

Jesus finished instructing the twelve apostles saying, 40 “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 41 Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; 42 and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Trinity 3 2020: Matthew 10.40-42, Psalm 89.1-4. 15-18, Romans 6,12-23

If we are going to try and make good sense of today’s Gospel we first need to see it in the wider of context of Matthew’s Mission Discourse (the Little Commission) that we have been considering over the last two Sundays and as it follows on from the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus’ own ministry as he lives it after preaching the Sermon on the Mount. Before we get to today’s position of the Mission Discourse Jesus has been speaking to the apostles about what their sending out in his name to extend his ministry, to democratise his ministry, entails. The apostles are to be the harvesters of what has already been sown, as they share in Jesus’ ministry commissioned and empowered by him. They are to go the lost sheep to the House of Israel. Here is a good summary of what we heard over the last two Sundays by Elisabeth Johnson. She is a Lutheran pastor and missionary serving in Cameroon as a professor at the Lutheran Institute of Theology in Meiganga.

“Jesus evidently intends the Apostles to be the answer to their own prayer, for at the beginning of chapter 10, he is sending them out, giving them "authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness" (10:1). Jesus instructs the twelve to "go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" and to "proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (10:5-8).

The disciples are to act as envoys of Jesus, extending his ministry, proclaiming the same good news and performing the same works of healing that he is doing. Jesus' further instructions make clear that the disciples are also to share in his poverty and homelessness, taking with them no money or extra clothing, and depending solely on the hospitality of others for shelter and sustenance (10:8b-13).

They will not be welcomed everywhere (10:14-15), and they can expect to experience the same hostility Jesus ... does, for he is sending them out "like sheep into the midst of wolves" (10:16). They can expect to encounter persecution and trials (10:17-23), for "a disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master" (10:24-25). They need also be prepared for painful division within families, and to be willing to put Jesus' mission

above family loyalties (10:34-38). For all of this risk and suffering, Jesus promises, "those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (10:39)."

We can say without batting an eyelid that this programme is not for the faint hearted. Jesus gives clear instructions about what the apostles' sending/mission will look like. The parameters are drawn clearly, but the rewards, this is Matthew's language, are great in for the example the paradox of the losing one's life and that in this losing of one's life we actually find it. And each one of us here unless we are simply exploring the Christian faith should be able to testify to how in losing our life, by taking up our cross, we have found new life and are finding new life. The tradition of giving testimonies of how Christian faith births new life ought to abound in each and every Christian community. These manifold testimonies are a sign of God's spirit working amongst us. It would be worth our while as the restrictions caused by the pandemic are being lifted step by step to return to that first losing of life for the sake of the Good News, the Gospel, the Evangel. To go forward we sometimes need to remind ourselves of our beginnings, if you like, how the Old Adam and the Old Eve in us has been transformed into the New Adam and the New Eve - a first reward. Matthew uses the language of reward. We may prefer the language of blessing in the sense of blessed to be a blessing.

The Christian Gospel is attractive in many ways, because it shows us a way out of the cul-de-sacs of the kingdoms of the world as summed up in Jesus saying for example, "You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,..." Depending on who you are the way out of the dead ends of our today might begin simply, but profoundly with the vision of holding all things in common as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles - a new community doing a new thing.

This new life to which we are bound must include the absolute commitment to seeing everyone as made in the image of God with the potential of becoming a dwelling place of God, being grafted into the vine that they might flourish. It may also begin with seeing the Christlikeness in every person in whom God already is present and to which Matthew's

gospel is headed intentionally as told in the parable of the Great Banquet. The little ones to whom we must always be ready to give a cup of cold drinking water. I am not surprised that Christian NGOs early on and for decades have been at the forefront of providing sources of clean, fresh and running water to communities throughout Africa.

Be it the former or the latter approaches as just sketched both cement at every twist and turn the uncompromising and unswerving affirmation that all are made in God's image. All are of absolute value to God and therefore they must be of absolute value to us. We know or should know that the Good News, the Gospel, the Evangel have been misappropriated and short-changed in every age. There are figures that inspire, but the towering figures of the Christian Tradition were also those who are always aware of their shortcomings - their need for divine mercy being great. Where forgiveness, mercy and compassion are in short supply or set aside we know that this is not the Good News, the Gospel, the Evangel in its fullness. Where we depart from this norm the right to call ourselves Christians should be withdrawn. We should self-censure. All are being held to the standard set by the Good News. And let me say we willingly and eagerly subject ourselves to this standard. We have a means, we have a tool by which we can check ourselves as we lean into God. It is a standard and a measure not of our own making. Our finding the life of which Jesus speaks is found in our commitment to everyone being of absolute value. Our life is in the pursuit of enabling everyone to flourish and especially within the household of faith.

