

Matthew 9:35-10:23

35 Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for 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 laborers are few; 38 therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

10 Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. 2 These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as 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 Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

5 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, 6 but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' 8 Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

9 Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, 10 no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. 11 Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. 12 As you enter the house, greet it. 13 If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. 14 If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. 15 Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

16 "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. 17 Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; 18 and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. 19 When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; 20 for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. 21 Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; 22 and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 23 When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

Sermon: Shake off the dust

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Last week was a week of commissioning; we heard the words of commission given by Jesus as his final instruction to the disciples, we blessed Jay Bailey and sent him off to witness among indigenous people out west, and we learned about power and authority.

Humans were created by God to be agents of God – we were to be the caretakers of creation – gardeners – shepherds.

All authority was granted to us to act in God's name and in God's interest. Then we messed it up. We learned to sin – to turn our backs on God and his instruction and instead to act in our own names and in our own interests. In doing so, we relinquished some of the authority that had been given to us, and instead of being masters of our domain we became in many ways like puppets; we allowed other created things to have control over us.

We got lost and found ourselves being ruled by those very things that we thought we were in control of. Our sins and vices slowly took over; those things that we turned to for pleasure or amusement began to consume more and more of our thoughts, time, and money, until one morning we woke up and found that it was no longer us in control, living our lives, but the things that we created were now living through us.

This happens on an individual level, and an institutional level. The coke and doritos that began as a special treat has grown into a constant struggle to maintain a healthy weight and shape that consumes all our thoughts and effort – becoming a cruel burden.

The economy which began as a tool to facilitate commerce and trade has now grown into a hydra that is inextricably intertwined with all facets of our lives. The economy no longer works for us – we work for the economy now, sacrificing our time and treasure and forgoing the fruits of our labours for the sake of 'the economy.' We now serve what was created to serve us.

We were granted authority in the beginning – and we lost it. We frittered away our power for trinkets and words of praise; we have squandered our birthright and have found ourselves in the pigsty, not sure how we got there exactly, but knowing that it is not our place to be.

Jesus' response to our situation was to restore that lost authority. Through the forgiveness of our sin Jesus broke the hold that sin has over us – he reclaimed that authority that we have given to sin to rule over us – the power of guilt and fear and defeat. Jesus, the only King and head of all of creation rightfully claims all of that power as his own, as the authority that God the Creator has given to him from the beginning of all time. Jesus bestowed that authority upon us once again, restoring the original order, and sending us out as his emissaries to act in his name.

All of this sounds fantastic – the King of Kings strides into his Kingdom and sets things right – tears down the unjust structures that we have raised up and empowers his people to live together – not as dominated subjects – but as confident and competent equals. It's a remarkable thing, really.

But not all is as idyllic as we would want it to be. Our sinful ways have become entrenched in the world; the message of freedom is not necessarily a well received one. Jesus said 'you shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free,' but in Jesus' time and in our own, it is apparent that not all are willing to receive the truth.

Last week's reading in which Jesus commissioned his disciples to baptise the nations in his name has a triumphal tone – like the sound of a horn blast cutting through the forest. It stirs the blood and invigorates the soul. And it well ought to sound triumphal; that commission call came after the resurrection, just as Jesus was preparing to ascend into heaven.

This week's commission call is a lot more sobering, and not nearly as appealing. It starts well; 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.' A plentiful harvest – this suggests some easy pickings.

'Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.' Again, we see the granting of power and authority – over the spiritual realm, as well as the physical. Things were looking good for the twelve.

Jesus continued, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' Still looking good – the disciples were being sent among their own people – preaching to the choir, as it were.

As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Well, that is certainly a fairly easy message to deliver – who wouldn't want to hear it? Remember this all took place while Jesus was doing his ministry, so there wasn't yet any need to preach about crucifixion, or resurrection. Those ideas are hard to share – all the disciples had to do at this point was to declare that the kingdom of heaven was near.

After delivering the message, they were to reinforce that message with signs and wonders – curing disease, raising the dead, cleansing lepers and casting out demons, all with the power of God, delivered through Jesus and the Spirit. No problem.

If we were to stop reading at this point we could feel pretty hopeful for these twelve, and therefore also feel pretty hopeful and optimistic about the mission that we have inherited from them.

But, Jesus kept speaking. 'Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or an extra tunic, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food.' This doesn't sound as appealing, does it? It's like asking you to take a long journey, but leave your cell phone and credit card at home. The disciples would have to be fully reliant upon God in this journey. No emergency cash to get a train ticket home, or to rent a room on a lousy night – or even to eat a meal.

When they entered a village they would have to befriend someone very quickly if they wished to have a roof over their head or food in their belly. Find a man of peace, is the phrase Jesus used. They really were being sent out like lambs among wolves – no protection, no provision. The disciples had only their faith in God, that he would ensure that they encounter people of goodwill on their travels.

