

Sunday 18-6-17

³⁵ Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” **10** Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. ⁷ As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ ⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, ^[a] drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

Two questions – or a question in two parts: *What was Jesus up to* and *What’s it got to do with us* on 18th June 2017?

We begin to answer the question of what he was up to by observing his teaching and preaching: proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom. What is this good news of the Kingdom? Matthew will refer mainly to the Kingdom of Heaven, the other Gospels will use the term Kingdom of God – referring to one and the same thing, so don’t let that confuse you. The good news of the Kingdom of God is to those familiar with the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures a message of hope and expectation.

His hearers will have recalled the words of Isaiah 52:

How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
“Your God reigns!”

Declaring the reign of God is a pretty good description of what is meant by the word Matthew uses for Kingdom – not about territory, but about the rule, the reign of God.

Those famous words of Isaiah 52 have a context - they are preceded by the promise, or the hope, that the announcement of the reign of Israel’s God will mean the overthrow of their oppressors:

Awake, awake, Zion,
clothe yourself with strength!
Put on your garments of splendour,
Jerusalem, the holy city.
The uncircumcised and defiled
will not enter you again.

² Shake off your dust;
rise up, sit enthroned, Jerusalem.
Free yourself from the chains on your neck,
Daughter Zion, now a captive.

Isaiah 52 may have been written in a different era and relevant to a different time, but it was not uncommon for prophecy to be read as applying more to circumstances of the people of God than to their

experience at merely one point in chronological time. So, the message of the prophets – as Matthew will demonstrate in regard to Jesus – may have immediate but also future reference. Indeed, Luke tells us that at the very outset of his preaching ministry Jesus deliberately read from Isaiah 61 for this very purpose:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”^[1]
²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.²¹ He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

So, to the Jewish community in the region of Galilee, Jesus’ message will stir expectations that the God they worship is among them and about to be at work in their circumstances. This is not a message of no consequence – this is serious and significant.

What is Jesus up to?

Jesus is declaring the presence of God among his people bringing hope, raising expectation and, as will become very clear, saying that he, Jesus, is the living expression of God among his people. He is not just the herald of the good news of the Kingdom – he *is* the good news.

However, what is good news for some can be not so good for others.

For example, this week the Bank of England decided to keep interest rates in the UK at their historic low of 0.25%. Good news from my married daughters and their husbands who have mortgages. Not good news for us because we’re earning next to nothing on our savings and now that we live in the Netherlands the Dutch tax authorities are about to relieve us of more tax on savings that we could earn in interest! My only comfort is that we are not alone!

This good news/gospel that Jesus proclaims will, in Jesus’ day and in days of the early church, be heard in another way quite different way. This message calling people to repent and order their lives under the reign of God, the God of Israel, will be heard as a radical, subversive, politically dangerous message. The reason is that ‘gospel’, a declaration of good news, was a particular form of declaration already used in the years before and during Jesus’ life and ministry. ‘Gospel’, ‘Declaration of Good News’, was a term that existed before Jesus was on the scene.

We are familiar with it exclusively in the context of Christianity but even before Jesus’ time it was a technical term, commonly used in connection with declaring a military victory and/or as a means of eulogising the Caesar as part of the imperial cult.

Yesterday you were probably all glued to your TVs to watch the Trooping of the Colour for Queen Elizabeth’s birthday celebrations – military massed bands, pageantry, fly past by RAF... No – missed it?

Birthday celebrations for a monarch are not unusual as we know well in the Netherlands where 27th May is King’s Day. It was true also of the ancient world: for example, the famous decree of the Greeks of the province of Asia around 9BC marking the birthday of Augustus Caesar:

The birth of Caesar is eulogised as the beginning of everything that's good,
'a day that gave a new look to the Universe at a time when the Universe would gladly have welcomed destruction if Caesar had not been born to the common blessing of all men, providence has sent him as a saviour for us and those who come after us to make war to cease, to create order everywhere, the birthday of the God (Augustus) was the beginning for the world of glad tidings (here the Greek word is the word for gospel, good news)'

The decree concludes with the statement that 'the reckoning of time for the course of human life should begin with his birth.'

I guess you can begin to see the problems ahead...

