

Mission – Entertaining Angels?

(Preached by Cheryl Williams on June 14th, 2020 at Footscray Baptist Church)

On my grandparent's farm in Gellibrand in the Otways in the front paddock was a large shady walnut tree. It is still there, in fact, it is the only way I can recognise the farm. That tree holds a special place in my heart. It was a place of hospitality. We would gather for morning tea or afternoon tea, my grandmother, would have baked scones or cakes and have hot water for tea and we would go out and meet with whoever was working on the farm that day. I can still see the feast – scones, homemade jam, cream from the dairy, the white enamel mugs with blue rims, all of us sitting under the tree. A place of hospitality.

In our reading from Genesis 18 we have the story of Abraham and Sarah that was depicted in the icon we looked at last week. In our reading today we find another place of hospitality. Abraham finds three visitors standing near him, he runs to meet them and then offers them water, washes their feet, an opportunity to rest under the Oak of Mamre while he gets his servants and Sarah to bake bread, prepare other food – a calf, and get milk for the guests. The visitors ask where Sarah is (clearly she was very busy getting their food ready). They then bring a message – the child she and Abraham had so dearly wanted would arrive in their old age – Sarah's response was to laugh, wouldn't you laugh too, given her circumstances! One visitor takes her aside and reminds her that there is nothing too wonderful for God. Sarah laughs, denies laughing and then when she bears a son names him Isaac, a name which means laughter.

In the provision of their hospitality they know they have not just entertained three visitors, they have entertained angels, they have entertained God.

In our reading from Matthew we are given a summary of what Jesus has been up to – going around to the cities and villages, teaching in the temples where he proclaimed the good news and curing all sickness and disease along the way. We are also told why he is doing this – he looked out on the people and had compassion as they were harassed, helpless and like sheep without a shepherd. In Matthew's world the people were under the rule of the Romans, who dominated them and plundered all they had. Jesus is setting down the groundwork and example for the twelve and all other disciples following.

Compassion is essential for Jesus especially when working with people who are tormented, exhausted, neglected and led astray. Compassion is not pity or a passing interest, it is practicing solidarity with another, it is a way of making the sufferings and aspirations of another our own.¹

Jesus then speaks to his followers and gives them authority to go and do the same, he gives them a job description. The task is urgent and large, it is to proclaim that Kingdom of Heaven is near, to bring life where it is lacking and justice where there is marginalisation.²

And what an interesting bunch they are – some fishermen, a greedy betrayer, a tax collector, God works in quirky ways and as we learnt in the reading from Genesis God achieves the unlikely by using the unlikely.

¹ G Gutierrez 'Sharing the Word through the Liturgical Year' pp163-5

² G Gutierrez 'Sharing the Word through the Liturgical Year' pp163-5

So, they are told to pray, to pray for workers to help announce the Kingdom of Heaven is near and to do the works Jesus has done. Then they are sent out to carry out Jesus' mission in the context of compassion, authorised by Jesus, by the authority of love.³ Sent out to preach, to heal and do all they can to liberate them from that which oppresses them whether it be physical or spiritual. To liberate people from torment and free them from whatever constrains.

They are told to stay local though, not to go to Samaria and surrounds. This verse is a problem and contradicts what Jesus says in Matthew 28:16-20, where the disciples are sent out into all the world. It contradicts what Jesus does and says about Samaritans in the gospels. We must remember that Matthew's audience is predominantly Jewish people who have come to believe in Jesus, maybe that is why this part of the story says only to go to lost sheep of Israel. However, there seems to be some progression in understanding by the time we get to the end of the gospel story.

The first disciples are told to go out into the world and gather them in.

So, what are we to do?

We too, are, given this task of mission, we too are called to be God's people and go to the harassed and helpless with compassion and in love.

We need to figure out who in this world in 2020 are the sick, are the lepers or outsiders, who are those tormented and constrained by other powers, by their own fears, by mental illness, who are without life or without abundant life. That is the task for Footscray Baptist Church – to go out and find these people and gather them in, to go to them in compassion and love. This is our context and setting, a very different setting and time compared to those first disciples – but the task remains the same.

It may be in the going out to these people we might find like Abraham did that as we offer hospitality, we might find that we are entertaining angels and that they might have a word for us from God.

God's message comes to us from unlikely places – from people on the margins, they might teach us love and grace.

So, the job description is to go out with compassion. Offer hospitality to all we meet. Liberate others from that which constrains them and in so doing we might find compassion, hospitality and freedom. We might just entertain angels, messengers – even God. And may we all laugh together at the joy we find together. Amen.

³ W Loader – Matthew 9:25 – 10:8