

Promoting the Gospel with Prayer

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. You may like to have the Bibles open in front of you from our second reading from Matthew's Gospel, page 790 in the Black Bibles in the pews.

This is the second of a series of sermons under the title of Promoting the Gospel and the various aspects and ways that we as Christians are to promote the Gospel in the world in which we live, which God has created.

Let me pray as we begin. Speak to us, Father, we pray from your word. Write it on our hearts that we may not only believe it and understand it, but also that we may obey it.

For the glory of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen. They tell us that we suffer fatigue from it these days. We are so used to pictures of things like Hurricane Katrina, the devastation, destruction, grief and sadness and pain that those of New Orleans felt last year.

We are so used to the pictures on TV and the newspapers and magazines of the suffering of millions in Darfur in southern Sudan. Not only from famine and drought, but also, of course, from civil war and acts of atrocity.

[1 : 22] We're used to the pictures of bombs blowing up in Israel and in Iraq and seeing the grief, the sadness, the pain, the suffering, the terror, distress that so many people face.

There was still, we see pictures and reminders of the 9-11 destruction from a few years ago. The tsunami from a bit over a year ago in the Indian Ocean.

There was the Iran earthquake a year or two ago. And regularly we see floods in Bangladesh, for example. We're very used to seeing pictures of crowds of people who are suffering, in pain, in distress.

People who are orphaned, homeless, hungry, sometimes little more than skin and bones with distended stomachs. We're used to seeing pictures of terror, fear, distress, tears.

We're used to seeing pictures of crowds of people who are desperate, who are unprotected, vulnerable, unsafe, harassed and helpless.

[2 : 37] And our response, they tell us, becomes more and more that of compassion fatigue. Too many people in too many places suffering too many problems.

And it's all too easy to go into emotional shutdown. Compassion fatigue. We close our wallets and perhaps more importantly, close our hearts.

That's one of the effects of instant news. Where we can see within minutes, if not live, strife, terror, suffering and pain in almost any part of the world now.

And it's easy to shrink away exhausted and numb at yet another disaster in yet another part of our world.

Just this week we've seen the pain and grief etched on faces of the Kovko family in Gippsland. We've seen again the grief coming to the surface of those bereaved in the Port Arthur massacre of just over 10 years ago.

[3 : 44] And it's easy for us to suffer from compassion fatigue. 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. Jesus said, The difference is that the crowds that Jesus saw were crowds of ordinary people.

In Galilee, in northern Israel, in the last years of his life on earth. They're not hordes of people in refugee camps. They're not masses of people suffering starvation and famine.

They're not lots of people with amputated limbs or loss of eyes because of landmines or warfare. It's not a drought. They are ordinary crowds.

Admittedly, their standard of living would be lower than ours. But by and large, they got by. Largely a rural community, villages and towns.

[5 : 15] But not exclusively rural either. And yes, though they were in a sense governed by the Roman Empire from afar and in some senses a near.

It wasn't. Life wasn't in a sense too bad. They were ordinary people living ordinary lives. And as Jesus saw this ordinary crowd, he had compassion on them.

The word for compassion is particularly strong. It's not just that he sort of loved them or had a bit of pity on them. But that he was moved in his bowels and in his guts with compassion.

Particularly a strong emotional response. And sometimes when we see crowds of particularly extreme pain and suffering, then our response we might well say and might well be even literally gut-wrenching.

Perhaps for me the example that comes to mind most readily is a few years ago visiting Phnom Penh in Cambodia. And going in the centre of Phnom Penh to what's called Tual Sling.

[6 : 22] It was a high school under Pol Pot. It became a prison where many, many people, Cambodians, died or were killed. And then going out of Phnom Penh to the killing fields themselves where later after Pol Pot was ousted, hundreds and hundreds of bodies in mass graves were found.

And there's still today this memorial tower that is largely just inside Glassville Perspex, a tower of human skulls that were killed during Pol Pot's time.

And I remember walking around the former school, former prison, which is now a museum, and almost physically retching. So appalling were the pictures and descriptions of the suffering and pain of those thousands of people imprisoned in the centre of Phnom Penh within my own lifetime.

Similar sorts of experiences visiting concentration camps in Germany, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem and other places. And some of you will have had those sorts of experiences in your life.

And sometimes those pictures on TV move us to tears and move us very strongly. But what's significant here is that Jesus' compassion is for an ordinary crowd.

[7 : 40] Not the extreme of pain or suffering or distress, but an ordinary crowd of ordinary people. He's moved with compassion because he sees them as being like sheep without a shepherd.

