



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

Sunday 4th June 2023, 1st Sunday after Pentecost

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. Isaiah 61:1-4

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. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest."

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. Matthew 9:35 - 10:4

The harvest is plentiful

So, we're back in Matthew's Gospel. If you attended services before Easter, you might remember we spent a few weeks in Matthew chapter 18, which was all about conflict and reconciliation in the church

Now we're dipping into chapter 10 which, like chapter 18, is an extended discourse from Jesus to the church. This time, the focus isn't conflict. This time, the focus is the church's mission in the world. It begins, as we've heard today, with the calling of the twelve disciples, who are sent out by Jesus to proclaim the good news of the kingdom.

So, we're going to be reflecting on that theme over the next few weeks: what it means to be a people sent out by Jesus into the world. And we begin here at the end of chapter 9 and the beginning of chapter 10. It marks a transition point, a shift in the focus of the gospel.

Up until this point, the focus has very much been on Jesus and who he is. Among other things, he is the bringer of the kingdom of heaven. Both his teaching – such as the Sermon on the Mount – and his healing ministry point to God's kingdom coming near, breaking in, disrupting the status quo, turning things on their head.

So, chapter 9 ends with a kind of summing up of all of that. We're told that Jesus was going around cities and villages, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing people of every disease and ailment. In short, wherever Jesus went, the kingdom of heaven came near, and people's lives were transformed.

The chapter ends, though, with an acknowledgment from Jesus that he can't do it alone – or at least never planned to do it alone. He has brought the harvest. But, as he says, while the harvest is great, the labourers are few. And so, the focus shifts – from Jesus, as the bringer of the kingdom, to his followers, this new community, who are sent out by him to minister in his name: co-labourers with Jesus.

And so, we get the calling of the twelve disciples, Jesus' inner circle, who became the founding leaders of the early church.

Perhaps the first thing to note is that, for Matthew, the mission of the disciples is the same as Jesus' ministry. Matthew makes that very clear in the transition from chapters 9 and 10. Just like Jesus, the disciples are sent out to "proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near, and to cure every disease and sickness."

That's our mission. At least from Matthew's perspective. To be the church is to follow Jesus into the world, pointing, through our words and our actions, to God's healing and redemptive life among us, to heaven coming on earth.

I want to sit with that today. Because, often, I think, the church has got things the wrong way around. The emphasis has been not so much on heaven coming to earth but on us leaving earth to go to heaven. That is, if we do the right thing or pray the right words or get a good enough score card, then we will earn our ticket to be with God in heaven after we die; we will receive eternal salvation.

And the church has made that its mission; to convert as many people as possible so that they too will earn their ticket to heaven. We have been in the business of winning souls, selling tickets to this far off place.

And as good as the intentions may have been, it's fair to say that that approach has evoked a lot of resentment and suspicion towards the church over the years.

And I would argue that this isn't so much because the people out there have got it wrong. It's because the church has got it wrong! The gospel has never been about earning tickets to heaven. It's not about us going to be with God. But about God coming to be with us in Jesus Christ.

Jesus seemed so adamant on that point that he made sure to include in the Lord's Prayer, which we pray every week: your kingdom come on earth as in heaven.

And in Jesus, the kingdom of heaven has come. God's abundant life has come among us whether we do anything or not. And the harvest, we're told, is a bumper crop. More than we could possibly imagine. If only there were labourers to collect it all and realise the potential!

Let's unpack that a bit, because I think it changes how the church thinks about its mission in the world.

I want to use an analogy – the one that comes to mind is that of food waste. From the farm to the supermarkets, from the supermarkets to our plates, from our plates to our rubbish bins – we know that there is a huge amount of food wasted every day, every month, every year. Over 100,000 tonnes of food per year is wasted in New Zealand alone. Globally it's 1.3 billion tonnes.

To catastrophic effect. For the environment and for people. It's all the more scandalous during our current crisis when food prices in New Zealand have reached exorbitant highs and an increasing number of people are unable to afford to put healthy food on their tables every week.

It's a scandal. In short, there is more than enough to go around and yet many people do not have enough. We're pushing our earth beyond sustainable limits and still there's not enough. Something's wrong.

The harvest is great. But so is the waste.

It's a tragic summary of our human condition isn't it? We human beings are very good at taking the abundance of life all around us and using it to enhance and improve our lives. But we also take that abundance and squander it, waste it, or distribute it in unfair ways – so that some have an overabundance while others go without.

We human beings are masters at realising the abundance of life and then hoarding it for ourselves – with the result that we end up diminishing and denying life at an interpersonal level; at a societal level; at an environmental level. The issue of food waste is just one, very pertinent example. I'm sure you can come up with others.

It seems though – and this is the good news that (I think) we're called to proclaim – that God is not content with the way things are; that God is not satisfied with mere survival. For the harvest is great, the potential for life is great, and God wants to see that full potential realised for all!

God is utterly determined for us not only to live life but to enjoy life to the fullest with God, with one another, within ourselves, with our earth.

Which is what we see in Jesus. In Jesus, God's will for us to enjoy life in all its fullness is realised. That's really what the coming kingdom of heaven is, isn't it? At least as the gospels would have us imagine it: Fullness of life with God.

Have you noticed that wherever Jesus goes in the gospels, he enhances the quality of life of those around him; those whose life has been diminished or denied by others. People are healed from physical illness and disability. People are forgiven and set free of their guilt. People are restored to relationship with God and one another; restored to their place in society. People receive dignity and worth. People are fed. People are cared for and loved.

In short, whatever burdens people in body, mind, or soul – whatever limits or diminishes their life – is cast off and they are freed to live life to the fullest. That's what happens when people encounter Jesus in the gospels. That's what heaven on earth looks like.

And the Church's mission is simply to join in on that; to notice the need and the potential for God's redemptive life around us and to get to work

realising it. To be hands and feet collecting the harvest. To not let the gift of God's life fall from the tree and go to waste.

The harvest is great but the labourers are few. The thing I like about this image is that it assumes God is already here, not absent and up there. God's kingdom of heaven is already among us. The crops are ready for harvesting. The potential for God's saving life is already here. Salvation is coming. And we're simply called to get in amongst it.

We can't do everything though. Because the harvest is great and the labourers are few. God's life is far more abundant, far more transformative, far more... just far more than we could ever realise. But we're called to do what we can, to share in God's salvation as we can, to proclaim in loving word and deed that the kingdom is coming on earth as it is in heaven.