more.

The separation that we feel now is something that our Lord Jesus saw when he looked at the crowds around him. But he saw that separation at a far deeper and more profound level.

Our reading today comes from Matthew’s Gospel Chapter 9:35 – 10:23. I am just going to include the verses here at the end of Chapter 9:

**35**Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and illness. **36**When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. **37**Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. **38**Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.’ (NIV-UK)

Jesus was proclaiming the amazingly good news of the Kingdom of God to this crowd and in all the towns that he travelled through. This glorious message was accompanied with Jesus’ astonishing acts of healing. No matter what disease or affliction someone had, or how long they had had it, nothing was too difficult for him to cure. And as he went from one group to another, he saw the greatest need that they had, and that it was so much more damaging to their health than a mere physical disease. He saw a world where heaven and earth had been separated by sin, leaving the earth under the shadow of death.

That is why he came to proclaim this glorious Gospel of the kingdom, that would bring rescue to those who believed it. He felt such compassion for them, they were like sheep without the protective shepherd to shield them from the dangers of this world.

Chester Zoo has been in the news over the last few weeks. The Zoo was on the brink of closing because it was running out of money to feed the animals and pay the staff. Almost all their income had been turned off like a tap. I remember that when my children were young and we lived in Cheshire, we had a season ticket for Chester Zoo. We all loved taking a picnic and spending the day there. So, when I read that the Zoo was struggling, I felt great concern for them. I could only imagine the heartache that the owners and the zookeepers felt at that time. Fortunately, many others had great compassion on them, and over two million pounds was donated to keep the place open until the visiting restrictions could be lifted.

That sense of concern for Chester Zoo can only be a fraction of the compassion that Jesus felt for those in the crowds that he spoke to then, and all the lost people in our communities today. Jesus knew that they were in great danger, and the eternal protection for them was his to offer.

The problem is, there is only one Jesus, and an awful lot of needy people who are under the shadow of death. This is at the heart of the world’s need; to be restored in our relationship with God, the good shepherd.

That restoration leads us to know that we are His children and secure in His eternal loving embrace. We come to know His purpose for our lives and we are equipped to serve others in a way that is entirely fulfilling and not at all self-centred.

Who do we know who does not know the blessings of being part of the Lord’s flock? Who in our family, our friends and neighbours, have not heard, or believed in, the good news of the Kingdom”?

Let us ask the Lord to open our hearts, so that we may look upon them like Jesus does, with compassion and love, to have the same attitude towards them as He does.

As we come to verse 37 in the reading, St Matthew has recorded Jesus’ words to his disciples:

‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. **38**Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.’

The harvest is all those ordinary people who have not put their trust in Jesus but in themselves. And Jesus saw how plentiful the harvest was then, just like today. But he also saw how few the workers were, those Christians willing to tell others about Jesus, just as it is today.

Jesus doesn’t ask us to pray for the Lord of the harvest to raise up leaders; rather, we should pray for workers (not just leaders) to go out into the fields, to multiply the work Jesus began in his own ministry.

He turned to those around him, who believed in him, and sent them out into the fields, the towns and villages around them.

We can look around us and feel that the work is just too big. What difference can I make, we may well ask?

It brings me back to an apocryphal story that I may have used before about two shoe salesmen that were sent out from the UK to China many years ago. One sent a telegram message back to his company: “Hopeless situation. Returning home. No one here wears shoes.” The other salesman also sent a telegram home: “Fantastic opportunity. Send all the shoes to me you can. No one here wears shoes.”

So many people around us do not truly know the love of God, they do not knowing the blessings of being able to trust our Lord who will never let us down. They don’t know the security and companionship of the Lord’s constant presence, nor the Holy Spirit’s guidance. They need to hear this good news for themselves.

Do you find your heart truly aligned with Jesus’? Is our compassion for them, just like his? It must never be in a condescending way, but our compassion for them is to come from the simple desire of wanting to follow Jesus’ commandments: In our love for God we will want to be obedient and serve Him as He asks us to, and in our love of our neighbours, we will want them to share the same blessings that a believer knows.

“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.”

What harvest field are you working in, and what would it look like for you to labour in it today?

A Christian may struggle for a while due to isolation from others, but it is only temporary, and the Lord is always with his adopted family. But for someone who does not know the Lord, who does not believe in the rescuing work of Jesus, the current difficulties of isolation point to the greater separation from the Love of God.

May you be blessed and know the Lord’s love for you this very day.

Blessings,

Peter