

## ENTRUSTED WITH A MISSION

Exodus 19. 2-8a

Romans 5. 1-8

Matthew 9. 35-10. 8

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

I'd like to ask you to think for a moment about your childhood. And if you can, to remember that moment when your mother or father first entrusted you with a task. Perhaps you were sent out to buy some bread at a local shop; perhaps you were instructed to 'watch' a younger brother or sister; or perhaps you were asked to lay the table for dinner when special guests were invited. Whatever that task was, it came at a moment when our parents sensed that we were ready to accept the assignment. It came without a guarantee; it came without assurances; and it was cloaked with the uncertain reality that we might just get it wrong. But it always came with trust.

Good parents know that such doses of trust foster confidence and such moments of trust build a sense of responsibility. Parents may keep an eye on us from a safe distance, or worry every moment until we've completed the job; but the real point of their trust is to allow us the freedom to fail, to bring home the wrong item, to 'accidentally' punch our little brother, or to drop that crystal glass that was reserved for festive occasions. And if we did fail, our good parents were there to help us learn from such mistakes; so that the next time trust was given, we would not fear our failing.

Today's gospel reading is about a similar kind of trust, extended by our Lord to his disciples. According to our text, Jesus is moved by the need he sees in the crowds of people before him. What is striking is the nature of his pity. We are told, 'he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a

shepherd'. Christ then instructs his disciples to pray so that the Lord of the harvest will send out labourers into his harvest.

Well, as the proverbial saying goes, 'Watch what you pray for, you might just get it'. If we assume that the disciples took their master's urging seriously and did indeed pray for more workers, they soon discovered that God answered their prayers by sending out the disciples themselves! At the beginning of Matthew 10, it is the disciples who are immediately sent out into those harvest fields to do ministry in our Lord's name. Not only were their prayers answered; *they* were the answer to the prayer.

Sadly, the crowds who are like 'sheep without a shepherd' have not disappeared from our world. This reality has not changed, after all these years. People in our 21<sup>st</sup> century still face the same uncertainty as they did in Jesus's day. Many are troubled; many feel alone and abandoned; and many are without material and spiritual resources. They are seeking strength and help.

And that is why Christ issues a similar call to us today. Just as he summoned and sent out the twelve, so too this day he summons us and sends us out. Although we may not be the bravest, the most confident, the most loyal or the most persistent followers, neither were the twelve. Our Lord calls us not because we are perfect, but because we are ourselves; and because he intends to personally equip us to accomplish the tasks that he gives us. And one of the tasks that he gives us is to proclaim a message: 'the kingdom of heaven has come near'.

But what is this 'kingdom' that we proclaim? This kingdom does not seem to have the usual hallmarks of a worldly kingdom or a realm or a country. It is difficult for us to conceive of such a kingdom that is not also a definable place on the map, a

realm with borders and with visible signs proving that this particular place is different from all other places.

We all know what such signs are like. Take the Condor ferry to Jersey, for example, and immediately lots of things are different: there are more people, there is more traffic and the whole island looks more business-orientated and commercial. Or take the same ferry to St Malo, and suddenly people are speaking French, driving on the other side of the road and drinking what we might think are unconscionable amounts of red wine.

A kingdom or country or realm would rather be like that, we think. But no. The kingdom that Jesus is talking about is real, and it is real *now*; and it must be real now to the extent that we can display it in our lives and in our churches and on our island. You and I are members of a kingdom where the will of the king – our God – determines what happens; and our king is working in his kingdom today.

As we proclaim ‘the kingdom of heaven has come near’, what can we *do* to invite others into that kingdom with all the urgent, but loving intensity that invitation deserves?

The kingdom is present wherever people pray the way Christ taught us to pray. The kingdom is present wherever our Lord nurtures certain behaviours and lifestyles that we call the fruit of the Spirit. The kingdom is present wherever ministers pour water over the heads of babies or take bread and wine to their lips, all simply because Jesus told us that this is the way we are to act in remembrance of him.

The kingdom is present wherever Christians refuse to go along with some scheme because they believe that it is untruthful, and that going along with it would make them less transparent to Christ. Whenever and wherever a university student refuses

to participate in some binge-drinking party; whenever and wherever someone refuses to cut corners on his taxes; whenever and wherever a kind person brings light into a neighbour's darkness by a word of hope or a good deed; whenever and wherever all such things are done because all these people believe there is a cosmic Lord named Jesus, then there (right there and right here and right now) the kingdom of God is present because the will of Christ our King is calling the shots.

In these uncertain and surprising times, how dearly and desperately people need to see the possibility of a different kingdom, a different ethos, a different way of being where our King is in control, and where what happens is what our King wants to happen. How dearly people need to know that this is possible; now, and not sometime in the distant future.

The message that we have to proclaim, to embody and to exemplify is the same now as it has always been: 'the kingdom of God has come near'. Today as much as ever, people need to know that this kingdom is real and available; and they need to see the joy and the possibilities of that kingdom *in us*.

Amen.