

Sunday 3 July 2011, 12 noon

Reading: Matthew 10:32-42

The Tia readings since Friday this week have been from Matthew 10 – the missionary chapter of Matthew.

At the end of ch 9 we read:

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.'¹

Jesus' heart and passion and concern was always for the people he saw around him, ordinary people in their ordinary lives. He longed to bring them the good news of the kingdom, which meant healing, wholeness in their lives. He didn't want them to be left harassed and helpless, easy prey to whatever political or religious or economic forces might be exercising control over them. These helpless people were God's harvest field, the people God wanted to bring into his kingdom. That was what Jesus had come to do – to proclaim this good news of God's love, God's call, God's desire for them to know love and justice and peace in their lives. But labourers were need for that task.

And God answered that prayer for labourers in the harvest by calling and sending the twelve apostles, and all who would be called and sent after them. At the beginning of ch.10 Jesus call the twelve, and sends them out to continue this mission that Jesus had begun. The rest of ch.10 is his instructions to those first apostles – and to all Jesus' disciples afterwards who are called and sent out into the harvest.

Today's reading is the end of those instructions. It includes some important 'summing up' reminders. We are reminded of the priority that Jesus must have in our lives, if we are to follow him. And we are reminded of the promise we have as Jesus' followers that we will represent him wherever we are sent.

Firstly, the priority.

In the time and society where Jesus lived, family had very high priority. It wasn't just that they were those who cared for you and had a responsibility for you and gave you your identity. Being cut off from your family or clan could literally be a matter of life and death. Family was the primary source of social security. Your social position depended on the networks you were part of through your family. Associating with the wrong sort of people in the wrong sort of way, like accepting as equals people from a different social class, or putting the needs of outsiders ahead of your own family, was likely to see you cut off from all the networks of support.²

But Jesus told those who followed him that their relationship with him could bring division within their own family, because following Jesus meant putting Jesus first, loving Jesus more than father or mother, son or daughter. The family relationships that defined them within the accepted networks in society were no longer their first priority – they had been called into the family of God, an association which cut across kinship and status lines, that gave priority to a new set of relationships centred on Jesus Christ.

In fact these words about sons and fathers, mothers and daughters are a quotation from the Hebrew prophet Micah (7:6). The prophet predicts the terrible divisions that would always occur when God was doing a new thing. When God acts to rescue God's people, there are always some who declare they don't need rescuing, that they are comfortable as they are. In quoting this passage, Jesus is saying: don't be surprised when this happens now; this too is part of your tradition!

Jesus came to begin and establish a new way of being God's people, a way that cut across established patterns of status and family and position. Not surprisingly, those who were quite happy with the old

¹ Matthew 9:35-38

² Bruce Malina, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, p.65

way didn't like having it disturbed. Jesus didn't want to bring division for the sake of it. But he knew that, if people followed his way, division was bound to follow.³

And then he talked in v.38 about “taking up your cross”. Crucifixion was a punishment only inflicted on outsiders, nobodies and rejects, never on Roman citizens. Taking up your cross was to identify with the nobodies like slaves, and with those whom some understood to be cursed by God. It was to identify with those who resisted the empire's control, who threatened or challenged established interests.⁴ “Those who lose their life for my sake will find it”⁵ Losing one's life might mean: losing your social status - becoming disgraced in the eyes of others - because you chooses to associate with those outside of your social circle. Hanging out with the lowest and the least, with enemies, or maybe even with your actual neighbours.⁶

When Jesus' way of life becomes our priority, the socially acceptable and expected ways of living and relating to others are turned upside down. We have to die to the old way of life, the old expectations and obligations, but we are given a new life to live, with a new family centred on Jesus

But there is a promise for those who followed Jesus' call, who went where they were sent even as Jesus did:

whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me

Nowadays we have so many ways of sending a message to someone else, no matter how far away they live. Texting or calling on mobile phone, emailing or Skyping, a regular telephone call, even, if you want to be really old fashioned, a letter written and posted.

In Jesus' time people could send letters – but they needed someone to deliver them. So they were dependent on a traveling representative who would be authorised to act for the sender. The representative might carry letters from the sender but they also had to be able to represent the interests of the one they served.

We can understand the concept when we think of an ambassador, who is sent to represent their country, to speak in their country's interests, in a foreign land. Jesus is God's ambassador, sent by God to bring God's message of the kingdom of heaven, the new way of being God's people. In John's gospel this idea became so central that Jesus regularly refers to God as 'The one who sent me' and sending here refers to sending from the heavenly realm to become flesh and dwell among us.

The envoy, the ambassador, represents the sender, so that to respond to Jesus is to respond to God. In terms of an encounter he is effectively God, God's Word, carrying out the Father's will. The disciples are commissioned as ambassadors also, because Jesus sends them, on behalf of God, to continue with the same mission, to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom of heaven.

Now Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”⁷

So wherever we go, we are representatives of Jesus, and through him, representatives of God.

And as God's representatives, our mission is to proclaim and demonstrate the good news of God's kingdom, just as Jesus did.

That's the good news that God's love is for all people, that God wants to see all people flourishing, living in peace and justice, that God offers a new kind of living to all people.

This is what mission is about. God is always working to make the world all that it can be – and God chooses to work with us and through us. Wherever there is love and justice, God is at work. God's mission is to bring love and justice into being wherever they are blocked and to maintain or increase them where they are already present.

All of us who are baptized are sent into the world to tell and embody the good news of Jesus Christ.

3 Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, Part 1, p.123

4 W Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, p.244

5 Matthew 10:39

6 David Ewart, www.holytextures.com

7 Matthew 10:42

And wherever we go, from the time we leave this building until we meet here again, we are representatives, ambassadors of the kingdom of God. That is what we have been called to be as Jesus' disciples – that is what we have been sent out to do.

What will happen if we truly believe that we bear the presence of Christ to every person we encounter this week, in every home, workplace, or neighbourhood we enter?

What will happen if we see every conversation as an opportunity to speak words of grace, every interaction as an opportunity to embody Christ's love for the neighbour?

Because Jesus said:

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.