That is, he sees them with a spiritual perspective. He sees them lacking spiritual leadership that is true and edifying and protecting. Spiritual leaders through the Old Testament were regularly called shepherds and periodically were rebuked for their lack of shepherding the people with love and care and protection.

So when Jesus sees them as sheep without a shepherd, there's a sense in which he's implicitly rebuking the Jewish leaders of his own day, the scribes and Pharisees, who for all their religious devotion, led the people astray.

Maybe were unscrupulous, were overbearing, exacting from the people much more than they ought or should. What moved Jesus in his guts, literally, with compassion, was seeing people in need of the good news of the kingdom.

It's why he not only healed as he went around, but he preached the good news of the kingdom. Because that was their need. They were sheep without a shepherd.

[9 : 01] And what a challenge that is to our cold and fatigued hearts. Not when we see the extremes of pain on our nightly news, but when we see groups and crowds of people anywhere, ordinarily.

A few weeks ago, I went to the MCG to see one of the Commonwealth Games athletics events. And as I sat there with 80,000 people, I wasn't moved to compassion, I must confess, as I looked around the stadium thinking these are people's sheep without a shepherd.

As I've waited in the cold supermarket checkout line, there are crowds of people bustling around buying their groceries. I'm not naturally moved with compassion, seeing sheep without a shepherd, I must confess.

This week, I had to be in Sydney on Thursday for a meeting, and I was meeting a friend for lunch and waiting for him outside Sydney Town Hall. At lunch hour, there were all these people walking past, many of them with suits, lots and lots of them on their mobile phones, many carrying briefcases, looking very important and very successful.

As well, there was a group of sort of, I'm not sure what you call them, punks or something. They wear more earrings than most women do. And wearing clothes and hairstyles that are hard to describe, really.

[10 : 20] Including one guy who seemed to actually have drilled holes in the side of his nostrils that you can actually look all the way through. That was very off-putting and almost gut-wrenching in one sense.

But I must say, my instant reaction was not to look at the crowds and be filled with compassion, although I was actually thinking that, because while I was waiting, I was thinking about this sermon and what it was teaching me.

When I collected my bags at Melbourne Airport on Friday afternoon and saw the crowds of people doing the same and picking up cases and meeting people and hailing taxis and all that sort of stuff, my natural reaction was not to be moved with compassion.

On Friday night and yesterday, with the crowds of people coming to here, to this church for our autumn fair and bustling around the various stalls around the place, I must say my natural reaction was not to think, be filled with compassion at seeing a crowd.

The extreme of physical suffering that we might see and pain, that might move us. But what about ordinary people in ordinary crowds, day by day?

[11 : 28] Are we moved to compassion because they are sheep without a shepherd? That is, are we moved to compassion because they need the good news of Jesus Christ and his kingdom?

I acknowledge that last year when I was teaching in Beijing and seeing literally thousands of students on the campus in Beijing, Beijing, there was a sense of being moved because I sort of naturally sort of see the gospel needs in a place like China or Nigeria.

But come back home, my instant reaction is not to be like that, I must confess. And sometimes when I see or hear of bad spiritual leaders in churches leading people astray in what they teach or don't teach, my instant reaction is more often anger than it is compassion for those who are sheep without a shepherd.

Now, of course, when we look at a crowd, we can't always tell who's a Christian. There's no sort of glowing lights out of their face or fish symbols on foreheads or something like that. But you can be sure that when you're standing in the queue at Coles or Safeway and there are dozens and dozens of people round about doing their shopping and groceries, you can be sure that most of them are not believers in the Lord Jesus Christ here in Melbourne.

And when you're at the MCG cheering on your team, you can be sure that the vast majority of those people who may look very happy when a goal is scored by their team are actually not believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[12 : 55] When you're in a crowded bus or train going to work, when you see a school ground full of school kids or university campus bustling with young people, you can be sure that the majority are not believers in the Lord Jesus Christ and therefore wherever we look, whatever ordinary crowd we see, even in our home territory, they are sheep without a shepherd on the whole.

You see, it's as though we need gospel glasses to look at the world. We may well be moved by physical pain, but Jesus is giving us an example of an ordinary crowd and being moved by spiritual lack.

Sheep without a shepherd. We need Jesus' gospel glasses, in a sense, to give us the right perspective on the world in which we look. So that when we see lots of successful businessmen walking down Swanston Street or on the train going to work, we see them not as successful, fortunate, lucky, wealthy, comfortable, complacent people, but a sheep without a shepherd and to be moved with compassion for them.

And when we see lots of deliriously happy sports fans at the MCG or Telstra Dome or wherever, jumping for joy at the end of a match and singing and dancing and drinking beer and all that sort of stuff, underneath we should see sheep without a shepherd and be moved with compassion.

