

Who are the workers? – Matthew 9:35-38
25th July 2010 at 10.30am

Introduction

Good morning everybody

“Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them”

Today, we’re looking at the last four verses of Matthew chapter 9 and I want to focus on one of the key aspects of Jesus’ character: his extraordinary compassion for human beings

I’m going to start by talking about the extraordinary compassion Jesus had for humanity during his ministry on the earth

Then I’m going to talk about the reason why Jesus has this compassion: the desperate condition of humanity when we’re not in his personal care

And I’m going to finish by talking about the commission that Jesus has given to us all as a result of his compassion

Got that? Jesus’ extraordinary compassion, the condition of humanity, and Jesus’ commission to all of us!

Compassion for humanity (vv35-36a)

“When he saw the crowds, Jesus had compassion on them”

You know that feeling you get in your stomach when you’re going down the first drop of a roller coaster?

It’s the same feeling you get when you hear horrible news.

Your stomach feels as though it’s just been kicked in.

The New Testament has a Greek word for that feeling – it’s *“splanchna”*

It’s a word that literally means bowels or guts, but it’s translated as “compassion.”

Jesus is the only person that this word is associated with.

The New Testament says that Jesus felt this way when he encountered the sick (Mt 14:14), the blind (Mt 20:34), the demon-possessed (Mk 9:22), those who’d lost loved ones (Lk 7:13), the hungry (Mt 15:32), the lonely (Mk 1:41), and the bewildered (Mt 9:36).

In verse 36, when Jesus saw the crowds, he had *splanchna* on them; he had gut-wrenching compassion for them

You see when Jesus looked at the crowds following him in Galilee he didn’t just see a group of people

He saw the souls and hearts of men and women who were suffering

He looked beyond their faults and saw their needs

Our word “compassion” comes from two Latin words (com & pati).

It literally means “suffering with” others.

When Jesus saw the needs of his people he so identified himself with their plight that he literally suffered with them

So, this means that Jesus didn't just see a man with leprosy he felt his pain and rejection, his loneliness and isolation.

This means that Jesus didn't just see a man whose daughter had died he felt that man's sorrow and bereavement.

This means that Jesus didn't just see a woman who'd been bleeding for 12 years he also felt her shame and embarrassment

The Gospels leave us in no doubt that Jesus had enormous compassion for the world he'd come to save

It's also clear that that compassion wasn't limited to those Galilean crowds 2000 years ago

In fact it wasn't limited at all

It's a compassion that's for all people for all time

It's a compassion Jesus still has for this world today, including our own precious town of Lewes

Condition of humanity (v36b)

What is it about humanity that so moves Jesus?

And in particular what is it about the crowds in verse 36 that caused him to have *splanchna* on them; that gut-wrenching compassion that caused him so much personal pain?

Well, it's simply this. It was “*because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*”

Jesus is able to see the true condition of humanity

The Bible often compares people to sheep. Just to pick two examples:

- Isaiah 53:6 says that: “*We all, like sheep, have gone astray.*”
- And the well-known Psalm 23 starts with: “*The LORD is my shepherd.*”

Verse 36 paints a picture of sheep that have been attacked by a wild animal. These sheep are away from the flock; they're alone; and they have no shepherd.

Remember that when the Bible calls us sheep, it's not a compliment!

We may be tempted to think, oh, how cute and cuddly baby lambs are

But sheep are absolutely dependent on their human masters for safety.

They're virtually defenceless against predators

Sheep aren't very quick and they're not very clever

They tend to follow one another into danger rather than get out of the way

Sheep aren't very resourceful

Sheep have no sense of direction

In fact without a shepherd, sheep will often wander aimlessly for days until they get lost or die.

Look at this world and you can see plenty of similarities with sheep!

People blindly following each other as they anxiously check out what their peer group is doing
People slavishly copying the latest fashion, and buying the latest must-have technology
People jumping onto the latest bandwagon, but often not quite sure why exactly they are!
People all in a hurry but none of them really knowing where they came from, why they're here, or where they're going.

Sound familiar?

Sound a bit like the sheep we've been talking about?

