

## What is the Plan?

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you, this day.

Let's pray

Lord, life is a mystery – far too deep for me to fathom, too large for me to grasp. I am just and ordinary person, seeking to make each day something special, and hoping that in some way my life might have meaning, might count.

And so I recognise that I need so much. I need wisdom and strength. I need compassion and courage, and I turn to You as the source of what I need.

What a surprise it is to discover that You are within me! In Jesus, You have stepped into our world. By Your Spirit, You have stepped into my heart. How often I have missed this hidden treasure inside me.

Yes, I am just an ordinary person, but I am Your image, and I am filled with Your Presence. Forgive me for my blindness, and for my neglect of the gift of Yourself with which You have so generously bless me. In your name, Jesus, I pray. Amen.

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As we begin today, I want to tell you this story. You may or may not have heard it before, but my hope is that story sets the scene for our time of worship and reflection.

There is an old legend which says when Jesus had ascended into heaven, the eleven disciples stood and watched Him rise through the clouds. The angel Gabriel was standing in the clouds and saw Jesus pass by and called out, "Jesus, where are you going?"

"Back to be with my Father in Heaven," Jesus replied.

"I thought you were going to bring salvation to the whole world!" Gabriel protested.

Jesus said, "I have. The atonement is complete. My work on earth is finished."

Puzzled, Gabriel asked Jesus, "But who is going to be your witness and go out into the world and spread the Good News and tell people you love them? What plans have you made for carrying on your ministry in the world? How will people learn of what you have done for them?"

"They are," Jesus said motioning toward his disciples. "I left that to Peter, James and John and the other apostles, to Martha and Mary and such. They are to tell their friends and their friends will tell other friends until the whole world has heard the good news."

Gabriel looked down on the rag-tag group of disciples and asked, "What if Peter goes back to his nets and Martha is too busy with her housework and the friends so preoccupied that they all forget to tell their friends? Don't you think you should make a "Plan B"?"

Jesus answered, "I have no Plan B. I am counting on them to spread my name and my love."

In recent weeks we have celebrated the Ascension of Jesus, the great feast of Pentecost as the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and believers and so gave birth to the Church. Then last Sunday we took a moment to consider the nature of God, as father, Son and Holy Spirit – the very essence of our faith as Christians and what it is we believe. The last chapter of Matthew’s gospel, 28:16-20, one for the few great Trinity passages, is also a passage that speaks of the expectation of Jesus for the Church. In the next few weeks and months, I hope to spend some time reflecting upon the early church and what happened to who and by whom.

So let us turn to a passage from the Gospel of Matthew and recall this account from the life of Jesus before the great event of Ascension and Pentecost, indeed before even Easter.

### **Reading: Matthew 9:35-10:8 (NIV)**

#### **The Workers Are Few**

<sup>35</sup> Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. <sup>36</sup> When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup> Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. <sup>38</sup> Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

#### **Jesus Sends Out the Twelve**

<sup>10</sup> Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

<sup>2</sup> These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; <sup>3</sup> Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; <sup>4</sup> Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

<sup>5</sup> These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. <sup>6</sup> Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. <sup>7</sup> As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ <sup>8</sup> Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

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#### **Disciples or Apostles?**

Did something just happening here, something important, it goes by so fast that you may not even have noticed it. In the first verse of Chapter 10 of Matthew’s gospel, we read, they are "disciples" then suddenly, they are "apostles" in the next verse. What happened? Even if you did catch the change, you may not have paid much attention: "disciples" then "apostles". So what's the difference? They're just interchangeable names for the same twelve men, aren't they? What's the big fuss?

All over the country at this time of year there should be young people (and not so young) making the same kind of transition, but of course this year the Coronavirus has disrupted that exciting and important occasion, when we might have seen on the news, or read in the papers the lists of graduates, pictures of people tossing mortarboards into the air to celebrate their change in status.

My daughter should have been one of them. For a time these people are students, still in training, still learning the ropes, the rules, the formulas and logarithms, syntaxes and structures. Then comes the moment of graduation – diplomas or degrees in hand, shifting tassels from one side to the other, grinning for pictures with proud moms and dads - and suddenly they're somebody else, something else: no longer students, but graduates, ready to go out into the world to practice what they've been learning for lo these many years.

They're no longer "disciples" - students, learning the disciplines of their profession, trade or craft. They are in effect, "apostles," people being "sent out" into the world to do what they have been "discipled" to do. That is what "apostle" means: someone who is "sent out."