And when we see people who are probably in our suburb fairly wealthy, queuing up to buy all their groceries at Coles or queuing up in other shops buying nice items, probably relatively easy lifestyle, like you and me.

[14 : 40] We ought to be moved, if we wear gospel glasses, to compassion for people who are sheep without a shepherd. And when we see an idle group of youth standing around the bus area of Shopping Town or in other parts of our streets or congregating late at night outside a pub or in the Box Hill streets or something like that, rather than being filled with fear or anger, disdain, hatred, hostility, we ought to respond with compassion as we see sheep without a shepherd.

And when we hear of or see congregations where the teaching that they get is leading them astray from what is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in the scriptures, perhaps firstly we should be filled with compassion for those sheep than anger to the shepherds who are misleading them.

And when we see classes of school kids in playgrounds, we've got to remember that their greatest need is not a university place and a successful VCE, but actually knowing the Lord Jesus Christ and his gospel.

They're sheep without a shepherd. You see, what we need if we see the world as Jesus sees it is to see the world as fundamentally lost.

Sure, there are Christians all over the place. We don't always know who they are, but still the vast majority of people in our country, in any country, are fundamentally lost.

[16 : 10] Sheep without a shepherd. Jesus later on in chapter 10 sends his 12 disciples out to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, verse 6 says. That is, knowing that people need the gospel firstly and foremostly.

The image of sheep is very appropriate because sheep are defenseless animals and without a shepherd, they are particularly vulnerable to anything from attack from outside, from being mistreated, ill-fed, wandering astray, going all over the place.

It's not so much that sheep are dumb that's part of the analogy here. It's that sheep need shepherds. And that's why Jesus was filled with compassion.

It's why he went around Galilee teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, healing every illness and disease that he could. And it's why he's moved with compassion. Because as Isaiah the prophet says, all we, like sheep, have gone astray.

It's why we need the suffering servant's death to bring us to the true and good shepherd, Jesus Christ. You see, without Jesus, people are lost.

[17 : 25] No matter how smartly dressed they wear suits and carry mobile phones on trains to work, no matter what good jobs they have, or no matter what expensive items they buy in the shops, no matter what private schools they go to, without Jesus, they're lost.

Our first response to our world ought always to be compassion. Because wherever we look, there are sheep without a shepherd.

Jesus' compassion leads him to urge the disciples to pray. There's a great caution here for people like me who are a bit of an activist. As I look at a need, the instant reaction is to think, well, we'll do something.

We'll go and knock on more doors. We'll hand out more leaflets. We'll run more courses. We'll do some more training and preach some more sermons. And it's very easy to become so full of activism to do things which are good and right things to do.

But firstly and foremostly, Jesus says, pray. He's not saying, do nothing but pray, just pray.

[18 : 32] He's not saying, do nothing but pray, but he's saying, do nothing without praying, first. He said to his disciples, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.

Therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Jesus' own example of going around Galilee in verse 35 has exposed the huge need beyond his own physical human capacity capacity to meet all the needs of all those people, not only in Galilee, but for the rest of the promised land as well, without even considering beyond the borders.

He shifts the metaphor from the flock to the field, from sheep now to harvest. And he says that God himself is the Lord of the harvest. Therefore, pray to him, petition him for more laborers into the harvest.

For the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. And if God is the Lord of the harvest, it's his work to bring the harvest, so pray to him. And if God is the Lord of the harvest, it's his job to raise up laborers for the harvest, so pray to him.

And the verb there that's pray or ask, really, at the beginning of verse 38, has got the sense of urgency and pleading, persistent, asking, pleading, beseeching with God to raise up more laborers into the harvest.

[20 : 00] Why then are we so poor at praying for this? Why don't we pray and pray and pray with urgency and persistence that the Lord will raise up more laborers to send out into his harvest?

Why are we so poor? Is it because we don't see the world in Jesus' eyes? Is it because when we see the crowds in our streets and shopping centers and trains and so on, we don't see sheep without a shepherd?

Maybe we envy other people's success or wealth or happiness rather than seeing them as Jesus did, as sheep without a shepherd fundamentally lost.

You see, if we don't have the gospel compassion that Jesus had, we won't pray. we won't pray at all, let alone pray for more laborers to go out into the harvest. If we don't see the desperate plight of sheep without a shepherd, spiritually speaking, in our world, we'll never pray.

If we do ever pray along these lines, it's usually with overseas mission in mind. And periodically, CMS and other mission societies will encourage us to pray for more laborers to go into the harvest.

[21 : 15] The harvest is plentiful. And they're talking about China or they're talking about Russia or deepest, darkest Africa and rightly so. But the laborers are few everywhere and the harvest is plentiful everywhere.