In Roman occupied Palestine Jesus comes making a declaration, a gospel about a different Kingdom than that of the Caesar. If he was doing it in Rome he would probably have been ignored, treated as just another weirdo looking for attention and talking gibberish. But this isn't Rome; it's Galilee, the northern region of Palestine - home to not a few hot heads and rebels who don't take kindly to the Roman occupation. This is northern Palestine, a Jewish community who understand the language that Jesus is using and who have been longing to hear a message like this. What they hear is a Rabbi proclaiming a message that sounds very like the kind of hope held out by their ancient prophets – that God would once again redeem his people from oppression, that a kingdom would be established under the rule of the God of Israel and not some foreign pagan.

This is a message that fires up hearts, generates expectations, mobilises the young men of the community who are willing to forsake their fishing boats to follow the preacher, instils a boldness and sense of adventure in a subjugated people that could lead to revolution and to trouble.

What is Jesus up to?

Jesus is declaring the presence of God among his people bringing hope, raising expectation and, potentially storing up trouble for himself and those who will follow him. But Jesus is also doing something else – commissioning an interesting group of people to be fellow messengers/heralds of the news of the Kingdom of God. Matthew decides that at this stage we should hear the roll call of disciples who Jesus is about to commission to bear this message of the kingdom to their own community.

Some of them were religious men, men of faith. We know from John 1 that Andrew was originally a disciple of John the Baptist and that he took John's advice and followed Jesus right after Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. Indeed, Andrew brought his brother Simon Peter to meet Jesus because through John's witness and what he had heard from Jesus he believed Jesus to be the Christ - John 1:41 'We have found the Messiah' (that is, the Christ).

We also know from John 1 that Philip and Nathanael come from the same town as Andrew and Peter and that Philip also appears to be a deeply religious person who declares Jesus to be the 'King of Israel'.

Philip then brings his brother Nathanael (Nathanael is largely assumed to be the same person as Bartholomew) to meet this Jesus and he is soon convinced that Jesus is the promised anointed one.

If we add James and John into the mix – the sons of Thunder – we have three sets of brothers involved who seem to be religiously minded, devout, sincere Jews familiar with the need for repentance.

Then there's Judas Iscariot (a dodgy accountant), Simon the Zealot (a militant freedom fighter), and Matthew the tax collector (generally

one of the most despised of the community) - not people considered to be sincere religious men.

There are a few mainly anonymous individuals as well – what do we know about James son of Alpheus, Thomas and Thaddeus? Next to nothing!

So we see Jesus gathering round him the devout, the dodgy, the unknown – an interesting collection of people, to say the least. Yet, these are going to become the key messengers of the good news of the kingdom. These are the men who will take this message of hope to the surrounding villages. I suspect that a few of them are the kind of people you would think twice about buying a second-hand car from – but they are Jesus' team and he knows what he's doing.

What is Jesus up to?

Jesus is declaring the presence of God among his people, bringing hope, raising expectation. Jesus is potentially storing up trouble for himself and those who will follow him through this declaration of Good news – this gospel. And Jesus is commissioning fellow messengers – an unlikely combination of the devout and the dodgy.

There's one other thing we need to observe closely about what Jesus is doing and that is the means by which this message is shared. I think, above all else, Matthew wants us to get this, to see and sense this. The message is conveyed out of compassion and addresses the needs of the hearers. The gospel writers all make this point frequently. Yes, Jesus can give the hypocrites a hard time, but compassion is the hallmark of his ministry:

- Compassion for the leper in Mark 1 – he reaches out and touches him;

- Compassion for Jerusalem as he weeps over it before his crucifixion;
- Seeing the crowds – harassed and helpless – harassed by challenges of surviving day by day, harassed by disease and sickness, harassed by abusive religious leaders, harassed and ripped off by unfair taxes and helpless to do anything about their lot.

Jesus does what he can, with those he can. He intervenes – proclaiming hope, healing the sick, seeing the humanity before him like a vast field of wheat swaying in the wind. A vast field of need. A vast field of unrealised potential and possibility.

When he calls the twelve to him and empowers them to extend the ministry, they are to take the message with the same compassion, intervening in the needy situations - meeting needs and bringing hope because, as Jesus says:

You received without payment, give without payment;
Freely you received, freely give.
You have been treated generously, so live generously.

That's the way the messengers have to approach their task and that's why this motley band are taken seriously. They bring a message of hope backed up by a compassionate intervention in the lives of the needy. Their preaching is given authority by the power of the miracles and it is given credence by the way that power is exercised in compassion for people and his care for the sick.