This passage from Matthew marks the moment when the followers gathered around Jesus "graduated". When Jesus seems to have decided that they knew enough, were formed, shaped and changed enough, to be sent out to share the mission and ministry with him. Unlike our contemporary graduates, it wasn't that they'd completed a nice, tidy set course, with the required numbers of credit hours and proficiency tests and final papers. Discipleship isn't as easily marked out and measured as that. It was more a matter of Jesus deciding that he'd taught them about all he could, at least for the moment. And he knew that the world needed their ministry.

So when Jesus called to him his closest followers, the ones who'd been with him longest and observed the most closely, he passed on to them some of his power - the power to name and overcome evil, the power to heal and reconcile, power granted to him by the heavenly Father, the holy and living God - and he sent them out, "apostled" them, with these instructions: "As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons". Proclaiming the Good News was not about them speaking, but the Spirit of God their Father speaking through them. Off they went, to do the work in Jesus' name, as disciples who now became apostles.

So did the apostles do it perfectly? Not at all. The gospels and the book of Acts tell us over and over again of the ways they missed the mark, dropped the ball and fell over their own feet. They couldn't understand the parables, didn't know what Jesus meant when he predicted his own death, slept through his last agonized hours, deserted him as he went to judgment and the cross, barely recognized him when he appeared to them as the risen Christ, and hadn't a clue what to do when he ascended into heaven. One of them even sold him to the enemy for a bag of silver coins, and yet ...

There is a church around the world today, witnessing in every nation to the Good News of God in Christ. The sun never sets on the Christian hope, the faith that proclaims the good news even in the darkest hour, the ocean depths of the love of God. All because the disciples, imperfect as they were, answered the challenge of Jesus to be sent out to proclaim the good news.

The lesson we can glean today, is that we, Christians, of the 21st century are the current "apostles" for Jesus. In most small and average-sized congregations, carrying out this work begins with groups of lay members who may not believe they have unique qualifications. But like the apostles, they can rise to the occasion to meet the needs of people, whatever they may be. Our ordinariness is not a hindrance unless we choose to make it so.

Who among us, for example, could have felt qualified to face an unprecedented challenge posed by the coronavirus – isolated in our homes at a time of physical separation of the Body of Christ?

Nevertheless, in parish after parish and community after community, we read and hear about “unqualified” and untrained people who have risen to the occasion and accepted the hard mission to provide a remarkable closeness filled with love. Maybe we should have expected this development because throughout Christian history, the apostles have been replaced by a never-ending series of other apostles who continue to carry out the never-ending instructions of Jesus to go out among the people as his agents of love. Every one of us is empowered to do so, not because of our abilities or readiness, but because of the Holy Spirit.

Can you recall your baptismal promise or confirmation promises – promises in which you said, “I do” or “we will”, with God's help, proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. That's because you and I too, are apostles. I know, you've probably always thought that title “apostle” as belonging to those first twelve. When was the last time you spoke of yourself as an “apostle”? However, if you've made those baptismal promises, you've taken vows as an apostle. Take a moment and try saying to yourself, “I (*insert your name*), I am an apostle.”

All too often we're tempted to treat our life as a church as if it were an end in itself. We're happy to gather within the comfort of our worship, our buildings and our communities, just to be in the presence of the Lord. We have been content to be disciples, safely gathered around our Lord, shutting out the world. However we are called to be an apostle, to risk, to venture, to step outside our close supportive company and into a world of people caught in suffering and fear. It takes courage to be an apostle.

The followers gathered around Jesus weren't much different. They certainly weren't eager to go out there, outside the comfort of the close circle of friends and companions, where they had to be “wise as serpents” as well as “innocent as doves.” But Jesus saw the world, grieving and wounded, and knew its suffering, felt it in his own bones, in his own heart and he sent out his first apostles to bear the power of God into the struggle with evil, to heal the sick, to bring the reconciliation of love. And Jesus sends us still, to do the same. God's perspective is that what needs doing in the world, requires ordinary people, like you and me. God's work requires the very experiences we have had at work, or at school, or at play or raising a family, or doing whatever is normal for us – all of which we can use to help others. God needs today's “apostles” to utilize a great variety of gifts and skills and experiences to carry out a task of proclaiming the good news to those who do not know God and for loving our neighbours as ourselves, bringing about justice and peace, providing for those in need.