When Isaiah wrote, "*We all, like sheep, have gone astray,*" he was referring to the human tendency to move as an unthinking herd away from the watchful care of the Shepherd.

Of course this is totally disastrous for us. Human beings aren't designed to function without the help of our creator

If only more of humanity would realise that!

We all need a Jesus-shaped shepherd

We need the healing that he can bring to our brokenness

We need the protection that he can give us

We need the direction that he'll give to our lives

When Jesus saw those crowds 2000 years ago, he saw sheep without a shepherd

He saw people without a purpose

He saw humanity without ultimate hope

He saw sinners without the prospect of redemption

Jesus saw the true condition of humanity

And it was like a kick in the stomach for him

Jesus wasn't driven by duty

Jesus was driven by passion

He was driven by his love for a lost people

He was driven by an overwhelming concern for people's destiny

Just like the master we serve, we too must have the same passion, the same love

We too must have the same passion for the lost

We too must be driven by an overwhelming concern for people's destiny

When D. L. Moody was in London during one of his famous evangelistic tours in the 1870s, several British clergymen visited him. They wanted to know how and why this poorly educated American was so effective in winning such large numbers of people to Christ.

Moody took the three men to the window of his hotel room and asked each in turn what he saw. One by one, the men described the people in the park below. Then Moody looked out the window with tears rolling down his cheeks. "What do you see, Mr. Moody?" asked one of the men.

"I see countless thousands of souls that will one day spend eternity in hell if they do not find the Saviour." He replied.

D. L. Moody's effectiveness as an evangelist was because he saw people differently from the average observer. Moody saw eternal souls where others saw only people strolling in a park, and so he approached life with a completely different agenda.

Just like Jesus, Moody saw the true condition of humanity and it changed him completely. He focussed his whole life and ministry on winning people for Jesus.

We too must see people as Jesus saw them.

Jesus saw the true condition of humanity.

He saw the brokenness, the pain that comes from being like a sheep without a shepherd.

Moody saw the true condition of humanity.

He saw the souls that needed saving, the deep sense of lostness in humanity.

Do you see what they saw?

Do you see the true condition of humanity?

Do you see the need for the harvest that's out there?

To mix metaphors somewhat, do you see the harvest of people who need to be brought into the sheepfold where Jesus is the shepherd?

Jesus had gut-wrenching compassion for the crowds because he understands the wretched condition of humans when he isn't their shepherd.

And when you have pain like that, you have to do something about it.

Commission (vv37-38)

So Jesus took action.

In verses 37 and 38, he gave his disciples a commission:

He said to his disciples: *"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."* (vv 37-8)

Jesus changes the illustration and uses a different figure of speech to make his point. He moves from talking about the flock to talking about the field.

The flock is the picture that we need God!

The field is the picture that God wants to use us!

Now I admit that I don't know exactly why God has chosen to spread the gospel using us to help him.... but he has.

And here's the problem: there aren't enough harvesters.

It's harvest time, the crops are ready, and there's a world of opportunity.

But there's a shortage of labourers to bring it all into the barn!

But first where exactly is this plentiful harvest that Jesus sees?

Where can we find this world of opportunity?

Let's look at some straightforward facts and do some simple maths

We could look at the situation globally. But let's make it personal. Let's look at Lewes.

Here in Lewes on a typical Sunday, like today, there are probably less than 1500 people going to church out of a total population of about 16,000.

That means that there's well over 14,000 men, women and children in Lewes who aren't coming to church.

14,000! Just think about that for a moment!

And the overwhelming majority of those people will have no relationship with the God who created them

They'll be outside that sheepfold where Jesus is the shepherd and as a result they're in severe danger of missing out on spending eternity with their creator God

So, there's a huge harvest awaiting us in Lewes!

It's made up of our friends, our family, our neighbours, our work colleagues, the people who serve us in the shops, the traffic wardens, our school teachers, our postmen, our dustmen

In fact the potential harvest is made up of anyone and everyone who doesn't know Jesus Christ as their personal saviour

And there's 14,000 in Lewes alone!

So that's where we can find our harvest. Everywhere!

