

Reflection for Sunday 21st June 2020 Mark 9:35-10:8. Harvest Hands

Prayer



For a moment glance away from the screen and look at your hands. I wonder what you see, I wonder how often you look at them, I wonder how they've weathered the storm of excessive hand washing over the last few weeks and months?

Take a moment to look at the hands on the screen, the rich variety of hands, colours, ages, shapes and sizes in the picture. All hands of God's people, all hands which show the richness and diversity of God's people.

Hands are so very important, so very useful, hands enable us to undertake so many different tasks, for ourselves, for others and for God. All of our hands together, just hold yours up to the screen for a moment and look at everyone else's, all of ours hands together represent such potential, such possibility, such a wide variety of work we can do together in service of God.

Our passage today is all about the work there is to do for God and those who are called to do it. It's a well known passage about workers for the harvest. Over the last couple of years my colleague Elaine Lindridge, our District Evangelism Enabler, has been really drawn to this passage and has been encouraging us to pray about more harvest hands, hands for God's harvest, for the kingdom harvest.

The passage in Matthew 9 and 10 comes after Jesus has been proclaiming the Kingdom of God and healing the sick, earlier in chapter 9 we find the healing of the blind and the mute and Jesus has been questioned about fasting. This is reemphasised in verse 35 when we are told that what Jesus has been doing in proclaiming the kingdom and healing the sick. After we're reminded what Jesus has been doing he says to his disciples 'the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few' and then

he invites the disciples to pray 'Ask the Lord the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'

Of course sometimes when we pray for someone to do something God says, well why don't you do that! That's exactly what we see here, after Jesus' pray in 9:38 chapter 10 begins with Jesus calling the 12 disciple, Matthew recording their names for us and then sending them out as workers into that harvest field.

That said as I read chapter 9 and 10 I'm left wondering whether these two encounters actually happened together? I have two reasons for wondering this. Firstly we're told in 9:37 that Jesus is with the disciples and if this is all one account why in 10:1 does he call his disciples if they are already with him. Secondly, in chapter 10 the harvest isn't mentioned, he doesn't say go the harvest field or relate their sending to the harvest for which they have just prayed for workers. So I wonder if the order of events is slightly different to that which is presented here, not that I could easily find any argument one way or the other in the commentaries. What is clear is that if they did happen separately Matthew put them together and normally the gospel writers and compilers do that for a reason, I think those reasons becomes clear to us in verses 7 and 8.

Do you notice when Jesus sends the disciples out in verses 7 & 8 of chapter 10 he sends them to do two things, firstly to proclaim the kingdom and secondly to heal the sick. One of the commentators makes an interesting point that Jesus sends the disciples to proclaim the kingdom, he doesn't send them to persuade people into the kingdom, or scare people into the kingdom, or shock people into the kingdom he sends them to proclaim the Kingdom and let that speak to people of the saving power of God's love.

Jesus sends the disciples out to do the very same things that we learn at the end of C9 that he was doing. Whether they happened together or not I think that's why the opening verses of chapter 10 come after the verses at the end of chapter 9. They help us to see that the ministry that Jesus calls his 12 disciples into is the ministry of Jesus, he called the disciples and calls us not to share in any old ministry, not to share in part of his ministry, but together we are called to share in the whole ministry of Jesus. The ministry of the body of Christ is the ministry of Jesus, to proclaim 'the Kingdom of Heaven has come near' and to heal the sick. That's the ministry that each and everyone of us is called into, the ministry of Jesus, that's the ministry Jesus calls each of us to use our hands for, this is what we the workers are needed for, this is where the harvest is.

Of course the question the disciples probably asked and the question we ask, is ok Jesus but how? What do you want me to do, how do you want me to proclaim the kingdom and heal the sick. I find it interesting that Jesus tells the disciples to raise the dead but we don't hear many accounts of the dead being raised! Were the disciples not bold enough in following the call? Unless of course Jesus was talking about raising people from the death of life without knowing God's love to the joy of being raised to new life with Jesus.

As I studied this passage I thought there were three verses which help us to see how we can share in the ministry of Jesus.

1. 9:37 - The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. I think when it comes to the ministry of Jesus we tell ourselves again and again, people are not interested, people don't want me to talk about Jesus, no one is interested in me proclaiming the Kingdom, my friends are not going to want me to pray for healing for them. Yet here Jesus tells us the harvest is plentiful, the harvest of God's kingdom. Jesus tells us there is more than plenty of opportunity to offer Jesus. This very fact is still the same today, the Talking Jesus resource which we were going to use before lockdown arrived, tells us that many of our friends and family are waiting to ask us about faith but just don't know how to.

How do we share in the ministry of Jesus? We acknowledge the harvest is plentiful and that there is both need and want for us to proclaim the kingdom and heal the sick.

2. 10:6 Go to the lost sheep of Israel. Harry McKeating in his commentary on this passage describes this commissioning as a pre-pentecost commissioning. This is part of Jesus fulfilling his mission to God's chosen people, the people of Israel. After the resurrection and through the power of Pentecost the commission to proclaim the Kingdom and heal the sick comes again and then as now is not just for Israel but to go to all nations. Here Jesus calls 12 disciples and sends them to take the good news to the lost sheep of Israel, God's chosen people who are in 12 tribes.

