

Matthew 9.35-10.8

14th June 2020

The Authority to Love

Our last visit to London before Lockdown was to ‘cash in’ a Christmas present with a guided tour visit to Westminster Abbey, including the Diamond Jubilee Galleries that have recently been opened high above the nave.

It was inspirational visiting this ancient holy place and in a week that has had quite a focus on statues it’s probably worth saying that the Abbey has erected new ones to fill the empty plinths above the Great West Door. These figures in stone represent some of the Christian martyrs of the 20th century and include pivotal figures such as the Baptist Minister, Martin Luther King and the Roman Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero. Each of the ten images represents a life, however imperfect, that strove to reflect something of the ongoing life of Jesus in the world.

In today’s gospel Matthew distils down for us the life of his Lord and ours. He gives us a summation of that life that was given so completely for others and I love the term he uses when he says Jesus went from place to place proclaiming GOOD NEWS.

Strip our faith back and see through some of the rules and rituals we have laid over it and we find a message

that is good. It draws us to the God who is 'for' us and wants the best for creation. It's Good News.

I read a bible commentator this week who talked of there being *no thick line between Jesus' ministry and ours*. No different emphasis or goal between master and apprentice.

So, what appalled Jesus still appals us – whether it's oppression on the grounds of race, gender or social position.

And what thrilled Jesus still thrills us – when the captives are set free and the eyes of the blind are opened.

It's significant for us to read, therefore, words like Matthew's when he says of Jesus that *the sight of the crowds moved him to pity...*

Jesus was a people person. He cuts through all the conventions of how people dressed or talked. Social rank seems to have totally unimpressed him. He reads those around him with both a cutting impatience and an astounding generosity of spirit. He hates to hear claims of so called piety that actually hides a love of oppressive power but he loves to read in people their deep, but sometimes fumbling, desire to love God and serve neighbour.

In today's passage Jesus calls all who believe his message of Good News to join with him in sharing it.

It's an invitation that still stands and is as meaningful today as it was when first issued two thousand years ago.

Jesus put it like this: *The crop is heavy, but the labourers too few.*

I smiled when reading these words because, in a physical sense, they describe one of the consequences of this year's Lockdown, a harvest here in Britain with insufficient workers to bring it in.

Of course, Jesus was speaking figuratively. He longed for his followers to flavour society near and far with the Good News of God's love and light. He wants to bless the world making it a better place and we a better people.

So, he calls The Twelve. Twelve friends, disciples, apostles. And he gives them authority.

That's risky. Giving someone authority can change them and even change the message they should be representing. Authority can go to our heads and owning it can become an overwhelming passion.

What's surely important here in the Commissioning of The Twelve is that Jesus didn't give his friends the authority to lord it over people. No, he gave the like of Simon, Andrew, James and Bartholomew the authority to love. To live that life of self-giving love that was once

lived amongst them by Jesus himself. Whether master or apprentice the task is the same.

And so, we have named here in Matthew's gospel twelve disciples whose task it was to live like Jesus. And these were real people. John, Philip, Thomas and Matthew were real, fallible, human beings.

I love that. I love the fact that the beginnings of The Church's ministry is not left to a faceless cohort of unnamed servants.

In dystopian novels events that lead to an apocalypse are often carried out by mysterious unnamed agents whose humanity is finally eroded by the fact they are simply known by a number or letter.

The Jesus story is continued by the likes of Peter, James and John. Jesus left the task to people, people like us, with all our faults and failings and yet also with our ability to love and to share love.

Every statue above the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey like Bonhoeffer or Maximilian Kolbe, is of a person who lived in a community, came from a family, knew the fear of snuffing out a candle and the joy of watching the sunset.

God uses people. Jesus commissioned friends. The Holy Spirit lives in you and me. And our task, now as

then, is to live and share Good News.

As this pandemic took hold of our nation in the spring the Prime Minister was admitted into intensive care at Guy's and St Thomas'. On his return to Downing Street he spoke of the love, that was the word he used, the love he'd experienced from the nursing staff. Actually, he went further than that, he named those who had stood by his bedside and saved his life. He named: Po Ling, Shannon, Emily and Angel. He spoke of Connie, Becky, Rachael, Nicky and Ann. Not faceless individuals, but to him real people who have blessed his life forever.

Today Matthew has reminded us of the Jesus who was deeply moved watching the crowds. He thought of them as sheep without a shepherd, and so calls the Twelve to be Pastor Missioners. Twelve disciples with feet of clay. Some fell En route whilst others stayed the course. Their authorization and ours – simply to live with love and thus embody God's Good News.

Jesus still calls – will we say yes to his commission?

May it be so, in the name of the God who loves, the Son who showed us The Way and the Spirit who enables.
Amen

