

June 14h 2020 Sermon for First Sunday after Trinity –

Rev Tony Rindl, Vicar of St Mary's Church Watford

Bible Reading Romans 5:1-8

Gospel Reading Matthew 9:35-10:8

Let us pray. May the words that I speak be faithful to the written word and bring us to the living word who is Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

I think our reading has greater relevance than normal right now. I think that its true that in times of hardship or danger people are more likely to turn to God in prayer and to seek his help. I think in times like this with all the challenges we're going through, it raises fundamental questions about life and God and people are searching for answers. As churches have got to grips with zoom meetings and live-streaming it's estimated that 1 in 4 in this country have tuned in to a religious service and a very high proportion of those have watched right through to the end. And if you take the younger generation its even higher, its perhaps as many as 1 in 3. For a generation growing up with the internet and reliant on google for answers, there is suddenly a need to look elsewhere, to find the answers to discover meaning and truth to life's fundamental questions. Questions that in normal times are conveniently swept under the carpet in the busyness of life. So turning to our reading, and when reading the Bible its always good to imagine the context in which the passage is written. And I think that this passage gives us insight into what life must have been like in first century Palestine in the towns and villages around Galilee. Generally speaking the people were poor. It was hard to make a living from the land, and furthermore this was a country that was under occupation, and the people were subjected to heavy taxation, and there was lots of corruption around to such an extent that what precious little they did manage to earn was quickly taken from them, they barely had enough to survive. As our passage suggests there was a lot of sickness and disease around with very little in the way of help and any sense of hope. So we read how Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd we are told. Yes, there was a faith and a belief in God, after all we're talking about a people whose identity was based on the story of the Exodus and a narrative where their ancestors had been rescued from the hands of the oppressor and they had been given the land that they are now living in. Yet the sense of blessing and freedom which this promised land was supposed to give them, was not the experience of the average person. Yes there was an organised religion that worshipped the God who had brought their ancestors out of Egypt but with all its rules and regulations did very little more than simply protect the power and privileges of the religious elite. So when Jesus came along preaching a message of hope, declaring God's love and declaring God's forgiveness and speaking of a new kingdom where there would be justice and freedom for all, and where sickness and hardship would disappear there was great excitement. Not only that but the miracles gave credibility to the message that he was proclaiming. Suddenly there was hope and the possibility of a better way of living. Its no wonder so many were excited and interested in what Jesus had to say. As we know from reading the Gospel narratives, Jesus would often draw large crowds but there must have been many thousands of others who also needed to hear the Good News, but who could Jesus send? 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.'

We live in a largely secular society and prior to lockdown most of us would go about our daily lives not really concerned about the big questions in life. Most people would see faith and religion at best as superstitious nonsense, at worst the cause of many of the world's wars. Most people would rather put their trust in science and technology. In many ways lockdown and other world events have changed all of that. Suddenly we are faced with a very different world to the one we were used to. A world which is very much more uncertain. And every day we eagerly look for news; for any signs of hope as we look forward to better times. There is a desire for real change in the world. We are sickened by the lying and cheating and the rhetoric of politicians, and all that twisted fake news. There is a real appetite for truth and justice. Those big questions that if we are honest have always been there, but we have chosen to sweep aside and ignore, that have come now to the forefront. What happens when we die? Does God exist? If God is all powerful and all loving why does he allow suffering? Why does evil exist?

The Gospel has always offered a radical alternative, a different world view. And from generation to generation many have been attracted to the teaching of Jesus and have discovered in him a profound truth that is transformative. If the experiences of a global pandemic, political unrest and other uncertainties have created a greater spiritual interest and a hunger to find answers to life's big questions, and even a desire to know Jesus then once again we might say "The harvest is plentiful, the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest therefore to send out workers into his harvest field." But who are the workers? Well in our reading we learn that Jesus chose twelve of his disciples and they are named in the reading. He entrusted them, "...gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and illness. The names of the twelve apostles are Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him." It's an interesting selection of people and at this stage I just want to make one observation, and that is Jesus chose very ordinary people to do the work. He chose humble fishermen. He chose a tax collector with a dubious reputation. He chose Thomas who was to become known as doubting Thomas. He chose Peter who at the critical time of Jesus' arrest and trial would deny he knew Jesus three times. And then of course as clearly stated in our reading he chose Judas Iscariot the one who went on to betray Jesus. These are the twelve Jesus chose.