This mission trip is beginning to look quite imposing, and forbidding - but Jesus has more to say. 'Beware, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles.'

As Jesus finished this statement, I'm a little surprised that there is anybody left to hear his words. I think I'd want to be sidling off towards the door at this point. This is more than the prospect of being hungry, or having to sleep outdoors because of not being able to find that person of peace to provide food and shelter. More than just a little discomfort, Jesus is saying, quite plainly, that his disciples ought to expect to be dragged off to court, and even flogged.

The disciples will have no-one to trust or rely upon. 'Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name.'

Does this sound like a mission that you would want to be sent on? It doesn't even sound as though this mission has any chance of success – with beatings and betrayal as the expected outcomes. Where is the power and authority – the ability to raise the dead and cast out demons? Can that be done from a prison cell? Can the message that the kingdom is near have any credibility coming from the mouth of one who bears the scars of being flogged as a common criminal?

It is difficult to imagine how these apostles can speak and act with authority while also being victimized and publicly humiliated. And yet, it is precisely their weakness that gives the message strength. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

This can be hard to grasp – it goes against conventional wisdom. But, consider this: it is easy to speak from a position of power. If you are respected and admired, people will seek after your opinion and your favour. But it doesn't really mean anything.

People will agree with others who have power, not on the authority of the words themselves, but on the authority of the person. This diminishes the message, and ultimately the result is that we see celebrities extolling shampoos on tv.

The message is cheapened to the point of irrelevance, and there is also a cost to the position and prestige of the person who participates in such activities.

However, contrast this with the power of a message for which the messenger is willing to suffer, and even die. When someone is being persecuted for their message, when we see what they are willing to endure, rather than change their mind, then we are forced to pay careful attention to the message. The message takes center stage, not the celebrity of the messenger.

Rather counterintuitively, in weakness, the message gets delivered in force. The power of God is revealed in the weakness of man.

To ensure that this is the case, Jesus even went so far as to take the responsibility for making a coherent argument upon himself. He advised the twelve 'When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time. It is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.'

The message will be given to us, all we have to do is speak it – repeat it. It is when they are persecuted, when courage fails, that the presence and power of the Spirit will be made evident.

Ultimately, the mission of the apostles boils down to imitation and repetition. They were to do what Jesus did – signs and wonders of healing and miraculous interventions – and say the words they would be given. Jesus instruction could be summed up as 'do what I do, and say what I say.'

What is notably missing from this commissioning is any accountability for outcomes. Jesus did not say 'Don't return until you have hit your conversion targets and your minimum village stops.' In fact, Jesus took all responsibility for how people received the message completely off the disciples.

'If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.' Jesus didn't require them to convince or force people to believe. Their job was to deliver the message – that was all.

Shake the dust off your feet. As you encounter a place that is unreceptive, don't stay and waste your efforts in trying to change them – just leave. And when you leave, don't leave carrying burdens of guilt or failure – it's not about you. When they reject the message, it's Jesus they reject – not you. Shake the dust off, take nothing with you from that place that will cling to you, embittering relationships, sapping energy, and leaking hope.

Don't carry anger about the people who are indifferent to the message, and don't judge them. Shake the dust off your feet.

If we think about dust, we remember that God told Adam 'You are dust, and to dust you shall return.' It's what we say to each other on Ash Wednesday. Dust and ashes.

I have heard it said that house dust is mostly dead skin and hair particles. Dust represents dead human beings. When people reject God – either through outright hostility, or through indifference, they turn toward death, they become the dust of the earth. To dust they return.

We are powerless to stop them – we can't do anything with dust, but God certainly can. God made Adam out of the dust, and breathed life into him. God can make something beautiful out of dust and ashes.

So, when faced with failure, we shake the dust off our feet. We don't carry defeat from that place but we give it over to God to recreate what only he can recreate, and we move on to the next village, seeking out the people of peace to deliver our message that the kingdom is near, praising the God who made all things out of the dust of the earth and who still does.

This message about mission and authority is much more challenging than last week's. Jesus has openly spoken about the difficulties we will face – discipleship comes with a cost, and it can be a dear one. We will have to rely on God alone, not our own resources. We will have to be able to let go of our reputations, our liberty, and perhaps even our lives.

But – we are assured that the Spirit of power will manifest itself through us in our weakest moments – that when our own light is fading and sputtering, God's light will shine boldly. We are vehicles of the divine here on earth; through us God will work miracles, making beauty arise from ashes and making life come from the dust of the earth.

We prepare the way of the Lord – this is our calling – it is God who will do the miracles through us.

Amen.