

Send help!

Exodus 19:2-8a; Matthew 9:35-10:4

"Jesus makes it look easy. He goes to all the cities, preaches in all the synagogues, and cures every single ailment. No distance is too great, no audience too sceptical, no disease too severe. Jesus gets it done."ⁱ When He commissions His disciples to carry out His ministry, things get much more difficult. For anyone setting off on a new task, starting a new pathway in life, transitioning from school to school or school to university and college, or starting a new job, or looking for employment, or taking on a new role within the life of the Church, it is a whole lot tougher. Nevertheless, Jesus still calls, Jesus still sends.

Despite the challenges, despite the questionable likelihood of success, despite our inevitable difficulty in accomplishing what Jesus could do far more easily than us, Jesus confidently calls us and sends us. The story of Jesus, His work, and the work He entrusts to us makes us look at the gap between the ideal and the real, and then invites us to make a leap of faith in whatever it is we are facing in our lives, or being called to do and become. Jesus knows there is work to be done, not only in His time, but in our time. Which is why He calls out: 'Send help'!

Jesus has been out amongst the people. Crowds were everywhere, and as Jesus looked and as Jesus listened He became aware. He had compassion on them. Why? Because they were, "harassed and helpless." The image of a sheep without a shepherd evokes a picture of bewilderment, lostness, and vulnerability. Jesus sees they were the tired, the walking wounded. They're lost because there was no one to show them the way. There was no one to look after them or to lead them in the right way. They have no one to care for them until the real shepherd, Jesus, sees them in need. He is the one they have needed, whether they believed in Him or not, and now He is

looking at them. Their needs are made explicit. What will the Shepherd's response be to this aching human need. What is the Church's response to human need? Do we care, or could we not care less?

I have been reflecting on the scenes of crowd violence we have seen in Britain in recent days in Belfast, as well as those in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Perth and Falkirk. People with a right to protest abusing it by deploying violence, fire-raising, racial slurs and brutality against anyone they deemed 'different', and the police. Individuals mostly without the courage of their misguided convictions hence the black masks hiding their faces. From every decent part of society in communities affected, individuals affected, politicians, civic and religious leaders the condemnation has been clear, and I hope punishment will be meted out by the courts. A Church of Scotland statement said:

"There is nothing to be gained from such actions. The knife attack in Belfast was clearly a terrible and frightening incident.

The Church of Scotland stands in solidarity with the victim and our prayers are with them, their family and friends and the wider community. In the face of such violence our response should be a calm and resolute determination to see justice done, according to the law. Jesus called us to love our neighbour and to welcome the stranger. At a time of growing political extremism, it is even more important that the rights, freedoms and protections of people from religious and racial minority groups are respected."

I reflect on these individuals, mostly men, and the homes and backgrounds they come from. What sad and embittered experience of life has led them to this? Whilst neither condoning nor excusing nor patronising, I have wondered what help they need, what education, even what healing of their brokenness in order to encourage them into the broad, decent, tolerant people society needs? I

reflect on what Jesus would do if He were to walk amongst those violent street crowds in Belfast. Healing their disease and infirmity? Would He challenge them to follow His leadership of tolerance, love and wholeness far beyond the rabble rousers and society breakers of every far-right party and group currently blighting our land.

If Christian faith - the understanding, welcoming, sacrificial, inclusive Christian faith that has a place for friend and stranger, male and female, people of every colour, young and old - has any influence and power today - it speaks into and speaks about these hard places in life where help is needed most of all. Not just for terrified and persecuted families, burned out of their homes and their jobs by far-right mobs, but for the far-right mobs too, also in need of healing and transformation.

"Send help" indeed.

Jesus is modelling leadership. He has travelled to communities large and small. He has taught in the houses of worship and healed any who have sought Him out. As He has been doing these things His disciples have been watching Him at work. They have seen Him in His triumphs and when He was tired. They have listened to His teaching and seen Him confront the authorities. They have sacrificed homes and stability for the opportunity to be part of the Jesus movement that ushered in the opportunity of being in a different relationship with God, and a different relationship with every other human being.

Jesus saw the crowds, and called for help. Jesus saw His disciples and followers, and called them to help Him in that work.

In the 1980s a spoof document was written allegedly from the Jordan Management Consultants, in answer to a letter Jesus sent to them asking for an assessment of His disciples.

Thank you for submitting the resumes of the twelve men you have picked for managerial positions in your new organization. All of them have now taken our battery of tests; and

we have not only run the results through our computer, but also arranged personal interviews for each of them with our psychologist and vocational aptitude consultant. The profiles of all tests are included, and you will want to study each of them carefully. It is our opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background, education and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. They do not have the team concept. We would recommend that you continue your search for persons of experience in managerial ability and proven capability.

Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper. Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership. The two brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, place personal interest above company loyalty. Thomas demonstrates a questioning attitude that would tend to undermine morale. We feel that it is our duty to tell you that Matthew had been blacklisted by the Greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau; James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus definitely have radical leanings, and they both registered a high score on the manic-depressive scale.

One of the candidates, however, shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness, meets people well, has a keen business mind, and has contacts in high places. He is highly motivated, ambitious, and responsible. We recommend Judas Iscariot as your controller and right-hand man. All of the other profiles are self-explanatory.

Jesus didn't wait for the perfect team, He worked with who had responded to His call, "Follow Me." No time to hone their preaching skills, or get their theology straight, or sort out the finances required for the work, or answer all their questions. The need was great, the work needed done now, He used who and what He had, He acted early, and the men, and women, who followed Him stumbled into expanding the parameters of the Kingdom of God. They were to be labourers in the harvest, an image those country men and women would have understood well. They were to be not just disciples, followers, but apostles, which means, 'the ones sent out.'

As then, so now. When Jesus calls, 'send help', in this Church, and every Church, Jesus works with those who are already here, and with those who might be attracted to or intrigued by what we do and who we are. Jesus sees the scale of what needs to be done, and knows we can't do it on our

own, but with Him, and with each other, we can still do something to make a difference. Perhaps the followers of Jesus today have found just enough faith to see that the gap between the real and the ideal can be bridged. Jesus seems to think we can get the job done, even if it won't be easy.

What needs, looking at our community, does Jesus see? Do we see them too? For food and clothing. For welcome and friendship. For shelter and understanding. For forgiveness and comfort and love. Jesus calls, 'send help!' Then He sends us!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Alexander Wimberly, *Feasting on the Word Year A, Vol 3* p140