

Do you remember when you passed your driving test? If you don't drive, now is the time to engage your greatest imagination! Up till passing your test, every time you've driven, there's been someone with you in the passenger seat; an instructor, or maybe a parent (if they were brave!), guiding you, correcting you, telling you which lane to get in, one hand on the hand brake, the other on the door handle! Then you pass your test, and for the first time, you're in the car on your own. You're suddenly responsible for every decision **and** for the direction of travel. In my case, I drove into town, reversed into a parking space in Colchester on Crouch Street, and my mum's little Fiat 500 back bumper got hooked under the florist van that was parked behind me!

So basically, in this passage, up to this point, Jesus has been doing **all** the teaching, the healing, the confronting, and the navigating. Now he hands the disciples the keys and says 'you go, you do what I've been doing'.

So let's imagine the scene from the passage that Matthew describes.

Jesus is moving from town to town, village to village — teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, and healing people of all kinds of sickness. Word has spread. People are gathering wherever He goes. "He's different," they say. "His message is different. We might see something extraordinary happen."

And as Jesus looks at these crowds, Matthew tells us He is **filled with compassion**. He doesn't see a mass of problems or a list of faults. He sees people who are *lost, who are weary, and who are directionless*. And He describes them as '**sheep without a shepherd**'.

So I understand that picture pretty well. We used to keep sheep, when we lived in deepest Suffolk. And when I was being the shepherd, moving them from one field to another, they would largely follow the path, more or less in a line, and end up exactly where they needed to be. But if I simply opened the gate and left them to it, they wouldn't have reached the next field. They'd have been distracted by tasty patches of grass, wandered off the track, and eventually scattered themselves around everywhere, and then be vulnerable, lost, and in danger.

Jesus uses this farming image of sheep because His listeners would have understood it instantly. But it was also a familiar Old Testament picture: Israel without a prophet, without a king, without guidance. And now, as Jesus teaches and heals, He is stepping into that role — the shepherd Israel has longed for and needed.

Then Jesus shifts the imagery. The crowds are not only sheep without a shepherd; they are also a **field ready for harvest** — but with hardly any workers to bring it in. "The harvest is plentiful," He says, "but the workers are few."

Then something quite striking happens: Jesus rarely tells His followers what to pray for, apart from in The Lord's Prayer. But here He does. "Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers." Pray for labourers. Pray for people willing to go.

And then — before the disciples can even say "Amen" — they discover that **they** are the answer to their own prayer. And He's telling them to **go and do it**. Just like the new driver, on their own for the first time. Can you imagine their reaction? 'Us? Really? On our own?'

Matthew tells us this is the moment Jesus first calls them "**apostles**" — meaning **the sent ones**. There are twelve of them. He lists them by name. That number, 12, would not have

been lost on any Jew. Twelve tribes of Israel. Twelve apostles. God was renewing Israel, restoring His people — and these twelve are not just a **symbol** of that renewal; they are **part of the means** by which God will accomplish it.

Then we reach the part in the passage that can feel a bit difficult — Jesus telling them not to go to the Gentiles or Samaritans, but only to the lost sheep of Israel. But this isn't Jesus rejecting the rest. He has already said that Gentiles will '**stream into the Kingdom**'. And after the resurrection, He will send his followers to **all nations** ' baptising them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit'

But right now, there was an urgent, foundational task. Israel must hear the message first. So far, the only gentiles that have appeared, have come on their own initiative, Jesus hasn't sought them out, and won't do so at all during his public ministry. If he and the disciples had started taking their message to the gentile world at this stage, no self-respecting Jew would have paid them any more attention. So yes, God loves the whole world, and intends to save it, but the way He was going to do that was by fulfilling his promises to Israel. That was Jesus' particular and focussed attention at that time. The moment had come. The long-awaited Kingdom was breaking in. Israel must be told.

And so Jesus gave the apostles very clear instructions. The healings they perform are not just acts of kindness to the person who was healed; they are signs that **God's new life is breaking in**. The Kingdom is arriving. The day of God's judgment and renewal is drawing near. There was urgency.

They are to proclaim the Kingdom and demonstrate its power. They are to give freely, because the message is free. They are to be healers, restorers, bringers of hope — not seekers of status. They must **rely** on the hospitality of those who **receive** the message, **but the gospel itself (the Good News) is free**.

The apostles must have felt the weight of it. **Their** task was to announce that God's Kingdom was rushing toward them like an express train — and the people needed to be ready.

And now, that mission extends to us.

Jesus **still** sees the crowds. He **still** sees people who are harassed and helpless. And His response is **still** compassion.

Compassion is not just a feeling; it is a movement toward others. Jesus identified the need in Israel — a world hungry for hope, healing, and truth. And He sends His followers into that world.

So what does this passage say to us today?

It says **Jesus still sees the crowds and feels compassion**. He still says, "The harvest is plentiful." And He still sends ordinary people to bring it in; not perfect people, not powerful people, just willing people. Who **are** those people? **They're us!** Its often said in mission circles, "**God doesn't call the equipped; He equips the called.**" Do we feel inadequate? I do. But the bible says it is precisely in our inadequacy that His power is made perfect. The heart of the mission is this: "**Freely you have received; freely give.**" Everything we offer — love, forgiveness, service — **we** first received from Christ.

So the pattern Jesus set is still our pattern today: **See with compassion** and slow down enough to notice people. **Pray for workers** , and be willing to be one. **Go in Christ's**

authority , not timidly, but confidently. **Give freely** ; time, love, mercy, encouragement, hospitality.

So **let us pray** with open hands: Gracious Father

We thank you that when Jesus looked at the crowds, He was moved with compassion. Thank you that he still sees us, still knows our needs, still calls us by name.

Lord open our eyes to see people as you see them, not as problems to avoid, but as precious lives, longing for hope, healing and truth.

We hear your words today; the harvest is plentiful. So we pray, send workers into your harvest field, and give us the courage to say- 'send me'

Where we feel inadequate, strengthen us.

Where we feel unsure, guide us.

Where we feel tired, renew us.

Equip us with your Spirit to love freely, serve generously and speak boldly in your name.

Teach us to freely give what we have received.

Make us people of compassion, people of prayer, people who go in your authority and in your love.

And as we step into this week, show each of us the one act of obedience you are calling us to take. Give us willing hearts, open hands and ready feet.

And we ask all this in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.