The Proclamation, Pushback and Promise of the Kingdom
Matthew 10:1-23

Over the summer we looked at Jesus' letters to the seven churches in Revelation. And before that, we studied the book of Esther. And before that we were in the book of Daniel. But before that we were in the gospel of Matthew, and we had got to chapter 10, and it's to Matthew that we're now going to return.

Matthew 10:1-23

To really understand what's going on here, we need to set this in the context of what's gone before, how chapter 9 ended. Because there, Matthew tells us, 'Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel [the good news] of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction' (Matt 9:35). So Jesus is in Galilee, in the north of Israel, and he's been going from town to town preaching the gospel and healing the sick. And as he did that, Matthew tells us that the crowds Jesus met deeply affected him, v36, 'When he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless' or as other translations put it, troubled and cast down, or torn and thrown down, 'like sheep without a shepherd.'

And the word Matthew uses for compassion there means a deep, gut-level feeling of pity for someone. And maybe you've felt that. You've seen someone begging in the street and your heart goes out to them; or you see a profoundly disabled child and you feel this compassion rising up inside you and it's almost physical. And Jesus sees the crowds, he sees the mass of humanity, and he feels this for them. He sees how life leaves people harassed and troubled, he sees how the religious teachers left them shepherdless, helpless, cast down, and this compassion rises up inside him and his heart goes out to them.

Because that's what God's heart does for a lost and troubled and harassed and helpless world. It reaches out. John tells us that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son' (John 3:16). So whilst religious types tend to move away from the mess of a messed up world, leaving them like sheep without a shepherd, in his compassion Jesus moves towards the world.

But here in chapters 9 and 10, how does he do that? Well, chapter 9 ends with Jesus saying to the disciples, "The harvest is plentiful,' the need is huge, 'but the labourers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (v37-38). So faced with a mass of humanity that to you and I may have just seemed like normal, everyday people, but who Jesus sees as harassed and helpless, Jesus tells his followers to pray, and to pray that God would send out workers to meet that need.

Which is great. But he doesn't stop at prayer, does he. He proceeds to answer that prayer for them. And he answers it by sending them out. 'Guys look at all these people who need shepherding, who need help, who need their lives putting back together and turning the right way up, pray that God would send people to meet that need' And the disciples huddle round and start praying: 'God would you please send people out to meet that need.' And then Jesus says, 'Guys, I've got great news, God has answered your prayers! He's sending you!' And they, and every Christian since, down to you and me today, are the hands and the feet and the mouths that God sends to embody Jesus' compassion for a broken world.

Three points: Proclamation, Pushback, Promise.

Proclamation
So Matthew tells us, v1, that Jesus 'called to him his twelve disciples.' Now, did Jesus come up with the number 12 randomly? 'Shall we have 9, or 15, or 17 disciples? No, I know, let's go for 12.' No! He picks 12 as a statement. The people of Israel, God's people, called to be a blessing to the world, came from 12 Patriarchs and from them came the 12 tribes of Israel. But Israel, and her leaders, had failed to be that blessing. And so Jesus takes 12 men and says, this new community, those who follow me, this is the new people of God, this is how Israel and the world are going to be blessed.

But what a choice of men! These 12 were a motley crew. The list starts with Simon Peter, and it ends with Judas Iscariot, and both of them, top of the list and bottom of the list, in different ways, betrayed Jesus. And it's not as if it was much better in between. As one commentator puts it, they're all rather insignificant. If you put your CV, your resumé, against anyone of theirs, you would win hands down, wouldn't you. They've never published any papers, they never launched any products, they've never done a lecture tour, they've never got a big bonus, they've never even got a degree – not one between them. They're not even on Linkedin.

And yet none of that matters, does it? It's as if Jesus deliberately chooses the most unlikely bunch. What matters is that Jesus calls them.

And their mix of backgrounds – more than that even, their mix of temperaments – because you've got hot heads like Simon, and more poetic types like John; you've got bean counters, like Matthew, who like all the pencils lined up on their desks, and fiery political activists like Simon the Zealot – tells you that Jesus can use anyone. No one can look at that list and say, well, that rules me out of Jesus' team. No… you just have to respond to his call.

But Jesus doesn't just call them, he empowers them. Verse 1, he 'gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction.' And then, v5, 'these twelve Jesus sent out.' So Jesus calls, he empowers, and he sends. And now, he sends out the 12, but later on it's the 72, and after Pentecost, in Acts, you see the whole church mobilised in going to a world. A world that on the surface might look as though it's got it all together, but that Jesus knows is harassed and helpless.

Well, sure, you might say, but if it's to the world, why does Jesus say in v5-6, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"? That doesn't sound like the world to me. Does he not care about the Gentiles and the Samaritans? Well, of course he does, down in v18 he tells them that in the future they will bear witness before the gentiles, and Matthew ends his gospel with Jesus telling the disciples to go into all the world and make more disciples. So, the reason Jesus says this here is that this is their first mission trip. And they're in Galilee, and Galilee was bordered on each side by gentile areas and by Samaria. And so Jesus is saying, 'on this trip, stay focused, these are the towns I want you to go to, the ones I've already been ministering in. But the time will come when the Gentiles will also need to hear.'

