

11th Sunday Year A

Matthew 9.36 – 10.8

The harvest is rich, but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Matthew 9.36-7

When we read and hear the gospels, we are being invited to find ourselves within them. One of the gifts of the Ignatian tradition in prayer and spirituality is the practice of praying ourselves into a gospel scene, reading it over and over again, playing it out imaginatively in our minds and our hearts, and placing ourselves inside the narrative. As we do this, we will quickly have to ask ourselves who we think we are in the action which is taking place. Are we a simple spectator, watching from a distance but not playing any seemingly significant role? Are we almost the opposite, someone at the heart of the action – a sick person being healed, or an earnest disciple standing face to face with Jesus? A helpful aspect of this discipline of prayer is that we can be different

people at different times, seeing and hearing the same scene from a number of different perspective, asking ourselves what we learn from each particular role we choose to play.

This imaginative discipline, which is sometimes just called Ignatian Meditation, is much closer than we might think to the experience of those who first read and heard the gospels. The question of who we are when meeting Christ in the gospel narratives should always be a live one, and one of the joys of gospel reading is the realization that we are never restricted to just one role or just one point of view. The use of the word “disciples” is an obvious example. This word, which means literally “learners” is generally used by the evangelists to indicate those who are the most closely committed followers of Jesus. It sits alongside other words such as “apostles” – which literally means those who are sent – and the more specific words “the twelve”, indicating those who are given the title apostle by Jesus himself, though the gospels don’t

quite agree on exactly who those twelve were. Disciples can be wider than apostles – people were clearly learning from Jesus without, at that stage, being sent out by him. But apostles is also wider than the twelve, especially in the writings of Luke, where we see seventy sent out by Jesus, and we then read an entire narrative about the Acts of the so called apostles, who include people such as Paul and Barnabas who were not among Jesus’ chosen in his earthly ministry.

Why labour these distinctions? Well, this morning’s gospel presents us with several different roles to inhabit, I suggest. First of all, we see Jesus encountering the crowd, and being moved with compassion because they are like sheep without a shepherd. They are described as harassed and helpless – cast down is another possible translation here. The crowds are lost, we might say, lacking purpose or direction, in need of care and compassion – and all of that is clearly true of us, especially in the present

crisis. The pastoral love and attention we need is offered to us in the person of Christ. But that person goes on to speak to his disciples, those who follow him. And we might legitimately claim that we are those people also – we follow Jesus, we seek to learn from him, we pay attention to what he has to say, we try to do as he tells us to do, to follow his instructions. We remain the sheep, the flock, but knowing Christ allows us to find our shepherd, to rediscover that which we thought was lost.

But what does the shepherd have to say? He moves from pastoral imagery to an agrarian metaphor. The harvest is rich but the labourers are few. He says this to his disciples. He then invites them to ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers. The labourers to be sent are, therefore, not these disciples. They are others, who have yet to come. And those others who have yet to come are surely us as well. The apocalyptic imagery of the harvest that Jesus and Matthew have inherited concerns the final harvest, the day of

judgement on which the sickle will be put into the crop and those who have borne fruit will be gathered into the barns of the Lord. But this harvest, this reaping, is described to us in the context of the ongoing mission to which Jesus calls his followers. It is not a distant event, it is happening in the present. For readers of the gospel, the very existence of the church and of the text itself is testimony to an answer to prayer. Jesus encouraged his disciples to pray for more labourers for the harvest, and those labourers are now here, in the persons of all who follow Jesus and work to build up the kingdom of God in the world around them.

This gospel speaks to us powerfully as it finds us harassed and lost, but reminds us that we are disciples of Christ and that we cannot be removed from the flock of the shepherd whose love and compassion are our very life. And at the same time it moves us from dejection to hope, because the presence of the shepherd is also the promise of the answer to prayer, of the future which belongs to the God who continues to send

the labourers to his harvest to do what needs to be done. But we need to recognise that this gospel does not leave us with a simplistic happy ending, as if everything is now all right. The point is that the harvest is something present, that the work of the gospel is ongoing, and that if we are not those who are sent to the harvest, then who on earth is?

How, in this present time, can we respond? Partly, by doing that which we are already doing. Joining together in fellowship and prayer, seeking ways to serve those around us, looking out for those whose needs are far greater than our own and asking what we can do to address them. But also, and particularly, we can do the simple thing which Jesus invites his disciples to do. He invites them to pray. “Ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers to his harvest.” All of us, whatever our circumstances and however great our restrictions, can turn to the Lord in prayer. As of this week, some will be able to do this by entering a church building and drawing upon the richness of the

presence of God in sacred space, and perhaps, as in this building, in the infinite gift which is the Lord among us in the Blessed Sacrament. But where we pray is far less important than the fact that we do pray. This, for each of us, is the mission upon which we are sent, to acknowledge that this is the thing, here and now, which every one of us can do to contribute to the work of the Lord's harvest. Let us hear the word of the Lord, and keep it.