

Willows 10th July '16
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This passage about the Good Samaritan follows on from Jesus sending out his 72 followers last week. Both are passages relating to the kingdom come, to Jesus' type of kingdom come and made visible: thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We might have imagined that Jesus' kingdom was in the life after, not here and now. Jesus says it is close, is here and now and is in you.

Look... what do you see? "I see nothing but trouble and violence and fear and hopelessness. I see hell on earth and if ever I saw the kingdom of Jesus I find it harder and harder to see today." Let me help you... In a rapidly changing world, a world that you might struggle to recognize as the world into which you were born in and grew up in... Jesus speaks to you. In a rapidly changing church, a church that you might struggle to recognize as the church into which you were born in and grew up in... where same sex couples are married Jesus speaks to you.

The world into which Jesus was born was a world in turmoil – he was born into an enemy occupied land (holy land - where God's people were overcome, defeated and subjugated). The Jewish faith into which Jesus was born was a Jewish faith of internal disagreement, conflict, besides being out of touch with their calling. It was a faith in need of less ritual and in need of reformation renewal.

But... at a time of such turmoil round about they don't look for the new, they look for the old, they don't look for the new covenant they look to the old, *they retreat to the securities of the past*. The trouble is that there were no '*securities of the past*'. Some people try to live in the sacred places, times or clothes of the past... which was just as turbulent a world and faith as today!

The world and religious faith has always been in turbulence, always grappling with its meaning, purpose and direction. We see this in all the characters of the Bible, in all the prophets, and in the gospels. Some want life and faith to be clear, crystal clear easily comprehended but life is not like that (*but they insist that it is!*). Wars happen, votes change the political landscape of communities and

nations, and terrorists can create national and international panic. People wish it could be simple but it isn't, it's incredibly complicated.

People want, and some need faith to be simple and straightforward. They need to read the Bible as a constant and stable, unified record though centuries, across borders and language and from then 'till now throughout history. Even when there is clearly no constancy some people bend what is recorded to suit their need for simplicity of straightforward faith.

In the New Testament one of the authors writes, "for now we see through a glass darkly..." We wish our faith could be clearer, we wish our faith wasn't so cloudy, that it was neat, tidy, and constant, with clear borders and boundaries, but that is just not the nature of faith.

In the turmoil of the world, and into the many shades of faith Jesus says, "the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves..."

Those followers perhaps asked the same thing that we might ask, "You what! You are sending us? We don't have the answers. Surely this is a task for the you as Messiah, as Lord, and not for us your followers? What does Jesus expect us to be able to do?"

Just like us... those disciples each had various different notions about Jesus, about God, salvation, and mission. They were not in straightforward simple unity of faith with a common perspective and understanding. They had great disagreements with each other about just about everything: Jerusalem or Galilee, servant or king, political or theological, sword or prayer, who would sit where in Jesus' kingdom, Jewish or Gentile, and everything else imaginable.

Into this backdrop to world and faith Jesus says, "the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few..." Here is a passage about the mission of the church, which feels fresh, challenging and relevant in 2016. In our day we are seeing an unprecedented decline in church membership, in Spain one priest covers 22 parishes, in France in 2009 only 90 priests were ordained, and in Queensland, the parishes of Hughenden, Winton and Richmond are looked after by one priest... he travels 680 kilometres for three masses every Sunday. In

Toowoomba, there are 14 active priests covering an area the size of Germany.

Followers of Jesus down the centuries have known what it is to be met with hostility, to feel unheard, to be mocked or dismissed from unwelcoming people and communities (*mind you, they often have good reason!*). Jesus knew that this would be the case - *but he did not shy away from sending them out.*

With the backdrop of the gates of hell pressing in on tolerance to create every intolerance, division, distrust and hatred we see a glorious hope in our Multicultural Playgroup here at our Willows Church every Wednesday where cultures, faiths and different people come together. In the backdrop of our day of terrorism and hatred of the other the different other we see a harvest of friendship, respect and love.

With the backdrop of selfishness, greed and the materialism of the 21st century Western World, we have seen such great support for our Food Distribution effort at Boolaroo Church every Wednesday. What encouragement from so many, and in ever growing numbers, as people from our congregations (*and wider community*) share in our Food Distribution. We see people responding to the call of Jesus and doing, going, serving, loving, healing, saving. What a glorious sight. You should see Jesus' face at this event!

For contemporary followers of Jesus, what might the challenges of taking the gospel to the cultures of the day be? Where might we have to move beyond old norms (not retreating!) but going forward in order to reveal Jesus' loving kindness? Where is his new loving kindness and welcome being revealed? For 25 years I have been encouraging churches to go beyond their walls to where the people of today, to walk with them, share with them, and to be Christ's surprising presence with them in their place - and to reveal his unconditional love and acceptance. This was the risk Jesus took and he invites us to share this risk with him - going where we may not be accepted or welcomed or wanted - but to go in love and to give in his name.

The Good Samaritan story is one of going beyond, going into unacceptable areas among *so called* unacceptable people. Do you know that to go into Samaritan territory made you unclean... unclean

to worship in the Jerusalem Temple. This begs the question – ‘what is the true worship of God? Is it in doing... going to our neighbour, feeding, clothing, caring and loving or in going to the Temple? What does the Lord require of you...?’

Jesus said to the one asking him questions about how to inherit eternal life, that he should **go and do likewise**, not *the likewise* of the scribe or priest! No, *the likewise* of the Samaritan! Jesus points out that others (from outside their faith) are doing the will of God, sharing the love and compassion of God... and some of the examples he uses are so very very unacceptable to his hearers (and would be shockingly unacceptable to us today). “Don’t you tell us that Samaritans and the like of them *scum of the earth* are doing the will of God... for we are God’s people and the Lord’s favour is upon us!” Jesus points out that others are doing the will of God, sharing the love and compassion of God...

Some insist that God conforms to their limitations... Salvation is this way... yet Jesus forgives without repentance on occasions, and God says, “I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy” - which is hardly very compliant to some require! Let us never limit the love and mercy of God; but let us rejoice in the breadth of God’s mercy and love for all.

Finally, the 72 returned rejoicing. They didn’t return dejected, despondent or defeated. They didn’t find that they had wasted their time; they even seem somewhat surprised at the level of their success among the poor, the new immigrants, the outcast, the rejected, the self loathing...

This is because the gates of hell will not, cannot prevail against this kingdom’s love; the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot put it out. Love never ends, love will never be defeated not even by death!