

Trinity 1 [Proper 6]

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 14 June 2020

Readings: Romans 5 vv 1-8 and Matthew 9 v 35 – 10 v 8

Last Wednesday, I was left in no doubt that Guernsey is returning to something like normal life. I had three meetings. In person. With real people. Socially distanced, of course.

I have become used to having evenings without meetings. Instead, I have enjoyed walks, working in the garden in the lengthening evenings, and catching up with the overwhelming flood of emails.

So returning from an evening meeting after 9 pm, for a late supper, was a sharp reminder that lockdown was very much on the way out.

Friday morning was occupied with a long Zoom meeting with colleagues in England. The distance we have travelled together in Guernsey was all too obvious, in comparison with the continuing restrictions which my colleagues in England were facing.

It is difficult to think of a time within recent memory that has seen the British Isles and, indeed, the whole world under such stress and strain as we have seen in recent weeks.

We have been deeply worried and, in spite of all the expectations to the contrary before it happened, surprisingly willing to agree to lockdown. It has been interesting to see the turn of the tide, at least in the letters pages of the *Guernsey Press* in the last couple of days.

So perhaps we can empathise with the crowd in the gospel reading today.

Jesus' pity for the crowds, recognising their helplessness and realising that they are behaving just like sheep without a shepherd, is a strong hint that he is the Shepherd of Israel. In the Old Testament, one of the titles of God is Shepherd of Israel – we find it amongst other places in Psalm 80. So to link this title to Jesus is a clear indication of his relationship with God – a clear sign that Jesus is divine as well as human.

Following this, in St Matthew's Gospel it is clear that the twelve disciples are chosen as the twelve foundation-stones of the new Israel – reflecting, in the new covenant relationship between God and his people, the significance of the twelve tribes of Israel in the old covenant. Jesus had encouraged the disciples to pray for labourers who would go out into the harvest, recognising the vast human need around them. Whether or not they realised what would happen, the disciples found that they were themselves part of the answer to the prayer. They were themselves to go on missionary journeys. They were a mixed and motley crew.

It seems that Jesus built in the potential for conflict from the beginning. Canon Rosalind Brown describes this clearly and succinctly:

'Jesus chose the impetuous Peter, who acted first and thought later, and cautious Thomas who always needed to work through every possible outcome before committing himself to action: imagine decision-making in a group with these two. He chose Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, both of whose names suggest strong connections to Jewish freedom-fighters who – like terrorists around the world today fighting what they perceive to be oppression – were not averse to bumping off the odd Roman soldier, and Matthew who had sold out to the occupying Romans by becoming a

hated tax-collector. If that were not enough for group dynamics, add in two sons of thunder, James and John.'

Yet Jesus worked with this disparate and apparently unpromising group over three years to form the basis of the Church. And the evidence of the Acts of the Apostles is that whilst there were conflicts and disagreements, some of them sharp, the Church grew and flourished.

But before that, during the time that they were learning directly from Jesus, he gives their mission a clear focus: they are to be confined to Israel, and they are not to go into Gentile or Samaritan territory. Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels, written for a community of Christians who have grown into Christianity from Judaism, and probably still observing the Jewish good works and Jewish law, albeit in a new way, the way of Christ, according to the principle, 'What I want is love, not sacrifice.'

The Gospel of St Mark also makes it clear that Jesus' own mission had little to do with the Gentiles. Jesus meets Gentiles on only a few occasions: the Syro-Phoenician woman whose daughter he cures and possibly the Gerasene demoniac. But it is also very clear from the Gospels that the old order is changing. The 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' have not responded positively to Jesus with faith. The first human being to confess Jesus as 'Son of God' is the definitely Gentile centurion at the crucifixion: the death and resurrection of Jesus is the start of the Church's mission to the Gentiles. The relationship between God and his people is indeed new and radically different. This time, the relationship is with the whole of humanity, and not just a favoured nation.

And so we are the mixed and motley crew that Jesus calls to be his hands and feet, his eyes and ears, in this generation and this place. We would not be human if we did not feel as unprepared and inadequate as were the twelve that Jesus sent out to proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'

We may feel just as inadequate and unprepared, but the interest in online services during lockdown, and number of searches on the internet for prayer and so much more reveals a deep hunger for spiritual food, a deep longing for God.

Jesus had compassion on the crowds, 'because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.' He has compassion on the crowds of our own day. We, and those like us in churches across this island and throughout the world, are the labourers he has called to go out into the harvest. A mixed and motley crew perhaps, but we are God's people, called by him and with a task he has entrusted to us.