

Pentecost 3/ Proper 11, Year A

Exodus 19:2-8a, Romans 5:1-8, Matthew 9:35 - 10:8

If we think about it, this is a most encouraging gospel reading. I am going to read it again, omitting the names of the disciples, and this time I want you to listen out for any words or phrases that strike you.

35 Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. 38 Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

10 Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

5 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. 6 Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.

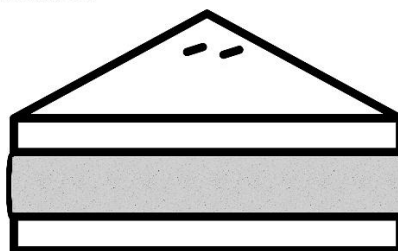
7 As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' 8 Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

What is your response?

Three of the words that strike me are compassion, authority and proclaim, or CAP if you like an acronym. These three words form something of a sandwich.

I should like you all to take one of the cards with a picture of a sandwich.

Matthew 9:35-10:8



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On the bottom slice of bread write the word COMPASSION. This is the foundation of our sandwich. Missing this out would be like making a sandwich straight onto a plate without bread on the bottom. It wouldn't really work.

In our gospel reading Jesus's compassion towards others is what kicks the whole thing off. Or, if you want to be pedantic, it is Jesus seeing, registering as it were, the situation of the people around him that initiates compassion. *When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.* Jesus saw crowds of harassed people who needed help.

What is compassion? It is something akin to sympathy, feeling sorry for someone, and empathy, having fellow feeling with them. But it is more than this. Compassion is when we feel moved to do something about another's situation. It's like wanting to restore the sight of the man attacked in Belfast this week, or stop him from being fearful about going out in the street in future.

So, compassion is the bottom slice of bread. For the filling of the sandwich write the word AUTHORITY. This is the meat of the sandwich. Without it the sandwich has some merit – the bread – but it is incomplete. It is not really a sandwich at all.

Jesus gave (his disciples) authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

Jesus's given authority comes with power attached, specifically in this instance power to heal, Holy Spirit power like Jesus had. Luke recalls (5:17) that on the day when a paralysed man was let down through the roof *the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick.*

In another account Luke writes that Jesus sends out 72 disciples with similar instructions. These 72 return with joy saying "It worked!" There is power with the authority.

Authority with power, the meat of our sandwich, is the essential element in the mission that Jesus is sending out his disciples to accomplish.

And what is this mission? Jesus's instructions are *"proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy (or skin disease) drive out demons."*

So, on your card write the word PROCLAIM on the top slice of bread in the sandwich.

The disciples are to proclaim the same message as the one Jesus has been proclaiming. Proclaim that the kingdom of heaven – God's sphere of rule – has come near. And this is not the rule that many people think of as God's rule. It is not condemnation for wrongful behaviour. No, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, is about healing and wholeness, relief from psychological distress, about life.

Further, Jesus says, demonstrate it, show that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Mere words are not enough. In this case the twelve disciples are to illustrate it by healing, or even by raising the dead. What more compelling demonstration can there be of the power of God's kingdom than this?

Why does Jesus ask his disciples to do this? Why do Matthew and Luke include the accounts in their gospels?

It is probably a training exercise on Jesus's part, looking ahead to the time when his personal presence on earth will be replaced by the infilling of his followers by Holy Spirit. This will extend his presence hugely but at the moment a limited number of people become a model for the future.

For us, it is a model which indicates that proclamation of Jesus's message should be accompanied by evidence as to what the kingdom of heaven is about.

And it is a training exercise for what follows after the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. In my early professional years in the health service the adage was see one, do one, teach one. Of course this has largely fallen out of favour because of health and safety concerns. But in Matthew we see it in action as the disciples learn to heal and then follow-up with further healings in the book of Acts.

But is this, as some say, just to kick start the church which afterwards will be expected to rely on anecdotal accounts and bible teaching? Surely not. Outpouring of Holy Spirit continues more widely later in Acts and there are accounts of Christians bringing genuine healing in my own lifetime.

Looking back to the word 'authority', we come across it again at the end of Matthew's gospel (28:18-20) where we read *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Jesus is with all disciples *to the very end of the age* so all disciples have the same teaching and access to his authority. Compassion, authority and proclamation are applicable to us later disciples too.

Now, it has to be said that we are not very good at proclaiming, let alone with healing alongside. When was the last time you spoke to a non-churchgoer something about your faith, the gospel of Jesus or the kingdom of God?

But when we do, in what ways can we demonstrate the nearness of God's kingdom? By healing? Maybe. When did we last see a positive healing in response to our personal actions or prayers? We do, of course, pray regularly for healing in our intercessions and it is right that we do.

But aside from this I think that there should be place for ministering healing to others even though we don't see it happening at the moment.

Of course, healing isn't the only way that the nearness of the kingdom of heaven is demonstrated, even in the book of Acts. In Acts we see other demonstrations of the kingdom of heaven.

For example, there is the setting up of a large daily soup kitchen for widows. Or read the testimony about Dorcas who *was always doing good and helping the poor*.

Recently, when TV Dragon Stephen Bartlett interviewed Christian Professor John Lennox about God and the bible he commented that the most compelling reason for believing in God was not the professor's words but "you", the professor himself. Stephen said "You have a certain peace and contentment that I rarely see in people that I interview, but I almost always see in the Christians that I've interviewed."

This should really encourage us. The kingdom of heaven comes near in us.

It was Jesus registering the need around him that kicked off the disciples' mission. And I invite you now to take a few moments to think of someone you know, or someone in your community, who is harassed and needing support. Write the name on the back of your card.

Now ask Holy Spirit to show you what support you can give to that person, how compassion, authority and proclamation can work out in your, and their, lives and situation. Write that too on the back of your card.

Please take home your card. Then remind yourself that compassion without action is just sympathy. Amen

Chris Shaw
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