Jesus' message is not abstract, it's not merely aspirational – there was probably plenty of that around already. His message is grounded in the real lives of the people. As Jesus addresses the needs of the sick

and possessed, his hearers recognise the authenticity of his message and recognise that God is at work in this situation.

What's true of Jesus is to be true of his messengers.

What is Jesus up to?

- Proclaiming the **message** – the good news, the gospel, of the Kingdom of God;
- Preparing the **messengers** – an unlikely combination of the devout and the dodgy;
- Making clear the **means** by which the message is conveyed – compassion and meaningful intervention in the lives of the needy.

At the beginning I suggested we had two questions to consider this morning : ***What was Jesus up to?*** and the second question:

What's it got to do with us in ERC on 18th June 2017?

It almost doesn't need to be stated – but it's the preacher's task to state the obvious for his own good and that of the congregation!

We are the inheritors of the good news. We have heard it read, we have sung about it, we're here because of it - the good news that in Jesus we see the first signs of God's reign and come to put ourselves under his rule. We understand this as life transforming, heart-warming, liberating. We worship because this good news is more than words – we've been moved by it, convicted by it, changed by it, empowered by it, enabled by it. We sing the praises of Jesus in whom we discover the Kingdom of God, through whom we enter the kingdom of God, in whom we experience the kingdom of God. We identify ourselves as disciples of Jesus, followers of the way – his way, learning the values, lifestyle and joys of the Kingdom.

Yes, we too are a motley crew, a miscellanea of cultures and colours. Jesus entrusts us with the message of hope, he tells us to give as freely as we have received...

But the compassion bit – that can be the tricky bit:
Sometimes it's only duty drives us.
Sometimes it's only guilt that motivates us.

Are we there yet? Am I there yet – with the depth of compassion of Jesus?

Compassion that tips the balance;
Compassion moves us from concerned to committed;
Compassion gives the message of hope credibility;
Compassion opens our hearts and our wallets;
Compassion gives us the courage to intervene;
Compassion helps our understanding of others to mature;
Compassion moves me from believer to disciple;
Compassion means I begin to care about the state of the world and the plight of those who are harassed and helpless.

Am I there yet? Are we there yet?

I like the fact that Jesus restricts the activity of the disciples to the world they know and I like the way Matthew plays with it. Jesus says to his disciples, “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.’

It's a statement that causes quite some theological angst and lots of debate. Some see it as indicative of the failure of Jesus' intended mission to his own people. Some are concerned about possible racial discrimination. People ponder this statement. I take it pretty simply.

This may be chapter 9 of Matthew's gospel but it in the chronology of things it represents the very early stages of his ministry – Matthew has been concerned with many other issues in between the birth narrative and the early days of Jesus ministry. The opening two chapters have been taken up with the story of Jesus' birth and escape into Egypt. Chapter 3 is largely about John the Baptist and Jesus Baptism. Chapter 4 records Jesus' time in the wilderness and the calling of his first disciples. Chapters 5-7 are the Sermon on the Mount, most of the teaching of which may have happened at later stages and is gathered together to set out the core elements and implications of Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God (KoH) – his central message.

So by the time we come to chapters 8 and 9 we are still at the very early stage of his ministry and the early days of the disciples' experience of following Jesus. Is the instruction to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel a matter of misplaced ethnic privilege or discrimination? I don't think so. Jesus sends the disciples – who, at this stage, understand so little of what he is really about – sends them among the people with whom they can relate. Later he will march them through enemy territory and teach them compassion for Samaritans. Much later he will commission them to all the world.

But, now, he's starting with the world they know, just as Matthew is starting his first readers with the world they know – but like the disciples, by the time we get to the end we learn that the message and compassion must extend to the uttermost ends of the earth.

This morning, be inspired:

- Be inspired to re-engage in the world you already know with compassion and sharing the good news of the kingdom of God;

- Be inspired to reset your compassion antenna for the people within your scope of influence;

If the world is too much to contemplate, start or restart at home, see the need in front of you, do what you can, speak well of Jesus...

But for some here – perhaps the world is your challenge – perhaps it's time to uproot and go, to go as a herald of this message of hope, to go as an agent of healing and hope to some destitute part of our world – though there's plenty to keep us occupied right here...

I heard the well known scholar Walter Bruggeman put it this way: It is a dreadful mistake to separate the love of God from love of our neighbour. The gospel invitation is to intervene and correct the mistaken arrangements in our world on behalf of our vulnerable neighbour

When it comes to the compassion of Jesus, let's all ask:
Are we there yet?

Amen