

The mission

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[0 : 00] The first reading today is taken from Luke chapter 10, verses 1 to 16, on page 1046. That's Luke 10, 1 to 16, page 1046.

After this, the Lord appointed 72 others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go.

And he said to them, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

Go your way. Behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no money bag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road.

Whatever house you enter, first say, peace be to this house. And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him.

[1 : 06] But if not, it will return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide. For the laborer deserves his wages. Do not go from house to house.

Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick in it and say to them, the kingdom of God has come near to you.

But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off against you.

Nevertheless, know this, that the kingdom of God has come near. I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town. Woe to you, Chorazin.

Woe to you, Bethsaida. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

[2 : 11] And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades. The one who hears you hears me. And the one who rejects you rejects me.

And the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me. Please do turn back to our first reading that we had this morning from Luke chapter 10.

Luke chapter 10, page 1046. Now I wonder what you feel you could really do with at the start of a new year.

Perhaps it's, well, I could have really done with another week off. Whether that was a week off work or a week off school. Or perhaps you were thinking I could do with some sunshine. Or I could do with some more money.

Expecting the credit card bill for Christmas to drop on the doormat any time soon. After all, so-called Blue Monday is coming up next week.

[3 : 24] I think a week tomorrow. It's going to be the most depressing day of the year. And worst luck of all, it happens to land on my birthday this year. But anyway, there's nothing I can do about that. Today we're continuing our series of talks in Luke's Gospel.

And we're looking, I think, at something to get us out of the bed in the morning. On a dark January morning. Something that's going to put a spring into our steps. Something to live for and invest ourselves in.

And it is the mission of Jesus Christ. If you were here last week, we saw that the times we live in are not primarily defined by climate change or Donald Trump or Brexit.

But instead by Jesus, who says that we live in the great age of universal gospel proclamation and invitation. And that is always going to be the case until he returns at the end of history.

And if you missed last week's talk, then as with all our talks, it's recorded. So do listen to it online. And today we're going to see that everyone who follows Jesus is to be part of this same mission.

[4 : 37] It is, if you like, an integral part of discipleship. For those of us who are Jesus' disciples, it's a wonderful thing to be thinking about at the start of a new year. Just to help us get our spiritual bearings as we look ahead to the next few weeks and months.

For those of us who are looking in on the Christian faith. Well, as we kind of weigh up the cost of following Jesus. As we think about what discipleship looks like. Well, these verses help us to see what it looks like.

And you'll see I put an outline on the back of the service sheets. We're going to see, firstly, Jesus' worldwide mission needs laborers. And then secondly, it needs faithful laborers.

Firstly, then, Jesus' worldwide mission needs laborers. Chapter 10, verses 1 and 2. After this, the Lord appointed 72 others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go.

And he said to them, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

[5 : 53] I want us to see there's far more going on here than the Lord Jesus simply sending out 72 disciples. Because this is all about Jesus anticipating that global mission that we thought about last week.

So back in chapter 7, it was John the Baptist who prepared the way for Jesus. In chapter 9, as we saw last week, it was the 12 disciples who were sent out by Jesus.

And now we see this larger group of 72 who were being sent out. And as such, it reflects the whole trajectory, if you like, of where Luke is going, both as he writes Luke's gospel, but also as he writes his second book, which is the book of Acts.

Just keep a finger in Luke 10 and turn to Luke 24. We looked at this last week, but I think it's worth looking at again.

Luke 24, verses 46 to 49. And Luke 24, verse 46, if you look at it, is a summary of Luke's gospel.

[7 : 00] As the risen Jesus says to his disciples, Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead. That is a summary of Luke's gospel.

But then verses 47 to 49 give us a summary of Luke's second volume, the book of Acts. And that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.

So you see, what is going on back in Luke chapter 10? Well, the Lord Jesus is anticipating this great global mission as the gospel, as the message of the repentance and the forgiveness of sins goes out to the nations.

Jesus' vision is worldwide, a commitment to the ends of the earth. Now, what's the surprise in verses 1 and 2?

[8 : 08] What is the biggest obstacle to the harvest? It's the shortage of laborers. The harvest is plentiful, says the Lord Jesus, but the laborers are few.

I take it you and I are meant to think of Kent on an autumn day, walking through apple orchards or driving through country lanes in Kent, seeing these apple trees completely laden with ripe fruit ready to be picked.

So let me ask, is that how we think of mission and evangelism? I guess most of us are tempted, or certainly many of us are tempted to think perhaps rather more pessimistically, to think that people aren't interested in the message of Jesus or won't come if we invite them to something, or they'll resent it if we bring our Christian faith into conversation with them.