Like the first apostles, we won't be perfect. We'll make mistakes, miss opportunities, betray our Lord, but our Lord is endlessly forgiving and he keeps sending us back out into the world, in his name. The first apostles, our forebears in the faith, turned the world upside down, in the power of God. You and I can too.

As Gabriel was to realise, Jesus had no other plan than to depend on the efforts of his followers! Jesus only plan was that he depended on the apostles, on you and me – each of us using our talents and gifts, time and resources for the good of the Gospel, to live as active apostles today in our parish, church and community. There is no plan B on plan A, and Jesus leaves you and me to decide whether we are a disciple or an apostle of his Church today.

**Let's pray**

Blessed are you, Lord our God, for you have called me into life and to love you. You have called me to proclaim your love and power in all the world.

Risen Christ, my eternal Saviour, like the disciples, I am sometimes afraid, sometimes full of doubt, but in your extravagant generosity, your boundless love, you appear to me in my fear and love me in my doubts and grant me the oceans of your peace. Thank you for loving me just as I am. Teach me not to hide from my doubt, but to recognize it as a door to mystery and to deeper faith. After all, the disciples' fear became a visitation as they saw you among them, risen and triumphant.

This morning I pray for the many men and women in our society who have no faith at all. There are so many who live without hope, without knowledge of your resurrection, without your light in their lives. Grant me the courage to live as a witness to your resurrection. Risen Christ, be light in our world.

I pray for those in our congregation who find it difficult to believe. Lord, you know that they are not alone, but in the best of company: even your own disciples struggled to believe all that they had seen and heard. Loving Jesus, it is your presence that removes all fear and erases all doubts: so come, and grant the doubting your presence & peace. Grant to me and all, living Lord Christ, renewed faith, great courage, and your boundless peace.

Blessed are you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I ask your blessing upon your Church, that we may show signs of being One in you, holy and dedicated to being apostolic as we reach out to all peoples. I pray for all who are reaching out to others in your name and in love. Bless and guide all who preach the word and all who share in your healing ministry. I remember those who work to relieve the distress and sorrow of people and nations.

I pray for all who govern and influence the minds of others. I pray for leaders in industry, in great multi-national companies and for all with whom they work. I ask you Lord, to help me show my care for the earth, and our respect for all who live in this world, not matter the creed, colour or race and I pray for those blighted by greed, injustice, prejudice and inequality or the insensitivity of others.

I give thanks Jesus, as you show your love though those who love me and I ask your blessing upon home and families in my community and those of loved ones and friends. I pray for homes where there is stress and pain, for those finding it hard to cope at present, for those anxious about debt and work. I pray for those who are unwell, especially those with the Covid19 virus and those who have died. Grant healing, comfort and your presence in these days. I thank you for those in the healing ministry and profession, for our researchers, doctors, nurses and carers and for all they are doing to fight this pandemic.

And so Jesus, as you sent the disciples out into the communities, so send me to proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near. I am eager to share your love, without expecting a reward. I realize I will not always be made welcome. When that happens, let me move on because there are many more places that need to receive your grace. May your Spirit speak through me in truth, Lord Jesus, and equip me for the journey, I pray, send me out in the power of your Spirit, that I may tell of you and your abiding presence.

All this I ask in the through the prayer you taught your disciples and I say now; Our Father .... Amen.

A well-known and much loved hymn, the prayer of St Francis of Assisi as found in the Church Hymnary 4, number 528, written by Sebastian Temple (1928-1997)

Make me a channel of your peace  
Where there is hatred let me bring your love  
Where there is injury, your pardon, Lord  
And where there's doubt, true faith in you.

*Oh, Master grant that I may never seek  
So much to be consoled as to console  
To be understood as to understand  
To be loved as to love with all my soul*

Make me a channel of your peace  
Where there's despair in life, let me bring hope  
Where there is darkness, only light  
And where there's sadness, ever joy.

*Oh, Master grant that I may never seek  
So much to be consoled as to console  
To be understood as to understand  
To be loved as to love with all my soul*

Make me a channel of your peace  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned  
In giving to all men that we receive  
And in dying that we're born to eternal life

**Blessing:**

Go now, relying on the power of God. Guard the good treasure God has entrusted to you and hold firm to the teaching of the apostles. Remember others in your prayers and continue to offer yourself for the gospel.

And may God give you grace, mercy and peace; may Christ Jesus lead you into life and faith; and may the Holy Spirit live within you and rekindle good gifts within you. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

