

040 11th Sunday of the Year A

Send me!

After the seasons of Lent and Easter, and the feasts of the Most Holy Trinity and Corpus Christi, we move back today to what we call the Sundays in Ordinary Time, and we resume once again our listening to the Gospel of Matthew. And I think it's helpful to recall where we are up to Matthew's Gospel.

We are now at Chapter nine. After the infancy narratives (chapters 1 and 2), chapters 3 to 9 have been essentially about the marvellous activities of this new holy man called Jesus. We have been listening to his revolutionary teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, and we have witnessed his compassion and his many miracles of healing. We can say that up to this point in Matthew's Gospel Jesus has been something of a one-man band. He has gathered disciples, but they are essentially followers of Jesus, not contributing to his mission in any specific way.

But that all changes with today's Gospel passage. We enter what some biblical scholars call the crisis-phase of Jesus' ministry, where it becomes abundantly clear to him that he cannot do it all on his own. Despite all his preaching and good works so far, he looks out at the crowds and realises that his work has barely touched the surface. There are still so many who are harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd. He recognises he needs helpers for his mission, so he tells the people to pray to the Father to send labourers into the harvest.

He then selects twelve of his disciples, whom he calls apostles, and gives them a share in his authority over unclean spirits with power to cure all kinds of diseases and sickness. Luke's Gospel records that, besides the Twelve, Jesus later appoints 72 others and sends them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go (Luke 10:1).

And as it was in Jesus' time, so it is today. Jesus needs followers – he needs you and me – to be agents of his message of salvation and instruments of his healing. Like the twelve apostles in today's Gospel, we are called to care for the lost sheep by bringing the healing and new life of Christ to them.

The 'sheep' we care for should firstly be those closest to us – our families and friends, and members of our community – a point Jesus makes when he says that the disciples should proclaim the kingdom of heaven first to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Charity always begins at home.

But it can never end there. Later, Jesus will commission his disciples to go out to the whole world and bring the good news to all creation. Similarly, our care must extend beyond our immediate circles to embrace all the 'lost sheep' among us – the homeless, people bound by addictions, refugees, the abandoned and rejected. For us, as for the psalmist, it is not enough when a few fortunate people praise God. We can only be fully happy when 'all the earth' cries out to God with joy.

Many years ago, the prophet Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' (Isaiah 6:8). Today, we pray for grace to respond with Isaiah, 'Here am I. Send me!'

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