Sometimes we think like that because the media is constantly telling us that we are a secular nation and no one's interested. Sometimes it's because the last time we did have a conversation with someone, actually the conversation didn't go very well.

And we have become discouraged. But you see, how does the Lord Jesus tell us to think about it? The harvest, he says, is plentiful.

[9 : 35] Now I wonder if we believe that. That's why we have that reading from Revelation chapter 7, where we see on the very final day of history, there will be a great multitude, people gathered from every tribe and nation and language, gathered around the throne, worshipping the Lord Jesus in the new creation.

In other words, the harvest is going to be a great success. And yes, while in our little corner of the harvest field, we may feel, as indeed they are, things look small and often insignificant and often difficult, we shouldn't lose sight, even today, of what is happening around the world.

I was hearing just last week that in 1900, in Africa, across the whole continent, just 10% of the population were professing Christians.

Today, it is 50%, obviously of a far bigger population. In Nepal, some of you will know, in Nepal, in 1960, there was not a single known Christian.

Now, there are at least half a million. In Korea, the first Protestant church was planted in 1884.

Today, there are at least 80,000 such churches.

[11:01] Even in France, where it's been said that secularism is the closest the French have to a state religion, a new evangelical church is currently being planted every 10 days.

There's nothing worse, is there, than being asked to commit to something we're not personally convinced of and persuaded by. Perhaps you've had something like that has happened to you at work, and you're asked to take part in a particular project, and you're simply not persuaded it's going to work.

You're not persuaded it's worth the time and the energy or effort. Perhaps you're on a sports team, and you're not persuaded of the tactics, and you think this is going to be a complete disaster.

Or perhaps you get dragged along by friends or family to go and see a film, and you're thinking to yourself, this is going to be the most dreadful disappointments. There are far better things I could be doing with my time on a Saturday evening.

Well, Jesus' worldwide mission is not like that. The harvest is plentiful. It will be successful.

[12:07] So that's, I think, the first surprise. The second surprise is simply the identity of the laborers who are being sent out. You see, when we talk about laborers in the harvest field, perhaps it's natural for us perhaps to think of our mission partners.

So our mission partners in Italy, who we were praying for earlier, or Zambia, or South Africa, or Stratum, or Ireland. Or perhaps we think of people like me, who are in full-time paid Christian ministry.

But no, the laborers are simply every disciple of the Lord Jesus. Because remember what we saw last week at the end of chapter 9, verses 57 to 62, the Lord Jesus is in conversation with three would-be followers.

Showing them what it looks like to be one of his disciples. And now what do we see in chapter 10, verse 1? We're told after this, the Lord appointed 72 others.

In other words, 72 just like them, just like those three would-be disciples. So who are the laborers in Jesus' worldwide harvest fields?

[13:18] Every Christian. Who are the laborers in your street, in your workplace, in your school, in your family, with your friends? You are.

Can I say, this is very exciting. It means, for instance, that if we're looking at Dulwich, and if we're kind of looking across London, if we're thinking, and if we're praying to ourselves, how can so few of us reach so many?

I was doing my normal Tuesday morning walk over London Bridge this week, and the crowds walking across London Bridge are simply enormous.

How can so few reach so many? Well, just think of the reach that we have as one church, just one single church across London.

Think of between us, the reach we have into offices in the city, into schools locally around here, into friendship groups, into societies and communities.

[14:26] It's very exciting. Now, I'm conscious that many of us struggle, in particular, with how to be a Christian at work.

And I take it, surely, this is the starting point, to see ourselves as the Lord Jesus sees us, to see ourselves as laborers in the harvest fields.

And if you're conscious that you're the only Christian in your place of work, or if you're the only Christian where you study at school, then, as Jesus encourages us to hear, pray.

Pray for more laborers. I think it's worth asking that, yeah. How do we think of ourselves on Monday morning as we go to work?

Do we think of ourselves first and foremost in terms of our career, or in terms of our job title, you know, a lawyer, an IT person, a teacher, whatever it is? Or do we think of ourselves first and

foremost as laborers in the Lord Jesus' harvest fields?

[15 : 31] That is completely transformative. Likewise, there's going off to school tomorrow morning, or going to Scanny Wags, or taking our children to sports lessons and music lessons, or whatever it is that's in the diary for tomorrow morning.

How do we view ourselves? First and foremost, if we are followers of Jesus, we are laborers in his harvest field. But secondly, Jesus' worldwide mission needs faithful laborers.

Faithful laborers. And that's verses 3 to 16. Now, there's a lot here that was clearly specific to that one occasion. Imagine a particular group of 72.

