

Prayer

Jesus Christ, Lord of all; the world in which we live has darkness as well as light, sorrow as well as joy, and trouble as well as peace. Give us hearts of discernment and courage we pray, which live out the Gospel call to turn darkness into light, sorrow into joy and trouble into peace. We ask this with conviction, because You have prepared us and called us to this task as Your people, Lord Jesus Christ; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Church Conferences

Pray today for those conferences that act as governing bodies for churches or inter-church organisations. When important decisions are taken, may they truly reflect the will of God.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks to God for those who enrich your life
- Pray about the fighting between Russia and Georgia.
- Pray for peace talks in Zimbabwe

Meditation

A prayer of dedication, aspiration and hope

In the time you have given me to live on earth and worship You,
May I take my stand for what is right, and against all that is evil.

Help me to show the love of God in everything I say and do,
And put into action the truths of the Gospel given to me.

Remove from me all falsehood, domination, and secrecy;
Establish honesty within my heart, so I may act with integrity.

Give me the patience to wait for the fulfilment of Your Word,
And the courage to persist in faith through all kinds of evil.

Show me when Your judgement is necessary and imminent,
And may Your justice open up a path of righteousness before me.

Help me face the need to forgive my brothers and sisters in faith,
And not stand back from the responsibility to love, like Christ.

Then, bring me to a place of peace where I may find rest.

For having followed Your call, and listened to Your voice,
I trust in Your infinite mercy and grace, to save me completely.

Bible Study - Matthew 9:35-38

³⁵ Jesus travelled around all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every kind of illness and affliction. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, his heart went out to them, because they were troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, 'There is a very big harvest, but the labourers are few; ³⁸ earnestly pray to the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out labourers into his harvest.'

Review

Our reading today is an interlude; it is like a summary of where we are in the greater story of Matthew's Gospel, and it reveals a special insight into Jesus' feelings at this early stage in His ministry; He described those who followed Him as 'like sheep without a shepherd' (9:36). It is sometimes forgotten that this passage flows directly into the next chapter, and the naming of the twelve disciples (10:1-4). We will look at this in the next study, but the transition from chapter 9 to chapter 10 is significant, highlighting the changeover from Jesus' ministry to that of the disciples.

It is interesting that verse 35 reads almost exactly the same as Matthew 4:23, which served to introduce the ministry of Jesus early in the Gospel. It is now repeated at the end of Jesus' first phase of ministry which has included the Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29) and His work of healing and deliverance (8:1-9:38), together with discussions with individuals (8:5ff), the disciples (8:25ff), would be disciples (8:18ff) and the Pharisees (9:4ff). The impression we gain is one of Jesus and the disciples involved in restless activity, just finishing with one person or one incident before going to another; notice the number of words like 'then', 'next', 'immediately', or 'suddenly' (8:3,14,18,23,,29; 9:2,9,14,20). In addition, verse 35 indicates that Jesus' ministry at Capernaum was simply an example of his ministry in the whole Galilean region.

All this activity is summarised by the threefold definition of Jesus' ministry, as 'teaching ... preaching ... and healing' (v35) and whilst this is a summary of what had happened, it became the basis for Jesus' mission instructions to the disciples (10:1,7,8). This threefold definition of Jesus' ministry is central to Matthew, and also to Mark (6:12,13), and Luke (4:18), and it remains a classic definition of the ministry of God's people, the Church. Preaching is the declaration of the Good News of the Kingdom of God, which calls people to respond; teaching is the task of explaining what the Kingdom is and how it may be experienced and lived; and healing is the demonstration of the power of God in our midst and an expression of His compassion and care. Whilst this pattern of ministry may be put into practice in a number of different ways depending upon our culture and times, I suggest that it is the standard to which we aspire, and if we deviate from it, we are in danger of moving away from the purposes of God for His church. Our deepest need as people is to respond to the God who has made us (through preaching), understand how to live (through teaching), and experience the power and presence of God in our lives (through healing).

When Jesus had time to draw breath and look around (9:35), He was struck by the enormity of His mission. He saw crowds of people thronging to take advantage of His ministry. Some came to hear His preaching, some to hear more of His teaching, and others, maybe a larger number, came seeking God's mercy and healing through Jesus, who they increasingly saw as God's Son (8:29), and the 'Son of David' (9:27); in other words, the 'Messiah'. Jesus' heart went out to the people (9:36), the Greek word used here expressing the deepest emotion and compassion. His picture of the people as like sheep was a picture from the Old Testament prophets who spoke of the failure of leadership in Israel (Zechariah ch 10ff, Ezekiel ch34, Isaiah 40:11, Amos 3:12, Malachi chs2,3), but Jesus would not fail.

The Pharisees and scribes were the social and religious leaders in Jesus' day, and they had originally come to hear and see Jesus like everyone else. However, they quickly decided to reject Jesus, his teaching and ministry (9:34); they saw Him as the very opposite of what the crowds were claiming, and said He was in league with the 'ruler of the demons', that is, the devil or Satan. This judgement would set the Pharisees against Jesus for the rest of His ministry and sow the seeds of His arrest and crucifixion. However, the immediate effect of their opposition was that the people were left leaderless. At what cost is the rampant opposition to Jesus and the church within society today?

But Jesus moved immediately to rectify the situation; He offered a brief but telling picture of the situation; 'There is a big harvest, but the labourers are few' (9:38) and immediately moved to commission the disciples for mission (10:1); for they were the labourers He had in mind. In the Bible, 'Harvest' is an image of God's final judgement (Ho. 6:11, Is. 27:12, Joel 3:13), and would have been understood as such by all who heard Jesus. We are familiar with this saying of Jesus, and use it as a call to mission. In Jesus' day it was believed that God's helpers at the 'end time' harvest would be angels, but Jesus called His disciples to join the harvest (9:38, 10:1). From Jesus' point of view, God had begun the End Times when it was appropriate to harvest for the Kingdom. He had already announced that the Kingdom was present (4:17); now it needed workers!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In what ways are people 'like sheep without a shepherd' today? In what ways does this show itself?
2. As disciples of Christ, how do you put into effect the threefold mission to which you are called: teaching, preaching and healing?
3. What new mission opportunities does God present to us today?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I have always found the threefold ministry of Jesus to be a strong personal challenge. There is a certain emphasis within ordained ministers of churches today for them to find their own ministry and calling. However, I believe that our role is to be Jesus' servants, and our call is to so what He did, according to His strength and not our own. It is a quite different outlook, and I do not understand the emphasis many place on personal ministry.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *What has the Lord called you to do? Has He called you to personal gifts that are different and must be expressed individually? If so, how does this fit into the call for us all to minister to others as Jesus ministered? Pray carefully about how you respond to this challenge.*
- *For a period of time, cut out some regular activity you do for personal pleasure, and spend the time in prayer about the ministry of God's people, the church, and your place within it.*

Final Prayer

Father of grace, may we not turn away from the many gifts You would like to give us. You offer us so much; open our eyes therefore to Your love, turn our hearts towards Your will, and strengthen our feelings and emotions so that we may embrace everything You would like to do through us by the power of Your Holy Spirit. Father of grace, we thank You; AMEN