Today there is another great harvest and who does Jesus choose? You and I. He chooses you and I because we know something that others don't. We know Jesus or at least we know something of Jesus that we can share with others. And yet at the same time we also have a great empathy with those who are searching for God, with those who are asking the big questions, indeed we may well be looking for answers ourselves. Jesus sent out twelve of his disciples. There are many ways of defining what a disciple is but essentially disciples are students and we are all learning and discovering new things. I once heard it said that sharing the Gospel is like one beggar telling another beggar where there is bread to eat. We share with others what we know and what we have. And I guess we all have questions. We all want to know what happens when we die. What God is really like. Why does an all-powerful, all-loving God allow suffering and some of these questions are big questions and some of them are stumbling blocks for many. These are good questions and sometimes

being a worker in God's vineyard is not always about having the answers, but simply showing people where they might find the answers that they are looking for. Or helping them perhaps look beyond the question. Some of those questions which are good questions can be, as I say, stumbling blocks for many. Why bad things happen to good people. There is so much hurt and pain out there, and its why Jesus told the disciples not only to proclaim this message that the kingdom of heaven has come near, but also to heal those who are ill. To raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. A rather dramatic instruction we might want to say.

I sometimes wonder though if we have toned it down a little too much. I'm quite clear in my own mind that healing, and new life, and freedom and liberation should accompany the preaching of the Good News of Jesus Christ. There is so much hurt in the world today. There is so much guilt and shame, so much sickness, and I don't just mean coronavirus, the whole world needs healing. And we need more love, and kindness. We need forgiveness. We need the chance to start over again. We need new life.

I've often said that actions speak louder than words. If we believe as Christians that Jesus is Good News then as followers of Jesus we need to be the Good News. Our message of hope needs to be accompanied with acts of kindness and love. But I go back to the question, why are we most qualified to be the workers of the harvest?

I think the answer was given by a good friend of mine recently. He's a Christian, but let's say that in the past he lived a rather colourful life. In fact he would be the first to admit he still makes mistakes. But bit by bit he is shaking off the old life and embracing the life that Jesus wants him to live. Again in his own words he would say that he has seen both sides of the coin and he knows which one he must choose, which one is ultimately better. And I think this makes my friend highly qualified because he knows the struggles and the issues and the questions. He might not have the answer, but like the slogan of that famous advert, he knows a man that does. He knows Jesus, or perhaps more accurately he's getting to know Jesus.

We often talk about Revelation, believing that in every generation God has shown himself to be real. We see God's Revelation most chiefly through the Bible. We see the Bible as God inspired, written by men and women who have encountered God and seen him at work. Recently in his sermons Josh has been keen to remind us that if you want to know what God is like, then look at the person of Jesus. St Paul describes Jesus as the image of the invisible God. As Christians we believe that Jesus is the son of God, that in Jesus, God meets us in our humanity. Jesus has the supreme authority to declare that God loves us and has made us to have a relationship with him whereby we can call God our heavenly father, and that we are his children. Jesus told many stories about God, and how God desires to have a relationship with each one of us. One of the most famous stories is that of the prodigal son. How the son leaves home and squanders his inheritance. When all his inheritance is gone, the son comes to his senses and knows that his best option, his only real option is to return to the father, and to admit his failure, and to ask for forgiveness. And yes in the story even before the son has come home the father is out there looking for his son, and he embraces him and welcomes him home forgiving him and reinstating him as his son. There are many other stories that show God seeking out the lost, and all those who are broken and who are afraid. And if we're feeling like that, if we're feeling uncertain,

feeling that our lives lack meaning and purpose, that something is missing, then maybe we need to take action, maybe we need to turn back to God. It was St Augustin who said our hearts are restless until our hearts rest in God. Perhaps as those big questions continue to go round and round in our heads, maybe God is calling us to a deeper relationship with him.

And I invite you to explore those questions with us at St Marys. Josh, Cath and myself, we would be delighted to hear from you. It is no trouble. Remember that our main task is to bring people into a deeper relationship with God. Members of the church are currently running an Alpha course which is going really well. And we would hope to run future courses. And yes, Alpha explains what Christians believe but its also a place where you can ask those questions big or small it doesn't matter. Its just simply a safe place where you can ask those questions. And its not so much that the leaders have the answers but its an opportunity to explore together. Another thing that we offer is that once a month we have a Current Affairs Group that loves to explore those big questions. Friday just gone it was all about where is God in this coronavirus pandemic and next month we will be looking at the Christian response to Black Lives Matter.

As Christians we believe that Jesus is alive today. It is at the heart of the Easter story, we believe that Jesus continues to meet with us through the Holy Spirit. And that God's Spirit is present in our midst, that we can have that relationship with God, through his Holy Spirit, through what Jesus has done for us, whereby we can call God, Father and that we can be his children. God has given to his church, to his people, the gift of his Holy Spirit, and Jesus says of the Holy Spirit; it will lead you into all truth, he is the answer to all our questions. Amen.