In deepest, darkest Africa, yes, pray for more laborers. The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. But it's also the same in outback rural Australia. It's the same in the poorer western suburbs of Melbourne.

And it's the same in Doncaster. In our very orbit of ministry here at Holy Trinity. And the laborers that we're to pray for, for the Lord of the harvest to raise up, that includes trained people to be missionaries, clergy, Bible teachers, lay ministers and so on for the laborers are few.

But it also includes praying that the Lord of the harvest will raise up laborers to teach RE in schools, to run youth groups and boys and girls club groups and to teach Sunday school for the laborers are few.

It includes people to go door knocking and to hand out leaflets in shopping town for the laborers are few. It includes people to invite and bring friends to things like introducing God because the laborers are few but the harvest is plentiful.

[22 : 27] And the list could go on and on and on. Why are we not desperate in prayer? Do we not see the world as lost as Jesus does? Why is it that not everyone in a church like this was at the prayer vigil we had two weeks ago because we can't be bothered?

We lack compassion for the world? We don't see it as lost? Who, for example, will commit to pray every Thursday night for the next six during our Introducing God course that the harvest will indeed be reaped during that course?

No one responded to that plea at eight o'clock this morning, I must say. On the 16th of May, the third Tuesday, we'll have our monthly regular prayer meeting in May, the next one.

We're going to have a focus on praying that the Lord will raise up laborers into his harvest. Everybody ought to be there. Or if they can't be there to commit the same time to pray for the same purpose, praying with urgency and persistence that the Lord will raise up laborers into his harvest.

will you be there? Or will compassion fatigue keep you asleep, dozing in front of the box?

[23 : 52] Will the lack of gospel glasses keep you blind to the urgency and desperate plight of our world without Jesus Christ? Without his compassion, we won't pray.

pray that God will open our eyes to sea fields ready for harvest on our doorstep, overseas, anywhere and everywhere.

And pray that he gives us the eyes to recognize that the laborers are indeed very few. There is no place on earth, no church on earth, that has more laborers than are needed for the harvest around it.

Nowhere on earth. Most fundamental task of each and every one of us in promoting the gospel is to pray. But I suspect that for us as individuals and maybe as our church, our biggest deficiency is our lack of gospel prayer.

For the laborers are few, but the harvest is plentiful. I know that in Sydney Diocese there's been concerted prayer to pray for the spread of the gospel in the area of Sydney.

[25 : 05] And as part of the response of that over the last few years, Moore College, the Theological Training College, is overflowing with students. I was visiting a friend who's a first year student there on Friday morning.

The place is packed. Oh, for that to be the case at Ridley College in Melbourne, for example. The laborers are few, but the harvest is plentiful.

So pray. Pray for laborers in particular situations. If you've got a non-believing relative, parent, child, grandchild, friend, pray that God will raise up laborers into their life, that they will lead them to know the Lord Jesus Christ, share with them the gospel of the kingdom of God.

Pray for laborers to be raised up by the Lord of the harvest in your children or grandchildren's schools, for example, in your probus groups and amongst your friends in other places.

Pray for laborers, for they are few, but the harvest is plentiful. But there is a warning when we pray like this. we may be part of the answer to prayer.

[26 : 15] For Jesus urged his disciples to pray that the Lord of the harvest would raise up laborers, and the very next thing we see at the beginning of chapter 10 is that Jesus selects 12 of his disciples whom he sends into the harvest.

When they were praying, they may not have thought of themselves as answers to prayer. when we pray, we need to be prepared that we might be the ones raised up by the Lord to go into the harvest.

Jesus summoned his 12 disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits to cast them out, to cure every disease and every sickness. And then in verse 5, he sent them out with the following instructions, go nowhere among the Gentiles, enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

And as you go, proclaim the good news, the kingdom of heaven has come near, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons. His own ministry extended by those 12 as a foreshadowing and forerunner to this great sending out after his own resurrection from the dead at the end of Matthew's gospel.

This week, I confess I've been challenged three ways by this passage. I've been challenged to see again crowds in our world, our ordinary world, and sheep without a shepherd in dire need of the gospel of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore to be responsive with compassion.

[27 : 42] I've been challenged again to pray for laborers, that the Lord of the harvest will raise up more laborers to harvest here at Holy Trinity, around Melbourne, overseas, anywhere and everywhere.

But as I've thought about the answer to the prayer in Jesus sending his disciples, it's made me realize again that I must pray that God will place me or keeps placing me where I may best serve him.

For the laborers are few, but the harvest is plentiful. When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

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

May God indeed answer such prayers. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.