We of course are post pentecost people, the body of Christ is called to take the good news to the ends of the earth so what does this verse say to us. The 12 disciples were focussed on Israel, 12 disciples for 12 tribes. Together they were called to share in the ministry of Jesus, at that point to fulfil all that was promised to Israel but they each had a specific part to play, a tribe each - still a big part I accept but - they each had their specific part to play. We are called together as the body of Christ to share in the whole ministry of Jesus, to take the good news to all the world, but individually we have a specific part to play, and each of us has a part to play.

How do we share in the ministry of Jesus? Firstly, we acknowledge the harvest is plentiful and that there is both need and want for us to proclaim the kingdom and heal the sick. Secondly, we acknowledge that each and everyone of us had a specific part to play, God has something for each of us to do in proclaiming the Kingdom and healing the sick.

3. 10:8 Freely you have received, freely give. This is the last verse of the charge to the disciples before Jesus gives them a number of warnings about the reality of following Jesus' call. The words freely you have received, freely give reminded the disciples and remind us that what the faith we have, the new life we have been offered has been given to us through the free and

unmerited grace of Jesus. There is nothing that we can do to earn the love of God, to share in the light and life of Jesus, that is a free gift from God! Alleluia!

The call here in this verse of course is that when we know we have freely received such immense grace, blessing and love that we should freely give of ourselves so that others may know that love too. That we should be willing freely and whole heartedly to be workers for the harvest because we have freely and wholeheartedly received from God.

How do we share in the ministry of Jesus? Firstly, we acknowledge the harvest is plentiful and that there is both need and want for us to proclaim the kingdom and heal the sick. Secondly, we acknowledge that each and everyone of us had a specific part to play, God has something for each of us to do in proclaiming the Kingdom and healing the sick. Finally, we give ourselves freely and whole heartedly to live out the ministry and Jesus calls us to. We give ourselves to be harvest hands to proclaim the Kingdom and heal the sick. We give ourselves disproportionately to this task because of the disproportionate grace Jesus has given to us.

To proclaim the Kingdom and heal the sick, I can't think of two things that our world needs more than this at the moment.

So this morning I want to encourage each and everyone of us to be harvest hands for God, to seek God afresh and ask what is it God wants us to do to proclaim the Kingdom and heal the sick.

As I encourage you so I also want to remind you that harvesting isn't an instant process. There are many stages to harvesting crops. The land needs tilling, the seeds need sowing, the weeds need pulling out, the ground needs watering, the sun needs to shine and in time the crops can be harvested. The crops need time and there are many stages but the workers are part of them all. So it is with serving God, it's not just the glamour of the harvest we need to be involved in, it's all the different stages and in many different ways. Through which over time and with true attentiveness to the task the harvest will be gathered into the kingdom.

In the coming weeks and months I have no doubt that the words that the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few will echo true. As we emerge into our post lockdown life we know that people will be asking questions, wanting to understand what has happened and be looking for something better. We know that we have in Jesus a better way to live, we know we have a kingdom which offers life and light, joy and hope. Different people we know and encounter will be at different points of understanding who God is just like the different stages of growing the harvest. We will need to proclaim the kingdom in different and appropriate ways so that more people know of God's love. But that is all part of what it means to be worker in the field, workers for the harvest of God's Kingdom.

As we embark together into a period of worship, prayer and listening in the coming weeks and from that into a new phase of life together I have no doubt God has something for every pair of hands here this morning to do, a specific part for each of us to play.

I encourage each of you to be open to the part that God has for you to play. Most of all I encourage you to be open to the fact that might be a different part to play than you've ever played before! I hope that excites you! I encourage you to be open to the fact that to be able to do the specific thing you are called to you might need to stop doing something you were doing before lockdown no matter how important that was. If God has a specific task for you to do and needs you to create space for that God will provide someone else to do what you were doing or maybe God doesn't need it to be done anymore.

In encouraging you to be open to God and encouraging you to use your hands where God calls you to for the harvest, I want to be clear that the Church Stewards and I are very happy for anyone to let us know there is a ministry they need to set down, to undertake what God is calling them to as we move into and beyond our time of prayer, worship and listening. To let people set things down in order for God to do new things is just a part of what it means to acknowledge life will be different in the future.

So look at your hands? Look at your harvest hands? Look at your hands which God has freely given you so that you are able to give freely.

What is God calling you to use your harvest hands for?

How might you spend time in worship, prayer and listening this week to let God reveal to you how you are called to use your harvest hands?

How might you use your harvest hands alongside everyone else's harvest hands?

I believe God has an exciting future for the Church, because I know the love and grace of God deep in my own life and I know when we help others to discover that it is exciting. I also know the harvest will be so much more abundant if we are all using our harvest hands, all applying them to the tillers that God calls us to apply them to and letting go of the tillers God no longer needs to be held onto.

So look at your hands, look at what a gift God has given you! Look at each others harvest hands (show them to the screen), see the hands that can gather the harvest together and let's pray that together we will see the plentiful harvest that God so wants to gather in.

The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few, ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to direct us his workers, into the harvest field. Amen.