

AFC 177
Psalm 13
Matthew 10.40-42
2nd July 2017

We are ALL sent!

Gracious God – may your Living Word come to us afresh this morning – so touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth – through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen

Ten o'clock was the start of the first shift. The headquarters was the Chapel Lounge of my previous church in Yeovil and it was there every Friday and Saturday night that the Street Pastors assembled to get themselves kitted up ready to go out onto the streets and encounter the 'night time economy' of our town. That Saturday night I too donned a high viz jacket and joined them.

Week by week these volunteers from the churches struck up friendly conversations with pub goers, gave out flip flops to girls whose high heels had broken, and special caps to clubbers to stop their drinks being drug spiked.

For the next five hours I was outside my comfort zone. Yet come 3am the next day I had had my photo taken next to the regular Street Pastors by young people tumbling out of clubs who wanted to share that encounter on Facebook, helped two guys who'd had too much to drink get taxis home, given out over ten pairs of flip flops and had three long conversations about life and God with folk who seemed to love being around these warm-

hearted, genuine and kind people called Street Pastors. During that evening it felt to me as if all the glass walls we put up between different sections of society just melted away.

I was reminded of that evening last week as I watched Songs of Praise which carried a report of a similar group, this time called Street Angels operating in the 'night time economy' of Majorca.

These groups have a burning desire at the heart of all they do – they want to represent the love and compassion of Jesus Christ in a world that can so often seem harsh, confused and lonely, even when you're in a crowd.

Well this is the third consecutive week that the Lectionary has focussed on Matthew 10 and the Commission Jesus gives to his disciples as he sends them out.

Today's gospel reading is relatively brief, just three verses long, and I know Michael was pleased about that when I handed it to him on Tuesday!

So here are a few thoughts this morning on these verses.

The first is that our lives tell a story.

Matthew has Jesus say this: To receive you is to receive me, and to receive me is to receive the One who sent me.

That sounds like serious stuff.

In this chapter Jesus calls his friends, those fishermen who had followed him 'apostles'. And that word literally means the 'sent ones'.

We can send messages in all sorts of ways in 2017. I'm on Whatsapp just about everyday with my children and family – we share pictures, stories, experiences and make plans together – even if we are the other side of the world.

Yet in those first century days messages couldn't even be sent by post – instead they go by person. The ancient Jews had a word for a messenger: Shaliach and it's said that the character of a Shaliach was chosen so that they represented the character of the person sending them.

Now that's quite a thought isn't it: the character of the messenger represented that of the sender.

Begin to appreciate that and we see the idea of being an apostle not in terms of power or authority but as someone who was prepared to live like Jesus, love like Jesus and maybe even suffer like him.

What story does our life tell? Can something of God's love be seen in the life we lead, the words we speak and the character we hold?

That night as I went from bar to bar, nightclub to nightclub it became clear to me that those Street Pastors with whom I shared those brief five hours seemed to have a glow of kindness and integrity about them that spoke of God and made a positive difference to the atmosphere of the town centre that night. And in receiving them I

believe the party goers of Yeovil were in some small way receiving something of Christ.

Now as we move on in the gospel reading here's a thought about supporting ministry.

Verse 41: Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will be given a prophet's reward, and whoever receives a good man because he is a good man will be given a good man's reward.

Needs a bit of unpacking, doesn't it!?

Matthew, is I think, bringing to us a concept of community that undercuts hierarchy.

To talk of 'rewards' here is to use that word in the sense of God's favour. It's as if Matthew reports Jesus as saying: God smiles when people serve him and you know you don't have to be an Apostle or a Prophet to make glad the heart of God – you don't have to be an upfront worker, you can be a behind the scenes servant – because God smiles at those good people too.

I've done some number crunching this week. I mean how many people does it take here to run Amersham Free Church? Answers on a postcard!

Well there's a photo board in the vestibule that names two ministers and twelve elders so does that mean the answer is 14!! Of course not!

I counted up everyone listed in the Who does What page of the Church Directory and the total came to a

staggering 186 people – and we only have an average morning congregation of about 105 – so some of you clearly do at least two jobs!

Jesus says in this Commissioned Community there are Apostles, Disciples, Prophets and good people – and all make the heart of God glad.

A couple of months ago, at the London School of Theology where our eldest son works, Peggy the cleaner died. She was 87 and had worked at the college for decades. This is an academic institution but Peggy didn't hold a degree but our son said she would empty your bin whether you wanted it or not and dust your desk even as you were sitting at it. Peggy was loved. Peggy was a good person. Peggy encouraged faculty and students alike with her unfailing kindness – when you heard Peggy walk up the corridor you smiled.

Her family had no church connections so the college asked if they could arrange her funeral. They held it at Emmanuel Church, Northwood and the whole college turned out. The Principal preached and the choir sang. They did it for their friend Peggy, who did so much more than empty their bins, she filled their days with supportive, kind hearted encouragement.

Later in the New Testament Paul would go on to say that in the body of Christ you don't have to be a hand, you can be a foot – in other words every part of the body is to be valued.

In this Commission of Jesus in Matthew 10 God smiles not just at the Apostles and Prophets but at 'good' people

– a coded phrase describing those behind the scenes disciples without whom no-one in an upfront ministry could do without.

And this inclusive way of both considering what ministry is and who can participate in it is carried on through to last verse of the passage with that memorable one liner: anyone who gives so much as a cup of cold water to one of these little ones will not go unrewarded.

The commentators tell us that ‘little ones’ is not so much the way the Early Church described children but ordinary members.

So, although it might seem strange to us, this verse is actually talking about a Christian Community with mutually loving, pastoral care at its centre.

It’s as if the emphasis is being corrected as we near the concluding verse of Matthew 10. At the beginning of this chapter it’s an Apostolic Commission and maybe that makes spectators of us all. We are not in that league so these words are not for us.

By the end of the chapter the talk is of giving cups of cold water to little ones – and that is something everyone can do.

Tomorrow, at the Crematorium, some of us might be attending the funeral service of our good friend Vera Wilson. Vera was from a Roman Catholic tradition, but of late made her spiritual home with us. She was over 90 yet on one of her last Sundays with us, just a few weeks ago, she asked if she could go out and help with Junior

Church and she did. That was Vera, an encourager of others right to the end.

There is a place for you in this community of faith. There is even a role for you here. There are cups of water to be given out – that is there is loving, prayerful and kind encouragement to be given to one another – and such loving fellowship at the heart of any community makes the heart of God smile.

Matthew 10: it's a Commission for you.
It's a Commission for me.
It's a Commission for all of us.

May it be so, in the name of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Ian Green, Amersham, 30th June 2017