

Loving God, open the meaning of Scripture to us in a fresh and exciting way today.

In Jesus name

Amen

Jesus said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few."

My experience of the harvest is that it is a time for focus. Everything else is dropped and it's all hands on deck while the weather is just right. You don't sleep, and you eat on the run.

Once when I was helping with the harvest, I was in the truck, and my father-in-law, John, was driving the header. It was 3 in the morning. Unfortunately John went to sleep at the wheel, slumped forward. Somehow the header was still going. What to do? I tried tooting the horn, but he couldn't hear it over the noise. I tried flashing my lights. All the time the fence was getting closer and closer. I thought about leaping out of the truck and onto the moving header but as I played this out in my head I had an image of me being headed and all the blood and guts. I thought of driving in front, but this would probably cause as much damage as harvesting the fence. So I did all that was left to me. "God," I said aloud, "help." John, with miraculous timing, stopped just as the fence was about to enter the header.

I tell this story not so much to show the power of prayer, though it does that too, but to show the need for focus, for concentrated effort, for timing. For too long when it comes to the harvest the church has been asleep at the wheel. We have imagined that somehow the harvest will bring itself in. Put simply, we have a job to do, and that job is to make disciples. Like the bringing in of the harvest, it is urgent work. It demands our attention, and our future depends on it.

I wonder if you think of yourself as having a responsibility to help bring in the harvest. Or is that just the job of the clergy? Some day once defined Rugby as thirty people desperately in need of a rest, being watched by 10,000 people desperately in need of some exercise. Some parishes feel a bit like that too. When there are only a few doing all the work, it's good to delegate.

Today's Gospel has Jesus handing over the responsibility of proclaiming his kingdom of healing and peace to 70 others. The number 70 is important because the Rabbis taught that there were 70 other nations in the world. This means the Good News is for all the world and we have a responsibility to do our bit - just as all hands do on the night of the harvest. But how to do it?

When we look at Jesus, we see a man who was moved by the needs of people. When he saw the crowds harassed and helpless, he had compassion for them. Compassion is the quality of Jesus which the Gospel writers most often use to describe his unique way of coming close to those who suffer, of getting alongside them. Compassion means literally to share in the sufferings of another, to make the hurts and the aspirations of someone else our own. It means to sit alongside.

St Luke's is a beacon of compassion in this community. Thanks to the providence of God, and some cunning wooden architecture, this church and bell tower are not so much a means to call the faithful as they are a lighthouse of hope. They are a lighthouse that stands to say, to a tired and earthquake weary city, "Christ is alive. Hope hasn't died. The love, the peace, the joy of God can still be found, and you can find it at St Luke's."

Who cannot be moved to see our broken city? Who cannot be moved to see the broken people? And who, but the people of God, can offer the hope of God to others?

But what gives us the compassionate heart of Christ? To become this type of person doesn't come naturally. As Henri Nouwen writes, "...I have to kneel before the Father, put my ear against his chest and listen, without interruption, to the heartbeat of God. Then, and only then, can I say carefully and very gently what I hear. I know now that I have to speak from eternity into time, from the lasting joy into the passing realities of our short existence in this world, from the house of love into the houses of fear, from God's abode into the dwellings of human beings."

Returning to the Gospel reading: Jesus says, "Pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest." Prayer is where the heart's desire of God becomes our heart's desire. Prayer is where we find the compassion to minister together. It's only as we find the peace of God which passes all understanding ourselves that we have that peace to minister to others. When we go to another place Jesus tells us to say, "Peace be on this place." We so often play down what we have to offer - other people are smarter or more holy. "I'm just a simple person with nothing much to offer," we say to ourselves.

A friend of mine found himself as the chaplain at a big New York hospital. As one of the chaplains, he used to attend the weekly staff meetings. As they went around the room each surgeon and doctor would tell stories of the remarkable healing they had brought about. When they came to Terry he said: "I'm just the chaplain, I don't have much to offer." Afterwards one of the high powered surgeons took him aside. "I don't want you to ever talk like that again," he said. "As doctors, we give out medicine, but as a Christian you are

the medicine.” We are the medicine this world so badly needs. It needs labourers who carry good news, good news that death and violence and suffering are not the last word, but that love is stronger than all kinds of death. In the face of terror bombings and kids beaten to death and homeless, men dying in recycling bins, and refugees, the world needs the medicine that we are.

It’s an exciting journey. Never underestimate what we can do together: never devalue the difference this congregation can make to our city. Let’s have big, huge vision for all that’s possible with God.

Jesus said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few.” I urge you, don’t be asleep at the wheel, but make the harvest, the sharing of love, your number one priority. Whatever else you do, give this your best and most focused attention. Allow everything else to take care of itself. And pray that the compassionate heart of Christ might be yours too.