

**6<sup>th</sup> November 2024**

**Harvest Thanksgiving Matins**

**Joshua 3: 7-end and Matthew 10: 1-22**

**Mother Emma**

Our reading from St Matthew, chapter 10, described the sending out of Jesus' twelve apostles, carrying Christ's message into the surrounding area, to continue and spread more widely his own work of teaching, preaching and healing the sick. However, I am sorry that it did not include the final verses of Chapter NINE which offer a wonderful image for this day of Harvest thanksgiving.

<sup>37</sup> *Then saith he unto his disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few;*

<sup>38</sup> *Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.*

The earthly Jesus lived in an age and in a setting which was largely agrarian. Many of his images and parables are based around the growing of crops, the harvesting of vines or the keeping of animals. His hearers – perhaps unlike many people in Kensington today – would immediately have pictured the fields of wheat and corn, just waiting to be brought into safety in the barns where they could serve their purpose in feeding people and animals through the winter. As he looked around him, Jesus saw people who were anxious or self-orientated – he described them as “*sheep without a shepherd*”, and he created the image that they too could be harvested, brought into the safety of God's love and made fruitful and purposeful in his service.

He then turns to his disciples, in the chapter we heard, to describe how this harvest is to be gathered in. They are to go out, going to those they identify as “*lost sheep*”, who have moved away from worship and devotion to God, telling them that in his coming, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. They are to offer hope, through healing, preaching, teaching, and to give freely of God's love and comfort, just as it has been given to them. They must have total trust in God's care for them, taking no provisions or money, but relying on God to show them places where they will be offered hospitality in response to their message, demonstrating a faithful reliance on their Father in Heaven. At no point does Jesus pretend this will be easy; he is aware that their words and actions, just like his, will provoke suspicion, criticism and worse. Yet their reward will come at the end of the age, if not before, when they are saved into the eternal love and protection of God.

What does this story say to us today? Perhaps you are thinking that the disciples were a very specific group of people, at a particular time and place, set amongst traditions in which itinerant preachers were more “normal” than they are today. Perhaps there is some confusion around the word “disciple” itself.

Feedback which has come out of recent discussions with groups in the church suggests that, although people know that our three areas of focus in the current St Mary Abbots Mission Action Plan are “Welcome, Discipleship and Outreach”, many people are not altogether clear what might be meant by “discipleship”. As children, we often hear of the twelve disciples who followed Jesus, and who came to be known later as the twelve “Apostles”, the founders of the Early Church. These twelve are well-known, and, as we heard, their names were listed at the start of our reading.

For some, the word disciple continues to be associated with the Twelve, who accompanied Jesus on his earthly journey, who were sent out by him in the story we heard today, and who, after the Resurrection, became the first leaders of the Church.

And yet the word “disciple” is much broader than this. It means literally a “*pupil, student, apprentice or adherent*” who followed a specific teacher. Groups of disciples might follow a teacher in the Jewish law, in Greek philosophy or in other areas, “*sitting at their feet*” and learning from a master. The disciples who followed Jesus would initially have been seen in this light – an unlimited number of people who wanted to learn from a great master about his faith and philosophy, and how to put that into practice in their own lives. The Twelve, meanwhile, were his very closest supporters, who had given up everything to go with him on his journey – and who, ultimately, would pay the price of their devotion with their own lives.

We might have chosen a clearer word for our focus – perhaps taking into account that “discipleship” for many speaks of the lives of the Twelve Apostles – and we have been wondering whether something about “Christian living” might have been a better choice. What we were seeking to convey was that we are **all** disciples, in the broader sense, who have chosen to sit at the feet of Christ, to absorb his teaching through God’s Holy Word, and to draw near to him in the sacraments.

We are all called to live the life of a genuine follower, one who seeks to take on everything we learn and have been given and most of all to demonstrate that in the way we live our lives. Perhaps we are not sent out to preach the word of God barefoot, taking up residence in people’s houses and casting out demons. But we ARE, every one of us, asked within our own setting, to bring hope and compassion to others, and to speak openly to them of the comfort and inspiration we find in our Christian faith today.

We live in a time of great anxiety, as we see conflicts escalating across the world, and watch as many of things we had taken for granted in our own society seem to be questioned. We too can see people like sheep without a shepherd, who are afraid and seeking truth and hope. Yet, we as followers of Christ, have a clear message of hope and healing and salvation, of a God to whom people can come knowing that their sins are forgiven, and that perfect love is extended to each one of them; that they can lay aside their burdens and fears and grow in faith and trust.

The harvest truly is plenteous and we pray that the Lord of the Harvest will send us forth as his labourers into the harvest.