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Mission of the Twelve (Matthew 9:35-10:15)

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For someone like me – with universalist sensibilities – today’s gospel passage is initially unsettling. For one thing, there’s Jesus’ seemingly exclusivist instruction to his disciples to ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’. And for another, there’s his injunction to flat out leave behind those who don’t welcome the words of proclamation: ‘shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town’. This isn’t warm, fuzzy Jesus – but Jesus who comes as judge and refining fire. What are we to make of this apparently uncompromising beginning to the mission of the church?

This passage from Matthew forms part of what’s called the Sermon on Mission, which begins in a way that’s strikingly parallel to the earlier Sermon on the Mount.¹ Both sermons are preceded by words to the effect that: ‘Jesus went about teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and sickness (Matt. 4:23, 9:35). In other words, each one begins with Jesus immersed in the needs of people, by whose suffering he is deeply moved. The word that’s used to describe Jesus’ response is *splangchnidzomai*. It’s usually translated as ‘moved with compassion’. In our text it reads: ‘he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd’. *Splangchnidzomai* is a strong

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew, A Commentary*, Volume 1: The Christbook (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), p.447.

word. It ‘means a deep commotion of the entrails, a visceral commotion’.² It signifies *how much* Jesus cares – the magnitude of his passionate yearning for people’s healing and well-being. And what I find moving is that it’s out of this passionate yearning, this viscerally charged compassion, that Jesus summons the twelve and sends them out. Its with this concern that he tells them to proclaim the good news of God’s nearness, to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons – that is, to release people from whatever form of bondage, possession and cast outness they suffer. This mission isn’t about some self-serving church growth program. It’s about people’s *lives* – and the love that wants to give and enable abundance, well-being and joy.

Which is why it jars when he tells them to go only to the ‘lost sheep of the house of Israel’? What about everyone else? Well – here it seems we may be running aground something of the evangelist Matthew’s particular concern. This story of Jesus commissioning and sending out the twelve to heal and preach is told by Mark and Luke too – but in their rendering, the mission field is open (Luke 9:2; Mark 6:7). Matthew’s emphasis, by contrast, apparently reflects his situation in ministry. He’s thought to have lived in Antioch among a community of Jewish Christians and been himself a Jew. And throughout this gospel he’s concerned to see Jesus in his Jewish context. This is not primarily, I think, about ethnic loyalty. It’s to do with enabling his community to see Jesus as the fulfilment of God’s promise to Israel and not its negation or abandonment. Perhaps that’s why it’s important for him that there’s explicitly a mission to ‘the lost sheep of Israel’. If this is so, it’s noteworthy that by the end of even this gospel the mission of the apostles *is* universalized. After his resurrection, Jesus meets his disciples once more on a mountain in Galilee to give them the ‘great commission’: ‘Go and make disciples of all nations’ (28:19). But if that helps ameliorate concern about the apparent ‘exclusivism’ of this passage, what about the question of shaking off the dust and taking back the peace you’ve offered? Doesn’t this seem a little petulant, lacking grace? The

² James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), p.188.

suggestion offered by the great 16th century Protestant theologian John Calvin that the chief point of Jesus' counsel here 'is to give some relief to [the disciples] for their natural sorrow and dismay whenever their teaching may be flung back upon them, for fear that they might give up in mid-career'³ gives little comfort! Nothing too inspiring, it seems to me, about the notion of scripturally licensed hissy-fits!

I wonder, though, if our reading would be helped if we paid attention to what immediately precedes this instruction? Remember that the disciples are told to offer what's theirs to offer freely: 'you received without payment, give without payment'. And they're told not to take lots of material precautions in advance of their missionary endeavours – no spare tunics and the like. This suggests there's a necessary vulnerability involved if they're to communicate this news of the kingdom. As if, to make it known, they must be willing to entrust themselves radically to God and God's provision for their life; travelling light. This doesn't mean being undiscerning ... they must seek out those who may be ready to hear and willing to support them. But there is a kind of 'being with' and among, an undefendedness that's required.

Why? Well, I think what this 'poverty' enables is a kind of transparency for the message itself. Your mission is not about you, your security, your identity. It's about the reality you seek to communicate – the access to life you have received and seek to share. To share it, you must authentically live from this truth. But at the same time, you can't be responsible for people's receptivity, you can't make *that* happen. Part of the freedom in giving is that there's a level of non-attachment required in the offering. And if people aren't ready to hear, or won't receive, then you don't have to carry that with you, you don't have to make it mean a lot. Just as Jesus never got bogged down with his 'failures' in ministry, just as there was a cleanness and an invitation to adulthood in his encounters, so the disciples too can 'shake off the dust' of encounters where people don't want to be changed, don't want to grow or meet God beyond their settled

³ Bruner, *Matthew*, p.470.

belonging and identity. It's in this context, suggests Frederick Bruner, that we're to hear the reference to Sodom and Gomorrah: 'Whenever the apostolic message is proclaimed, a mini-Last Judgement is in progress, and people determine their destinies by their receptivity or unreceptivity to the message'.⁴ John's Gospel makes this point repeatedly: the light came into the darkness and people preferred darkness, rather than light.

Of course, what makes this 'dust shaking' instruction complicated for the church, for us, is that we're not Jesus. We might think we're cleanly offering an invitation to growth, freedom, new life and that someone's refusal says more about them than us; but sometimes it's not that simple. Our speech and action may be more enmeshed than we like to think with our own need to change others or to be good evangelists! People resisting *that* in us, is not the same as them resisting God. So we need be wary of too self-righteously shaking the dust off our own feet, cutting off ties and relationship. Even so, the invitation here is to let go being attached to the outcome of our efforts, to offer what there is to offer – freely, without strings.

So – these instructions are about *how* to go. But let's not lose sight of the context of our 'going'. What Jesus' sending out of the twelve is about is communicating the passionate, yearning, *splangchnidzomai* –ish love of God and the offer of deep healing, release from stricture and isolation. That's what Christian mission is. In the coming week, I'll be in WA, giving talks at the Perth diocese clergy conference of the Anglican Church. Part of what I'll mention is some of the ways we're seeking to communicate and share this liberating and healing gift of God in our life and beyond – through things like our L'Chaim reflective practice groups, Spiritual Practice Group, our new meditation groups and this afternoon's Soul in the System conversation. For me, it is such a joy and privilege to be in mission with you. Thank you for letting yourselves be commissioned as we share this work of love.

⁴ Bruner, *Matthew*, p.470.