I know that prioritising the household of faith will make some feel uncomfortable, but the household of faith with all its shortcomings is the main vehicle by which the Good News of God in Christ Jesus is made known and carried forward. Too often this household of faith does not have its house in order and thereby diminishes the effectiveness of the Gospel to spread. Caricatures of the Christian faith abound and seemingly they are seeping ever more deeply into the lifeblood of our present day culture. The caricatures are not only unattractive to those outside, but also to Christians. If the caricatures were substantially true few of us would be left in the pews of this or any church or to be found at the end of our mobile devices or standalones. We all need to be working as a local community, as a

local expression of Christian life ensuring that we continue to have an eye for everyone. This is our laboratory in which we discover what it means to be a Christian. It is our monastery. This is where we learn that despite our high ambitions and ideals, we are often the little ones in need of being handed a cup of cool water, mindful of the Law and the Prophets and that mercy and trust have met in Jesus Christ, who sends. We acknowledge the crack that permeates all of life. I don't know about you, but when I am honest with myself living in community I realise just how small I am. How much I am in need of God's grace.

What I have outlined above, the Christian commitment to the absolute value of each and every person, I find expressed in the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 12 August 1949. There we read,

“Persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed *hors de combat* by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause, shall in all circumstances be treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria. To this end, the following acts are and shall remain prohibited at any time and in any place whatsoever with respect to the above-mentioned persons: a) violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture;...”

At every twist and turn we are handed tools to pinch ourselves with (to awake out of sleep) and to remind ourselves of God's absolute commitment to the world for the sake of the world, a world of which we are members. In this message we must not waver. Friends in Christ, I am not saying anything new as you will recognise, but what I am saying needs saying emphatically over and over again, so that we don't suffer amnesia. It needs saying today, tomorrow and the day after. And we must do this based on our common humanity, being made in the image of God, and the basis of the Law and the Prophets knowing ourselves sent by Jesus who tells us what are sending entails, while also resourcing us. It needs saying on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, etc. It needs saying in 2020, 2021, 2022 etc It needs saying on the streets of our cities, from the roof tops, in the prisons where political dissenters, Christians and journalists to name a few have been locked away

or as in Malta and Slovakia murdered. Did you know that over 1000 churches have been closed in China and that Christians in northern Nigeria continue to suffer at the hands of the Fulani and Bokum Haram?

Today's Gospel coming at the end of Matthew's Mission Discourse has as its central themes those of welcome/hospitality and reward. It does not easily give up its meaning. But if we use the image of a chain made of many links we may see how the apostles, the prophets, the righteous ones and the giving of a glass of water are linked, linked to the sending of Jesus and Jesus' sending of the apostles. The cold glass of water stands for something elemental, human and relational. The prime sending/mission is that of Jesus who is sent by God. He commissions the apostles to share in his sending to the lost sheep of the household of Israel. These apostles are not faceless. They have names. They are singled out. Jesus to use an earlier phrase "democratizes his ministry", but it is always a ministry that originates in God. Jesus is sent. Jesus sends and the sending is based on and grows out of the ministry of the Prophets and the Law as signalled by the welcoming of the prophets who stand in this tradition as well as the righteous ones. There is continuity. And it stretches to our shared humanity symbolised by that most elemental gesture, which belongs to our common humanity the giving a cup of cold water to a stranger, to a refugee, to those who stand in the service of upholding the Law, to those who are the true prophets voices of our age, and especially those who have been sent by Jesus to share in his mission, empowered by him, ready at every twist in turn to make the Gospel and nothing more or less the measure by which they are to be measured.

Robert during his sermon on the first Sunday we began to consider the Mission Discourse, (the Little Commission). "Compassion should move us to a missional conviction. Compassion for human beings should inspire us to participate in the mission of the Kingdom of God." What is our reward? Our reward is to have a share in God's mission to the world being informed at every twist and trust of an absolute value, measure and standard that begins and ends with the giving of a cup of cool water based on God's love for the world and for all who are made in God's image. Let us be saturated in this knowledge and act accordingly.