They're sent out on a particular day. They're sent to particular towns, to particular villages, down a particular road. And Luke is simply recording what happened.

And as elsewhere in the Bible, just because people do something, it doesn't mean we should do the same thing. And therefore, I take it we're not disobeying Jesus. If next time Jake encourages us to go door knocking at Grace Church, I take it we're not disobeying the Lord Jesus, if, contrary to verse 4, we carry a rucksack, or if we talk to someone on the way.

[16 : 44] Besides, in other situations, the Lord Jesus says the opposite. So in Luke chapter 22, he says, do take a money bag. Do take a rucksack. And whereas in Luke chapter 10, here they are told to move on in the face of rejection, in the book of Acts, in Luke 2nd volume, we see established churches being established, rather than simply moving on in the face of opposition and rejection.

So the details, many of the details, are simply for them then, on that particular day. And yet I think it's clear that there are general principles which show us what it's going to look like to be a faithful labourer in this great harvest field.

And in particular, the three convictions which we'll need. Firstly, a conviction about the urgency of the mission.

Verse 3, Go your way. Behold, I'm sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Now I take it that you and I are meant to picture countryfile on a Sunday evening.

And rather than cooing at how lovely the newborn lambs are, so kind of fresh and woolly looking and beautiful and all the rest of it, instead, in our mind's eye, we are meant to conjure up a picture of complete chaos.

[18 : 05] Because the fox has got in amongst the lambs and there is blood everywhere. Perhaps you won't let your young child watch countryfile after all.

Well, not this particular version of countryfile anyway. Now I guess the obvious question to ask is, why would the Lord Jesus do that? Why would he send out his people whom he loves and expose them to such danger?

Well, it shows how much, doesn't it, the mission matters. It is urgent. It's what explains verse 4. Don't take anything with you that's going to wear you down.

Don't greet anyone on the road, where in the first century social customs often dictated, not that just that you kind of said hi to someone and then sort of quick how are you and then move on. But actually you might sort of catch up over a meal or something.

And then verse 7, don't go looking on TripAdvisor for an accommodation upgrade or verse 8 for a better meal deal. No, the mission is urgent. And because the mission is urgent, faithful disciples persevere in the face of rejection and opposition.

[19 : 11] It's why I love this book, Rico Tice's book, Honest Evangelism. It is our book of the term some time ago with its wonderful strapline, how to talk about Jesus even when it's tough.

He says this, if you're going to talk to people about Jesus, you're going to get hurt. There's a pain line that needs to be crossed. And he exposes why often we are unwilling to do that because we want a comfortable life or a good reputation with friends or colleagues or a nice settled existence with family and so on.

But I take it that Jesus' words in verse 3 are ultimately meant to be very encouraging for us. Let me ask, do we find evangelism hard speaking to others about Jesus?

Jesus said it would be. Have we experienced opposition, apathy, sometimes conflict as we've sought to talk to people about Jesus? Does it make us feel exposed?

Does it make us feel weak? Does it make us feel unimpressive? Yes, yes and yes to all of those things and more. And Jesus is saying, that is normal.

[20 : 28] And I take it that is a great encouragement. Secondly, the message, verse 5.

Whatever house you enter, first say, peace be to this house. Now that single word, peace, is a summary of the gospel in Luke.

So just turn back, keep a finger in Luke 10 and turn back to Luke chapter 1, page 70, Luke chapter 1, page 1032. Now we're going to look at the words of John the Baptist and how John the Baptist, right at the beginning of Luke's gospel, is going to prepare the way for Jesus.

What's his message going to be? Luke chapter 1, verse 76. And you, child, this is John the Baptist's father speaking about him, will be called the prophet of the Most High.

For you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender comfort of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

[21 : 53] Can you see, what is John's message? It's a message of salvation. What is the heart of this message of salvation? It is for the forgiveness of sins. How is that possible?

Because of God's kindness and mercy. What is the result? No longer in spiritual darkness, facing death in this world and the next, but instead wonderfully at peace with God, restored to a right relationship with God, both in this world and in the next.

Back then to chapter 10, verse 5. By itself, the word peace, well, it could mean almost anything, couldn't it? It's a slippery word. You know, just what do all those Christmas cards mean which proclaim across the front peace on earth?

Well, the Bible understanding of peace is peace with God. It's why Jesus came to earth. It's why Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins so we could be forgiven.

This is the timeless, unchanging message that we see at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, throughout Luke's Gospel, and which these disciples are now sent out by Jesus to proclaim.

[23 : 07] Just worth thinking, isn't it, at the start of a new year? What is actually the most important thing anyone could possibly hear this year? Is it about what to do about climate change?