Now what about the harvesters?

Where are they?

How many gospel workers are there in Lewes do you think?

How many of those 1500 churchgoers in Lewes are workers for Jesus?

Jesus' Great Commission at the end of Matthew to "*go make disciples of all nations*" is given to every Christian without exception

Every Christian is charged with being a worker

Every Christian should be a harvester

That's the theory. But what about the practice?

If you consider yourself a Christian this morning, are you a worker for the gospel?

In church here this morning we've probably got something like just under 200 people

How many of us here are workers for the gospel?

All 200 of us? 180? 150? 100? 50?

If you consider yourself a Christian and you're not working for the gospel, can I gently ask you why you're not?

I suppose that you might give me one of three answers:

Firstly, I suppose you might say “Jeremy I’d like to do it but I don’t know how. I’ve never been told how to talk to others about Jesus. I’ve never had any training.”

If that’s your reason please come and talk to Steve, David or me and we’ll see how we can organise some training for you. We won’t ask you to do anything scary, I promise!

Secondly, I suppose that you might say “Jeremy, I know that this isn’t very clever of me, but I’d never really understood how important it was for me personally, to be sharing my faith in Jesus with other people. I think that I sort of thought that it was a job for the professionals like you, Steve and David, and maybe one or two others.”

If that’s your reason for not working for the gospel I hope that you’ve changed your mind this morning. It’s every Christian’s job to share their faith. The commission is for us all

Thirdly, I suppose that you could say “Jeremy actually I don’t think that I need to work for the gospel. I know that I’ve been saved by Jesus’ death on the cross. I know that I’m in Jesus’ sheepfold, so I know that I’m okay. Frankly I just can’t be bothered to put myself out to help other people to receive the same mercy and grace that I’ve received.”

You know I really hope that there’s not a single person in here this morning who thinks like that. Clearly it’s totally inconsistent with the Biblical message

In verses 37-38 Jesus hangs out a “Help Wanted” sign.
He calls for labourers and suggests a great harvest for those who respond.

God wants to populate his kingdom.
He wants to fill his heavenly house.

Perhaps surprisingly God’s method for recruiting workers is prayer
We’re told to pray for labourers!

Not everyone may be a frontline harvester
But everyone should at least be praying for them
Did you know that we could lose two major frontline harvesters from Southover in the next 12 months?
Unless we can get what’s called a Bishop’s Mission Order, and some additional funding, David and Helen will be leaving us next summer as David’s curacy comes to its end.
Have you started to pray yet for David and Helen to be able to stay? Or for the right workers to take their place?

Conclusion

So let’s recap

This morning I’ve deliberately not talked about the how of harvesting.
Instead I’ve focussed exclusively on why we need to play our part in the harvest

Jesus has exactly the same compassion and love for the 14,000 people of Lewes that don't know him today, as he had for those crowds in Galilee

He understands precisely their desperate condition as *"harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd"*.

And he gives us the same commission as he gave to his Galilean disciples: "Pray for labourers to go into the harvest field"

Our influence and our compassion are only realized when we walk in obedience and respond in love to Jesus' call to play our part in harvesting Lewes

We are the answer to that 1st century prayer of Jesus.

The answer to 'who are the workers' is 'us'!

All Christian's are commissioned as workers for the harvest field

As we choose to serve Jesus rather than serve ourselves, we'll be amazed at the blessings which will come our way and the harvesting we'll be able to do.

We'll also discover that there's no better life than a life lived in the centre of God's will.

In two weeks time, I'm going to be preaching on the next part of Matthew. It's when Jesus tells us the how of harvesting.

In the meantime I want you to do just two things for me between now and then.

Just two things

They're not difficult but they'll need a small commitment from you.

Firstly, I want you to keep your eyes open and to see the harvest possibilities that are all around you in Lewes and elsewhere

Secondly, I want you to pray every day for the next two weeks for God to send out workers into his Lewes harvest field.

Every day for two weeks.

Specifically for harvesters in Lewes

Can you do that, do you think?

Do you have sufficient compassion for the people of Lewes, to do that for them?

I do hope so

Prayer