

The Second Sunday After Pentecost

June 14, 2020

Matthew 9:35-10:8



In a Funny Sounding Word, the
Compassion of a Saviour

Dear fellow redeemed: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our Gospel reading today from St. Matthew contains one of my favourite Greek words in the New Testament. The word is *splanchnizomai*. It comes from this verse: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”¹ *Splanchnizomai* is the word here for compassion, as in “He had compassion for them.” But as is often the case something is missed in translation. This word goes beyond the kind of compassion that we might most often think of, which is for the most part superficial and fleeting. Yes, we feel sympathy for people, we have pity on them, but then we move on. But *splanchnizomai* goes beyond this. It speaks to the kind of compassion which responds to need. In fact the word comes from the Greek word for entrails or guts! So perhaps the closest we can really get is to say that our Lord had the kind of emotional response that one feels inwardly, a “gut response.” This is

¹ Mt 9:36.

compassion as an inner, wrenching experience. In fact every time this word is used by St. Matthew it relates this “gut response” of a Saviour who looks upon the lost and needy sheep of His pasture with a deep and longing compassion. See why I like this word so much? Not only is it fun to say but it packs a big punch!

The implication of this word is action. That’s what the rest of the Gospel reading is about, how Jesus moves beyond sympathy, beyond feeling sorry for the lost sheep, and starts to unfold His plan. This plan is all about “proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.”² In the events that St. Matthew describes leading up to this reading that’s what we see Jesus doing: preaching and teaching, and performing amazing miracles. Now He reveals the next part of the plan. “And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction.”³ It was only after they had seen the dead raised, the sea rebuked, devils expelled, the legs of a paralytic brought to life, sins remitted, lepers cleansed, and had received a sufficient proof of his power both by deeds and words — only then did he send them out. It reminds me of the process of learning to drive a car.

There’s a big difference between being a passenger and sitting behind the wheel. You might think you are familiar with all the rules of the road and all the streets and turns in your community, but the first time you get behind the wheel things

² Mt 9:35.

³ Mt 10:1.

start to look very different.

Up to this moment Jesus' disciples have been the passengers in the car and He's been doing all the driving. They have been astonished at what they have seen, but He has made all the decisions. He has taken all the turns, He has steered them through various towns and villages, and when abuse came, He took it. Now they are going to get their chance behind the wheel. He sends them out, in His stead and by His command, to lead the lost sheep of Israel back. He sends them out to prepare the harvest, the coming of the Kingdom of God. For the first and only time in his Gospel St. Matthew refers to the twelve as "apostles," a word which literally means those who are sent. Who are they? Fishermen, a tax collector, and even the one who will betray Jesus. They are just ordinary men who in their sending are doing something extraordinary, not on their own, but because of the One who sends them.

Why does Jesus have this deep, gut-level compassion? Because Jesus beholds God's people as those who are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."⁴

Perhaps St. Matthew has the words of the prophet Ezekiel in mind: "So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; ⁶ they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to

⁴ Mt 9:36.

search or seek for them.”⁵ What happened? Why are God’s people in such a terrible state? Because in sin they have forsaken God and his grace and mercy, and they have turned away. You see, the sheep, God’s people, are not harassed and helpless because of some mishap or disaster. They are harassed and helpless as those who are under the condemnation of the Law, people without a shepherd to lead them back to renewal and restoration – to righteousness. In the description of these harassed and helpless sheep of Israel we find common ground with all of humanity. In today’s Epistle reading St. Paul teaches this to us when he says, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.”⁶ Everyone, even little children, have broken God’s covenant, indeed not just because of personal actions – those things which we confess are done and left undone – but in virtue of our common origin in that single ancestor in whom all have sinned.

God is holy. He is just. And in his holiness he would be justified in abandoning his people to their sins and destruction. It would be on us, not on him. But he does not. Instead he sends his only begotten Son into our flesh in order to take away this sin, to restore us to good standing, to present us holy and righteous once and for all. Jesus is sent from the Father to seek and save the lost. He comes not to destroy, but to fulfill. He comes with mercy, and compassion. And now Jesus sends out the

⁵ Eze 34:5–6.

⁶ Ro 5:12.

twelve, not just a sign of His own sending from the Father, but as the very means by which the seeking and saving will take place. The preaching of the Gospel heralds the news, that God loves the whole world and he intends to bring salvation to everyone, by the redeeming sacrifice of the cross. The miracles and wonder that Jesus has done are now given to the apostles, the sent ones – He “gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction.”⁷ These also are signs, that the Words of the Gospel are indeed of God and no other, for who else could do these marvelous things?

Part of His instructions to the ones He is sending might appear puzzling to us at first. Jesus says, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶ but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”⁸ If we are all lost sheep without the grace that is received through faith, why does Jesus not want the apostles to go everywhere? Weren’t the Gentiles and the Samaritans of Jesus’ time worthy to hear the Good News that was preached to the lost sheep of Israel? After all, Jesus Himself said, “I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”⁹ Indeed, after His Resurrection Jesus will reverse these instructions when He says, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”¹⁰

7 Mt 10:1.

8 Mt 10:5–6.

9 Mt 8:11.

10 Ac 1:8.

But in the beginning Jesus shows the compassion of the Father toward the people of Israel, for this is the God who keeps his promises. He has promised to redeemed his people, and so the Word must be preached, the people must be given the chance to repent, to turn back toward their God in faith, through the Son. The people of Israel must hear the message, the Scriptures will be fulfilled. So the apostles go forth, but not repeating the words of Moses or the prophets before them. Rather they preached something new, the Kingdom of Heaven which has come in a person, the Son of God.

So the compassion of Christ is made manifest in action. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”¹¹ Jesus sent the disciples out to preach the Word, to announce the Kingdom of God, that the forgiveness of sins is breaking in upon a world that lays in darkness. And today that same Word comes to us, sent by the Father through the Son, who sent His apostles out into the world, who then have handed down His Words to the Church in the preaching of the Gospel and in the Sacraments. Before He sent out the newly commissioned apostles He directed them to pray. Outside the Lord’s Prayer Jesus doesn’t often do this. But here He does: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”¹² And in praying that prayer they find

11 Jn 3:16.

12 Mt 9:37–38.

out that the answer to their prayer is...themselves. Perhaps their sending didn't match up with their expectations for how this should all work. Perhaps they had a different conception of what this new movement and mission should look like. Maybe something a little flashier, something more in line with how the world sees power and glory. Perhaps we have that same expectation today.

Where are the fields of harvest today that Christ's church is called to pray for? What should our prayer be? Will we see our church as part of that prayer? The final reaping of the harvest at the return of our Lord is preceded by the sending of messengers in the here and now. Remember the funny word we started with? May the *splanch-niz-omai*, the compassion that Christ has shown us, His people, be reflected in our lives, as we go forth in faith, with praises to Him on our lips and joy in our hearts, praying earnestly for the harvest.

Amen. Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠ Soli Deo Gloria