

Three seeings and one supplication

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[0 : 00] The reading tonight is from the book of Matthew, the ninth chapter, beginning at verse 27, and can be found on page 974 of your church Bibles. That is page 974.

Matthew 9, beginning in verse 27. As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, Have mercy on us, son of David. When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to him, and he asked them, Do you believe that I am able to do this? Yes, Lord, they replied.

Then he touched their eyes and said, According to your faith, let it be done to you. And their sight was restored. Jesus warned them sternly, See that no one knows about this. But they went out and spread the news about him all over that region. While they were going out, a man who was demon possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.

But the Pharisees said, It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons. Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and illness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.

[1 : 57] Let's pray as we sit. May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Amen. Well, we're just looking at the last four verses that were read tonight. Basically, we're looking at 35 to 38. Just four verses, but what verses they are. Now, the last three, I ought to be able to recite from memory, but given my age, I'm not going to risk it. But they are wonderful verses. We're at the end of a section in Matthew and the beginning of a new one. If you keep your Bibles open at the place where it's just been read, I'm going to read to you chapter 4 and verse 23. Don't look at it, look at 35, and you'll see what I mean. Chapter 4, verse 23 goes, Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. It's almost identical, isn't it, to 935. And I reckon that probably sets chapters 5 to 9 as a section. And then a new section begins with our verses. So it's reasonable first to look back and to see how, in chapters 5 to 9, we've seen three things that came over clearly in that verse. I'll read 935 this time.

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. Teaching, proclaiming, healing. Those are the three things that we've seen in those last five chapters, some of which we actually looked at a very long time ago. So I'm not expecting that you'll all remember everything that we saw.

But first, let's go through them. First, Jesus is the great teacher. In chapters 5 to 9, we've seen a tremendous demonstration of Jesus' unparalleled ability to teach.

[4 : 41] And that's most in chapters 5 to 7, in which Jesus gives teaching in what we usually call the Sermon on the Mount. That's teaching on which whole societies have built their ethics and their way of living. And after he's taught those three splendid chapters, we hear that the crowd were amazed that he taught with such authority. We've also seen much shorter pieces of teaching after the healing miracles. For instance, after that of the centurion's servant, or the paralytic, or in interactions with the Pharisees or the disciples. And as this verse says, the teaching in the synagogues.

So these chapters leading up to the four verses I'm looking at, we see Jesus as the great teacher. We see Jesus proclaiming. He proclaims the good news of the kingdom. The good news that God reigns.

It's this amazing sense that in these five chapters, we've seen the kingdom of heaven breaking in, in Jesus. So that we can see what it's like when Jesus, the king of heaven, reigns.

There's no sickness. There's no sickness. Well, there is sickness, but it's all healed. Definitely no waiting lists. We see storms calmed. We see even the dead raised.

It's the world that we want. We see a proclamation coming in actions of the ones I've just described, but it also comes in words. To take an example, in chapter 9, Jesus said, which is easier, to say your sins are forgiven, or to say, get up and walk? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. So he said to the paralysed man, get up, take your mat, and go home. Then the man got up and went home. That's proclaiming the good news.

[7:03] In word, the man is healed. And indeed, because he gets up, takes his mat, and he goes. He goes. He goes. He goes. He goes. He goes. He goes. He goes. He goes.

It's interesting the words that are used. Jesus, it says, Jesus heals every disease and sickness among the people. He went through all the towns and villages. We've seen detailed accounts. We've seen fever, leprosy, paralysis, demon possession, bleeding, and in our reading, blindness and muteness. In five chapters, we've seen what it's like when God reigns. And the wonderful thing is that that rule doesn't just mean power, although we've seen power. It means care for people. We've seen that, obviously, in that passage I just quoted, when the paralytic is forgiven and healed. But that's also clear as we come to the second verse that I'm looking at this evening. When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. The Greek verb, verb, planknizomai, means to have compassion.

And it's a word that's only used in the New Testament of Jesus or by Jesus in one of the parables. It means to feel something in one's gut. Now, we talk about being gutted, but that's not quite the same thing. But it's that sense of feeling something very deeply. When Jesus sees the crowds, he feels it really strongly. It's also when Jesus is using a parable, it always goes on to mean that the person does something about it. When the good Samaritan feels compassion, well, he brings the man into the inn with him. Jesus is deeply moved. He cared passionately. So what was it that made Jesus so deeply moved that Jesus was, in a sense, gutted? It was the crowds. And they're described with two adjectives and one simile. Harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

[10:00] Harassed means literally skinned or flayed. Perhaps we might say ripped to shreds. Helpless. Helpless is literally thrown. It's used in Acts 27 when the ship's tackle is thrown overboard in the storm. It's used again when the anchors are dropped. It's used of Judas throwing the 30 pieces of silver into the temple. Perhaps we could translate it cast down. So the crowds are harassed and helpless, as if they were ripped to shreds. And cast down. But more significantly, I think, they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Now, we live in Scotland, so we're pretty good on sheep, I suspect. They're defenseless animals. They're pretty stupid. I'm sure you've seen them with their heads stuck in a fence.

Without a shepherd, they're vulnerable to any attack. You need a shepherd to lead them in green pastures and beside still waters.

The picture of God as the shepherd of his people is so common in the Old Testament. I'll give you a couple of examples. For he is the Lord our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.

Those are words from Psalm 95, known to Anglicans as the Vanity. Or be ye sure that the Lord, he is God, we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

[11:43] That's from Psalm 100, the Jubilati. We shall sing them both at 4.30 on the first Sunday in November. What they say is that God is our shepherd, and he looks after us.

Now, he calls human beings to be under-shepherds, to look after his people. The last time I spoke at this service, we were looking at 1 Peter and thinking about under-shepherds.

And the reason that the crowds were so harassed and helpless was that the under-shepherds weren't doing a good job. They weren't exercising their under-shepherd role. But as we think of these people round about, we think of the people who were abandoned by the under-shepherds. They were helpless and harassed. I think it's important to say that much of the crowd may well not have looked harassed and helpless to those around them.

Many of them probably looked fine. When we see people in our office, or our neighbours in the street, often they seem sorted. Maybe we, subconsciously, we wouldn't of course say this out loud, think they don't seem to need Jesus.

[13:06] They seem to be ticking along quite nicely. But actually, this passage reminds us that they are sheep without a shepherd.

What does it mean to have a good shepherd? I'd like to, if we could now put up Psalm 23 on the screen. And then you'll see what it is like to have a good shepherd.

It's the most famous psalm in the Bible, I think. If you have the Lord as your shepherd, then you lie down in green pastures.

You walk beside quiet waters. You're accompanied in dark valleys. You can fear no evil. So when the crowd don't have a shepherd, think of the psalm the other way around.

What are these people, what are people without Jesus missing out on? The Lord isn't their shepherd. They don't experience that. Spiritually, they are in want.

[14:17] They miss out on the green pastures. They miss out on still, on quiet waters, or soul refreshment. They miss out on guidance, on right paths.

When they walk through dark valleys, they are fearful and alone. No table prepared.

No anointed head. A largely empty cup. Worst of all, we know that having rejected goodness and mercy, they'll miss out on the house of the Lord forever.

Never. This passage, you see, gives us fresh eyes. First, we look back over five chapters to see what it's like when God reigns.

Every illness and sickness healed. Good news proclaimed. Sinners forgiven. God's word taught. But now, our second thought is that we see the crowds missing out on God's loving rule.

[15:28] What it's like to be shepherdless. We can see the good things that can be in Jesus. And the possibility of missing out.

I'm not sure it works to say to somebody, be more compassionate. But seeing need changes us. The problem is that our eyes are usually shut. Or maybe it's just me. So I don't see need. At least not the spiritual need that we've seen in chapter 9.

The spiritual need that means that that paralytic needed to have said to him, Take heart, son. Your sins are forgiven.

Open our eyes. Soften our heart. And then my third point. Jesus gives us another view of what is really happening.

[16:28] Verse 37. Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. It's rather a jump of metaphors, isn't it?

We've moved from sheep, which we're very comfortable with around here, to grain. We can do grain too, but we might have to go across to the east coast or somewhere where it's a bit sunnier and a bit less wet.

Well, I suppose it could be the harvest of anything. It doesn't have to be grain, does it? And it's surprising. It's surprising words, isn't it? The harvest is plentiful.

I don't think often we don't see a potential harvest out there. We didn't really see lost sheep.

Perhaps it's just me. Yes, we're excited by the blessing that we as a church are experiencing at this time.

But if we're honest, we don't see any likelihood of people pouring into the church as a whole. But Jesus gives us a new vision, a new perspective.

[17:44] Just as he shows us people's need, as people who are shepherdless, so he shows us that there is a harvest. The harvest is plentiful.

It reminds me of that wonderful moment that comes to Paul in Corinth. As we're doing 1 Corinthians in the morning, I'll quote it for you. One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision.

Do not be afraid. Keep on speaking. Do not be silent. For I am with you and no one is going to attack and harm you because I have many people in this city.

So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God. The harvest is plentiful.

Seeing is really important. Seeing and understanding what Jesus is doing. Seeing real spiritual need. Seeing there's a real harvest to be brought in. Where do we look and lose heart and feel that people are not interested or too far from the gospel?

[18 : 54] Is it the people who work around us in our offices? Or in people we play sport with or whatever it is?

Or the crowds and bars on Byers Road on a Saturday evening? Or I wonder what I thought when I was asked this summer to speak for my great-grandpa's 200th birthday celebration and they wanted a service in church.

And I wondered where they were. But they did ask and I did my best. Jesus says the harvest is plentiful.

But a lot of Christians are required to bring in the crop. Now when I was young, lots of people helped with the harvest.

I certainly remember as a child, I know this isn't the harvest, going to help with the hay and being allowed to ride on top of the hay wagon. I'm sure that didn't meet health and safety in any real sense.

[19 : 57] But there were lots of people involved. And that's still true if your crop is something like cherries, I think, or something that requires picking. You know, we still need lots of people to bring in that crop.

But if you want a picture of how much effort's required, you could read Ruth chapter 2. Not now, but sometime, because it's such a lovely story. You just get that impression of a whole community getting together to get that crop in.

