**Matthew 9:35 – 10:8** 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.  When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.’

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. 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; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

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

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

I remember a pivotal moment – maybe about eleven years ago now – when I was having a conversation about preaching with the person who first thought I might have a vocation as a public Christian. And I said: preaching is the bit above all else that stops me wanting even to think about it.

And eleven years on, here I am, preaching …

Today’s gospel gives us a pivotal moment in Jesus’ own ministry: the moment when Jesus makes the switch from preaching and teaching and healing himself, to commissioning his disciples.

He’s preached; he’s about to get them to preach. He’s taught with authority; he’s about to send them out to teach with authority. He’s driven out evil and healed all kinds of diseases; he’s about to get them to drive out evil and heal all kinds of diseases. And these, remember, are the ones of little faith and no understanding, so castigated by Jesus on many occasions. That’s important. No one, not even those of us of little faith or understanding, is exempt from this sending-out.

A friend and colleague of mine has a bit of a bee in his bonnet about the terms Disciple and Apostle – a bee that I share somewhat. A disciple is a person who learns. That is the meaning of the word. So Jesus was the teacher and the twelve were his class.

And it gets to feel very comfortable, being a big fish in a small pond. But at some stage, you have to move on. The children about to come into the Reception class will find that; in contrast to their pre-school settings. The Year 6s will find that when they go to their various secondary schools. I found that as a teacher of primary children who moved on to teach and preach among grown-ups. You can’t stick around as a learner for ever. Because the point is not the learning – the learning is always a step to something more.

And so in the very next sentence, Matthew tells us, the disciples became apostles. And the ‘post’ in the middle of the spelling of apostle gives us a clue. An apostle is someone who is sent. Sent out. And – as I said - it wasn’t optional. Jesus did not say: so come on then, who’d like to go and give this ministry thing a whirl then? Nor did he ask for volunteers. He called all the ones who had been learning. And he sent all of them – even the one he knew was ultimately going to betray him.

But what is most interesting to me is what he sent them to do. And what are these apostles sent to do? Get in there among the lost sheep: the sick, the dead, the ones estranged from society. And heal. By these acts will you proclaim the Good News. **In other words, it’s less about talking the talk and mostly about walking the walk.**

There’s a list somewhere in the letter to the Ephesians of who goes out in ministry. And the list starts with apostles and prophets and evangelists and then gets to pastors and teachers.

Simone Weil was a French philosopher and, later, mystic, who died in 1943 at the age of just 34. She died in a sanatorium in Ashford, in Kent and you can see her memorial stone in Bybrook cemetery. She had never heard of Black Lives Matter, although she knew something about oppression of minorities: her parents were Jews, who moved from Alsace to Paris when the Germans annexed the Alsace region.

She was an advocate for workers’ rights throughout her life, and spent a year working in a car factory, the better to understand the issues.

She said many memorable things, among them, this: If you want to know if someone is truly spiritual, don’t listen to what they say about God, listen to what they say about the world. It is in relation to the hurting, grieving, abused and disregarded that we discover whether we have hearts of flesh or hearts of stone.

It is the job of the apostle to engage with the world and to preach the gospel – by word, yes, but mostly by action. And I would say that everyone who goes out is an apostle, so we get in that Ephesians list apostles who are prophets – who speak the hard truths, who get involved in telling people where it is going wrong and who advocate for justice: Black Lives Matter is one of the current issues, but let us not forget, on this third anniversary of the Grenfell Tower tragedy that the inquiry continues and the fight to make housing safe for all people is still going on. In January of this year,victims of the Grenfell disaster were told [it may take up to eight years](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/01/04/grenfell-victims-face-eight-year-wait-justice-inferno-killed/) to get any sort of justice for what happened.

And the world will always need apostles who are evangelists and pastors (carers for others) and yes, preachers and teachers too.

And having considered the second part of today’s gospel, we inevitably come back round to the first part:

The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few. How often though do we operate with the notion that the harvest isn’t plentiful? There has been a bit of scaremongering in the past few days - in the religious press even if it hasn’t yet made the national press, about the diocese of Chelmsford – and to be honest probably every other diocese in the Church of England too – being in financial straits even before coronavirus struck. And more so now that it has: such that over the next couple of years, they fear they may be looking at cuts in stipendiary clergy numbers. And we could focus on the grim thought that in the future not every parish might have its own priest – oh, except that most already don’t – so rather, then,, that every parish will be sharing clergy-ministry with one or more other parishes.

But you know what? That doesn’t frighten me. Because actually, in this odd time in which we are currently living, there is a distinct sense that the harvest may actually be more plentiful than we thought it was. People who never previously came through the doors of a church are joining online worship and coming to faith. People who came once a fortnight on a Sunday are coming to pray the Daily Offices during the week as well. But mostly it doesn’t frighten me because the one who **calls** is faithful. God never bailed on the people of Israel and God isn’t going to bail on us either.

So we can ally the two thoughts: that we are all called and sent to spread the gospel and, that the harvest is more plentiful than we believed it to be, and what comes out of that is that we will survive. More than that, we – the Church and people of God - will thrive. Differently, yes, but we are getting used to the fact that normal is going to look different from now on.

Who are the workers in this harvest, which will be plentiful? Clergy? Yes. Licensed Lay Ministers? Yes. As well as a whole new set of people, some of them with titles we haven’t invented yet, who will take the lead in scattered church and gathered church; and physical church and online church; and inherited church and new forms of church. And you are one of those.

Because if you really pray the prayer: ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest, then before you can say: but I can’t, you will find that you have been called. And commissioned. And sent. The kingdom of heaven has come near.  You received without payment; give without payment.

 **Amen**