But hear what? What does he send them out to do? Exactly what we saw, at the end of chapter 9, that he has been doing: v7-8, "Proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons." So, as one writer puts it (Moore), their job, and ours after them, is not to innovate, it's to imitate. To imitate Jesus' compassion and proclamation, to the world.

Ok, but what does Jesus tell them to proclaim? Verse 7, that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." That God's rule and reign has come near, that you can reach out and take hold of it. And it's at hand, because Jesus is at hand. It's come, because Jesus has come. And as the kingdom of God breaks in, in Jesus, the sick are healed, the dead are raised, the lepers are cleansed and people's lives are set free from the chains of darkness. In other words, as the good news of the kingdom is proclaimed, people's lives are transformed.

And nothing else has the power to do that, does it? Politics can't do it; aid can't do it; education can't do it; science and modern medicine can't do it. Those things are all good. Good governance and just economics; excellent education or great science and medicine, they all bring great good to the world – you know how much good they do when they're absent. But ultimately, they have no power to make whole the harassed and the helpless. They have no power to turn hatred to love, or bitterness to acceptance, or selfishness to selflessness, or division to reconciliation. They have no power to conquer sin, or humble proud hearts, or lift up the broken and defeated, or to cover our shame. They have no power to heal a broken reed or fan into flame a smouldering wick. Only the good news of Jesus can do that. Because it's only that that has the power to change the human heart.

And every follower of Jesus, from them down to us, has been entrusted with that message to proclaim.

But I want you to see two things about this proclamation. Firstly, it's word *and* deed. And the danger is that as individuals, and as churches, we tend to lean to one or the other. You tend to be either a word person or a deed person. And if you're a word person, you want to *hear* the kingdom being proclaimed, and you want to *talk* about it. But the danger is that's all you do: you become a sermon taster (or a sermon giver!). And you grow more and more knowledgeable, and supposedly more and more spiritual, but you do less and less, you're less and less involved in your community, you become less *others-focused*, less service focused, and whilst you can quote all the Bible verses on healing, you can't quite remember when the last time was you prayed for someone to be healed. Whilst, if you're a deeds person, there's nothing you want more than to see God's power released in healing someone's life, or in meeting some physical need – but your love for the message, for the proclamation of the kingdom, for the word – well, that's grown dim.

And yet here, Jesus combines them both, and he sends them out, word and deed, proclaim, heal, raise, cleanse, cast out.

But secondly, it's not just word and deed, it's also grace and truth. You see, what is it that propels these disciples out into the world? What is it that motivates them? What's the engine driving this? It's Jesus' compassion for the world. So let

me ask you, do you feel that? Do you sense the lost-ness of the world, the brokenness of it? Do you see beneath all the seeming sophistication and see what Jesus sees and feels what Jesus feels? Does it stir you like it stirred him?

And then look at what Jesus says in v8, "You received without paying; give without pay." So the grace of God to us in Christ, God's unwarranted, unearned, undeserved love and forgiveness and acceptance – his grace - has been poured into our lives, and now Jesus says we are to go and share the same, without charge, with others. These disciples, and you and I, are to serve others with a free and a generous heart – because that's how God has treated us. We're to treat others with grace and extend the message of God's grace to them as freely as it was given to us. And does that challenge you? Underneath, do you think people really need to clean up their act, they need to do their bit to make themselves acceptable to God – that it's not grace and forgiveness the world needs, it's a stern word of judgement? Well, if that's how you instinctively react, let Jesus' grace and compassion sit there for a bit and challenge you.

But maybe you leap at the thought of a message of grace – and if so maybe what you need to see this morning is that it's not just grace. It's also truth. You see, when Jesus tells them to proclaim, 'the kingdom is near', he's getting them to do what he, and John the Baptist before him, did. But think: what was integral to their message of the kingdom coming near? Repentance. The fact that God has drawn near in Christ has profound implications for every one of our lives, then and now. In the way we think and speak and act – how we use our minds and our bodies and our bank accounts. If the king and his kingdom has come near it tells you, you're not the king, so you need to stop acting like you are.

And did you notice what Jesus says they're to do if people don't receive the message? Verse 14, "If anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town." Do you know how shocking that would be? You see, this is what Jews did when they left a gentile house, or town. Shake the dust off – I don't want this clinging to me. It was a sign of the division, the gulf between God's people, the Jews, and those outside God's people, the Gentiles. But now Jesus is saying, that's not where the fault-line lies anymore, that's not where the chasm lies. It's not between Jew and Gentile, it's between those who respond to the message of the kingdom and welcome it, and those who don't. It's between those who do follow Jesus and those who don't. It's between those who accept he's the king and all the implications that flow from that, and those who don't.

And then Jesus says, v15, 'Truly I say to you' – and whenever Jesus says that you know he's going to say something you're going to struggle to swallow – 'It will be more bearable on the day of judgement for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town." So there will be a day of judgement and how a person, or a city, fares on that day will be determined by how they responded to Jesus.