And what we're saying is if we're going to bring in that harvest, then we need lots of people. We have to trust Jesus that there can be a great harvest.

So, what do we do? Well, our natural response is ordain a deacon. In other words, we set apart a new worker to be free from their secular job to preach the gospel full time.

Jonathan's being ordained in a month's time, and I'm really looking forward to it. Or we get more trainees. We've got five this year.

[21 : 05] Isn't that great? Or we put on a training course and teach people to do evangelism better. Or we plan a church plant. We're thinking about that.

All these things are good. But they're not what Jesus says. Not here, at any rate. Here he says, verse 38, Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.

He doesn't instantly say, go. Here he says, pray. Ask the Lord of the harvest, to listen to me patiently.

Or when the man with the demon-possessed son says to Jesus, I beg you to look at my son. So we're to ask the Lord of the harvest, earnestly, to supplicate.

I need a fourth S. Three seeings, one supplication. Or if you prefer, intercede, would do. If that's, that's even worse.

[22 : 19] It doesn't even have an S. But there we are. And we go to the Lord of the harvest. He's the one we pray to. We ask what the priority, he knows what the priorities are.

We don't necessarily know what those priorities are. To give you a wonderful and obvious example, only he could know in Act 8 that there was an Ethiopian eunuch in a chariot going across the desert, rumbling along, basically on his own, and send Philip all that way out to a desert road.

But he did. And when Philip got there, the Ethiopian eunuch responded. And so we pray tonight that the Lord of the harvest will send us out.

The Greek word is quite powerful. Throw us out. Push us out. So what do you think the disciples did? Well, actually, we don't know.

But I suspect that when Jesus told them to pray, that they probably did. And assuming they did, then they actually became the answer to their own prayers.

[23 : 28] In chapter 10, verse 5, it says, these 12, Jesus sent out with the following instructions. chapter 10 is the next stage in Jesus' mission.

We no longer see Jesus teaching, proclaiming, and healing, but we see the disciples. Verses 7 and 8 of chapter 10, 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. Freely you have received. Freely give.

So I think they did pray. And then, lo and behold, they were sent out to bring in the harvest.

In verse 2, they have authority to heal every disease and illness. Just like we heard in chapter 9, verse 35. So for what are we praying?

[24 : 31] Well, it's for people. Of course we can pray for revival. And that's wonderful. But Jesus gives us a specific prayer. What Hugh Palmer calls the other Lord's Prayer.

We've already used the Lord's Prayer. But this is another Lord's Prayer. A second Lord's Prayer. prayer prayer. To send out workers to send out workers into the harvest field.

It's a prayer not for lost sheep to wander in through the door. Although, praise God, sometimes they do. But it's for people to be sent out.

Is this more clergy? Is Jonathan the answer to our prayers? Well, of course. Are the trainees the answers to our prayers? Absolutely.

May we have more mission partners in response to our prayers? Well, maybe so. Let's pray. It can be easy in St Silas at the moment with two services in the morning and a staff team and people training for full-time ministry to think this is the normal picture of church life in Scotland.

[25 : 45] But in fact, at the moment, we're being incredibly and unusually blessed. not many people are prayerfully considering going into full-time gospel work either to reach the harvest field just around here or much further overseas as some of our mission partners have done.

Why is that? Well, perhaps because we, the church, don't see the crowds as harassed and helpless so we don't feel the compassion of Jesus for them.

Perhaps it's because we don't really believe that the harvest is plentiful so actually it's not worth it. So maybe we could resolve afresh to see the world the way Jesus sees it and then to pray asking the Lord to send out workers into his harvest field.

We pray for workers for summer camps next year. I had a flatmate who said he didn't book very quickly he liked to be the answer to someone's prayer.

That's really unhelpful of course but we can pray for workers for summer camps next year. Is it also possible that some or all of us while remaining in our secular callings will be sent out as workers in God's harvest field?

[27 : 15] will a possible future church plant be a place from which some of us go out to labour in the harvest field? Three seeings and one supplication.

Seeing what the kingdom of God looks like seeing what it looks like when someone's missing out on the kingdom of God shepherdless and seeing the harvest.

But before we get to supplication maybe there's someone who doesn't know Jesus as shepherd here tonight.

Maybe as we've thought about these words perhaps you've seen that without him however well life seems to be going spiritually speaking spiritually speaking Jesus sees us as harassed and helpless but the wonderful thing about this passage tonight is that his posture towards us is not despair or disappointment it's compassion.

He doesn't look on us wondering why we can't get ourselves together. No he calls out to us come to me let me be your shepherd and you'll find green pasture and rest for your souls and if you want to know more about that you could have a word with me afterwards or you could have a word with any of the staff team or probably just with the person sitting next to you would be ideal.

[28 : 57] Three seeings one supplication the message isn't just let's go but let's pray let's pray as we sit Lord Jesus we look back with wonder at what it was like when you lived on earth and people saw these amazing miracles and experienced your power and your compassion open our eyes to see the world that you see as you see it and then send out laborers into your harvest for we ask it in Jesus name Amen Amen