

Keep it Simple!

We have some fabulous readings today for a service that includes an adult baptism and the commissioning of a Street Pastor.

Our second reading – the end of Matthew 9 to the first 8 verses of chapter 10 - reminds me very much of the three strands of our diocesan strategy for growth and our vision for the church here in Cottenham and Rampton:

1. To grow God's church by finding disciples and nurturing leaders
2. To deepen our commitment to God through word, worship and prayer
3. To engage fully and courageously with the needs of our communities.

Grow, deepen, engage – I remember learning these three words (as actions) when I prepared for my interview here 6 years ago next week.

But where do we see them in this passage from Matthew's gospel, and how can we apply them in the work of the church today?

Our passage begins with *'Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.'* For many months, if not years by this point, the disciples have been witnessing the power of Jesus' ministry on earth. To be a disciple in Jesus' day was to follow in the footsteps of a leader – to walk with them, work with them, watch how they did it. So for some time now, Jesus has been growing and nurturing his disciples. And, as leaders, now it's *their* turn to follow his example and do what he's been doing.

Early on in the passage, Jesus says, *'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few'* and this passage has often been used to bemoan the lack of volunteers in the church, to fill the many rotas. But we often miss the power of those first few words – *the harvest is plentiful*. Jesus knew that people needed to hear the message of hope that he brought, and it's no different today. We know that interest in faith and spirituality increased during the pandemic as people logged onto church websites and watched services online for the first time. We also know that many people, particularly young people, have lots of questions about life and faith. Many are searching for something to give their life meaning – *'the harvest is plentiful'*. The mission is urgent – the harvest is ready and it will spoil if it's left in the field.

But before Jesus sends his disciples out, he challenges them to pray – ‘*on your knees and pray for harvest hands*’ is one translation of verse 38. And it’s through prayer that their commitment to God is deepened.

I love the way that Jesus introduces the twelve disciples to us at the start of chapter 10. He both names them and tells us something about most of them, either who’s related to who, or what they did. It would be lovely to think of ourselves as disciples in the same way: ‘Here is Ben, son of ? and ?; Alice the teacher; Debbie, daughter of Barry and Sheila; Boyd the carpenter; Sarah, daughter of Edward and Gill; Nick the healthcare assistant; and so on.

What Matthew offers in the rest of our reading and beyond to the end of chapter 10 is not a blueprint for mission but some key principles. Firstly he talks about methods – where to go, what to do and how to live. So he tells them to start local. The twelve should start on their home patch and not go to regions beyond Galilee, that is, learn how to do mission among people who speak their language – *engage with the needs of their own community*.

Then he says that mission is a mixture of words and works – they’re to both tell people about Jesus and his kingdom, and heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, and drive out demons. Then he tells them to travel light. He calls on them to trust two sources simultaneously for support: God, and the kindness of strangers. Jesus assumes people will be offered and accept hospitality in the towns to which they go. It’s about getting alongside people on their home ground, to share more effectively how Jesus can meet them in the midst of their struggles and disappointments.

Finally, he says that hospitality might come from many sources but we should seek out those who appear to be open to our message. ‘*If there’s openness there, you’ll know it,*’ says Jesus; ‘*so stay, accept their hospitality and continue to share your life and good news.*’ It’s a great model for mission – one that appeared to work then, and one that can work today.

Like the disciples, we have been given the authority to tell God’s story, with no required or measured outcomes – that is God’s work. And from where does that authority come? Well, it comes from God at our baptisms. How so? Well, consider these passages from Paul – first from Galatians 3:26 – ‘*You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ.*’ And from Ephesians 4: 4-6: ‘*There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were*

called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism – the very words that Marie said as Ben was welcomed by baptism into the church family.

So, as children of God, we have all been given the authority to tell God's story. And the central message from Matthew in our gospel reading is: *keep it simple*.

The famous quote attributed to St Francis of Assisi is '*Preach the gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words*' (although, apparently he didn't say it!). Does this quote have any credibility or mileage? How do we tell Jesus' story without words?

Emma, who will be commissioned later in the service as a Street Pastor, demonstrated that beautifully a few months ago when she shared with us what she does as a trained volunteer for her local community, patrolling the streets of Cambridge on a Friday and Saturday night caring for, listening to, and helping those who are out and about on the streets. In handing out flip-flops, bottles of water, cleaning up vomit, checking someone's got a safe lift home, the actions of Emma and the team she is part of tell the story of God's love for all.

But there are, of course, times when words *are* necessary, and the message is again, *keep it simple*. At the start of the service, we had a bit of fun in telling each other a very short story about ourselves. Some of you found that easier than others but you all could probably find *something* to say about the object you chose. And similarly, each of us will have a story of faith, however new we are to the Christian faith.

Ben or Emma might be asked by work colleagues on Monday what they did at the weekend. I'm hoping that both of them will have the courage to say what they did this morning. And, in telling their story, that they then have the opportunity to respond to questions that people might have.

Remember that harvest field? Remember Jesus telling the disciples to start local.

But what does local mean to you? Your family members, your neighbours, your work colleagues, school friends?

What do you say? Again, the message is to keep it simple. If you're asked why you go to church, you can respond with a phrase that I introduced you to a few weeks ago: '*Well, I've found that life with Jesus is better than life without Jesus.*' And if they ask you why, simply speak from the heart. If it's helpful to

you, we've sang some great songs already this morning that you can draw on. Maybe you can say, *'we sang this song in church on Sunday and it's kind of my story: I've found that Jesus is my rock in times of trouble. I can depend on him.'* And then see where it goes.

So, to conclude: three things I'd like you to take away from today, to remember as you go through this next week:

1. The harvest is plentiful
2. As metaphorical labourers of the field, you go in the authority of Jesus
3. Start local and keep it simple.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father, we adore you and we want others to do the same; but first they need to hear your story and how our story touches your story.

We know you love each and every person; may telling our story reveal that truth to those we meet and greet in every part of our lives.

May our story resound with praise and adoration, for you are the God we adore.

Amen.