Is it, you know, the latest health fad or whatever it is? No, this is the very best news in the world. And yet it's so easy, I think, as followers of Jesus to lose confidence in this message because it's not what everyone wants to hear.

We need to hold our nerve as a church, as individuals, as faithful workers in the harvest field. So we've thought about the urgency.

We've thought about the message. What about the stakes? What is at stake? Our culture, of course, says it doesn't matter what you believe.

It's like breakfast cereal, isn't it? You may be a Weetabix person or a porridge person or it may be Cheerios or muesli or cornflakes that you choose to guzzle every morning. You know, just choose whatever it is you fancy.

[24 : 13] Likewise, there are loads of different religions out there. Just choose the one that suits you the best. But there's far more at stake when it comes to the way we respond to Jesus.

Notice there are those verses 8 and 9 who do believe the message and who receive the benefits of the kingdom. Verse 8, whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you, heal the sick in it and say to them, the kingdom of God has come near to you.

That's just worth saying, that doesn't mean that everyone who puts their trust in Jesus is healed in this life, but we're going to have to wait until Luke chapter 11 for the explanation of why it is that so often when Jesus does proclaim the kingdom that actually people were healed.

Why that was the case then, why it's not the case now, but that's for chapter 11. So there are those who accept the message and yet there are those also who tragically reject it.

Verse 11, even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off against you. Shaking the dust off your feet was a way of saying to someone, you don't belong to us.

[25 : 26] I take it not out of spite, I take it instead out of love and concern to make it clear that someone who thinks they belong to God's people and yet who isn't part of God's people to make it clear where they stand.

That is always an act of kindness. Someone was saying to me just the other day that she had come to a carol service and that she had realized for the first time that actually she wasn't a Christian and she wasn't part of God's people and she recognized that was progress of sorts.

It's an act of kindness to help people grasp where they stand with God if they are without Christ. because the stakes are enormous.

Verse 12, I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town. Verse 13, Woe to you, Chorazin, woe to you, Bethsaida, for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. Can you see Jesus, the Lord Jesus, he almost seems overwhelmed, doesn't he? As he thinks about those who reject him.

[26 : 43] Sodom, notorious in the Old Testament, Tyre and Sidon, renowned for their arrogance. Yet they had repented long ago if they had heard Jesus.

It shows, doesn't it, the hard-heartedness of so many. Capernaum evidently thought highly of itself. Verse 15, And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven?

You shall be brought down to Hades. Perhaps, like Dulwich even, exalting in itself. Look at our schools, look at our lifestyle, look at our homes, look at our parks, look at our wealth.

And it's so easy to be taken in by all that kind of stuff. And Jesus says that to reject him, however exalted you are in this life, to reject him is an unqualified disaster in the next life.

I guess it's both the joy of evangelism and mission and the burden of evangelism and mission. And the Lord Jesus summarizes it for us in verse 16.

[27 : 56] The one who hears you hears me. And the one who rejects you rejects me. And the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me. There's the joy for those who hear the gospel, those who respond to the gospel.

It's a joy we've had as a church, perhaps it's a joy that some of us, many of us have known individually, a friend, colleague, family member has begun to follow Jesus. And it also, verse 16, shows the burden, doesn't it?

A burden many of us will feel. Not primarily, of course, the burden of a friend or colleague or family member who rejects us, but the burden of knowing that actually in rejecting us, they're rejecting the Lord Jesus.

And in rejecting the Lord Jesus, they are rejecting God himself. The burden of knowing that people around us, those we love and care for deeply, are heading for hell unless their attitude to Jesus changes.

Jesus' world by mission needs faithful laborers, those who understand the urgency, those who understand and are committed to the message, those who know what is at stake.

[29 : 15] Let's spend some time in reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer. The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the way in which at the start of a new year, the Lord Jesus raises our sights and helps us to see this glorious harvest across the nations.

Thank you that we have the privilege of looking over the last 2,000 years since the Lord Jesus spoke these words and seeing how the gospel has indeed gone out to the nations.

Thank you for that great hope we have of the nations being gathered around the throne in the new creation. And we pray therefore for your mercy on us.

Please would you help those of us who belong to Jesus to see ourselves as we are, as laborers in this great harvest fields. and we pray heavenly father for faithfulness, faithfulness regarding the urgency, faithful to the message.

[30 : 18] And we pray for faithfulness so conscious of the stakes, yes the joy, the wonderful joy as people put their trust in the Lord Jesus and begin to follow him and yet the terrible burden that we feel for those who don't.

So please would you help us to keep on trusting, prayerful trust as we work alongside one another in this great harvest field.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.