So is the good news of the kingdom a proclamation of God's grace? Absolutely. But it's also a proclamation of God's truth. And it's that combination, if you hold those two together, grace and truth, that explains why you'll face trouble.

Pushback

And Jesus makes it clear that while the good news is to be offered free of charge, if you're the messenger it could cost you everything.

And Jesus tells them that they will face opposition from four directions. Firstly, from ordinary members of society – who don't welcome them or the message. Secondly, from religious leaders, v17, 'Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts' – that's Sanhedrins, the religious courts, 'and flog you in their synagogues.' Thirdly, from the civil rulers, v18, "And you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake." And fourthly, members of your own family: v21, "Brother will deliver brother over to death." So, Jesus says, v22, "You will be hated by all." Now, he doesn't mean all people that ever live will hate you, he means all *kinds* of people will oppose you.

And that was true for these first disciples, it's true across the world today, but it's even true for us here in the West. You see, at the low end, as Jesus says here, it may be that some people don't welcome you, they're not especially friendly to you, because they don't welcome the message. Recently, I was standing chatting to a young couple at a birthday party, and I asked them what they were doing in Lausanne, and they told me, and they followed that up with, 'what do you do?' So I told them, 'I'm a pastor of a church' and the wife physically, instantaneously, turned away from me. No one ever did that when I told them I was a senior hospital doctor! So if you hold grace and truth together, you'll face that. But sometimes it's more than just low level rejection. But wherever it comes from, and whatever form it takes, unbelief won't be passive, Jesus says. In fact he uses this image of sheep among wolves. Because you know what wolves try to do to sheep. And people will try and shut you down.

So Jesus says, v16, "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Understand the world you live in. Don't be unnecessarily offensive, be wise, be prudent. But also, be pure, be a person of integrity.

But the truth is, it doesn't matter how good the news, or how gentle the messenger, you will face pushback: v22, "You will be hated by all *for my name's sake*."

Now you wouldn't think that Jesus was a cause for pushback, would you? Doesn't everyone love Jesus, the teacher of the golden rule, or Jesus the great moral example, or Jesus the embodiment of love, or Jesus the pacifist, or Jesus the social revolutionary. But those Jesuses are often just partial, even incorrect representations. They're not the real Jesus, the full undiluted Jesus. And when people hear the claims, then and now, that Jesus made about *himself*, that he is God come as man, then they pushback. They want to qualify his claims.

But people also pushback when they hear the claims Jesus makes upon us. You see grace and truth mean that your sins can be freely forgiven, your past can be wiped clean, your shame can be covered, because God loves and Jesus died for you. But it also means go and sin no more. And his call for us to follow him is one so radical that he describes it as taking up our cross and following him – that we must die to ourselves, that it's in losing our lives that we find them. And that does not sit well with the modern idea that to be fulfilled I must be true to myself. No Jesus says, to be fulfilled you must die to yourself.

But thirdly, you'll face pushback because of Jesus' exclusivity. When Jesus says, 'I am the way and the truth and the life, and no one comes to the father but by me', that does not sit very comfortably with a *I get to choose the path I want to follow* world, does it? And it certainly doesn't fit with a world that thinks we can save ourselves. So when Jesus says, 'you're so bad that you need saving, but you can't save yourself, you need me to save you', we react with 'who are you to say I'm bad, or need saving; who do you think you are?' But that's just the point. The good news of the kingdom will always be bad news when we want to be king or queen, because it tells us the rightful king has come.

But of course the remarkable thing is that Jesus sees this opposition positively, v18, "you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, *to bear witness before them*." So when your supervisor, or your boss, has words with you, or someone deliberately puts you down in public because you're a Christian, it's an opportunity Jesus says. That rather than shrink into the ground, we're to embrace it. But that doesn't mean we develop a martyr mentality – v23, 'When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next.' You don't need to go looking for trouble. Which is a relief!

Because none of us like pushback, do we? I mean, who wants to be unfriended, or cold-shouldered, or ridiculed? And especially not in public. So where do you get the motivation and the power to live as Jesus calls these guys to live, and as the early church lived? Where's the power to become a people, a church, who take the good news out into our schools and workplaces, our communities and cities in word and deed, in grace and in truth, like they did?

Promise

Verse 19-20, "When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit or your Father speaking through you." In other words, you will not be alone, you won't ever have to face opposition on your own. By his Spirit, your heavenly Father will be by your side, Jesus says. He will not abandon you.

And the reason you know that, the reason you don't need to fear, is because Jesus stood before those same judges for you. They might ridicule you or humiliate you or flog you, but Jesus stood in that very same place for you. And at the cross he was abandoned, for you. That's how much he loves you. And maybe these first disciples hesitated, 'will God really be for us?' but they never hesitated after Jesus death and resurrection. Because they knew what God had done for them. They knew that Jesus had been left alone at the cross for them, that they might never be left alone, that they might know Jesus' Father as their Father. And when you know that, when you know your Father's love for you in Jesus, you can face pushback, because you know your Father has your back.

So these guys went, and a helpless and harassed world found help and hope. Let's be a part of that.