

Raising Up Labourers into the Harvest

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It was part of a series we did then on promoting the gospel and of all the sermons I think I've preached, this one had significant impact on me and I had thought of preaching it today under the title of why I am leaving but I thought I was a little bit sort of morose or something but nonetheless I thought it was helpful to preach it as helping to understand a little bit more about why I'm leaving and going to do what I'm going to do and but also in the context of this was God's word that actually significantly influenced me so that's a sort of by way of a preamble let's pray and and you may like to turn to page 790 as well in the bibles to Matthew chapter 9 the passage that was read for our second reading oh God we thank you that your word is powerful and we pray this morning that your powerful word will change our hearts our minds our behavior so that we may glorify Jesus more and more and we pray this for his sake amen we've been inundated in the past week with news and pictures of natural disasters a typhoon in the Philippines 300 or more dead there as a result and others influenced and impacted and lives lost as that typhoon went further north to Vietnam and Cambodia and then the terrible earthquake and tsunami that hit Samoa and American Samoa and Tonga and then of course the earthquakes in Sumatra and what could be thousands of people dead across the Asia-Pacific region this week and often it seems to us that we are just on this relentless treadmill of some form of natural disaster somewhere almost every week these have all been relatively close to home but we're getting used to more and more it seems floods earthquakes tsunamis bushfires etc we can often suffer from what people call compassion fatigue this week the major agencies like world vision red cross and oxfam have yet again called for people's generosity in giving to help rebuild and to help provide for those who are homeless and suffering and injured etc in these different countries but as we keep on hearing of such stories and last year of course it was a cyclone in Burma a quarter of a million people or more dead an earthquake in Sichuan province in China and other natural disasters last year and there'll be more to come it's easy to feel compassion fatigue as it's called to feel that what can we really do it just goes on and on and somehow in our sort of emotional self-protection we begin to close our hearts and close our wallets maybe of course it's part of living in this sort of modern technological age where we can see and hear and in more graphic detail than ever before disaster after disaster around the world and of course these are just natural ones you add to that those that are created by man-made evil the disasters of places like Sudan and Zimbabwe and a whole range of other countries we could string along into that list and it's easy to become a bit exhausted and a bit numb and then even when it's close to home the bushfires in

February were a sort of very graphic example but most years in Australia there's some form of natural disaster of flood or cyclone or bushfire it's easy to feel exhausted numb at the demands for our compassion Jesus went about all the cities and villages in Galilee teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness when he saw the crowds he had compassion for them in response to the crowds Jesus had compassion but here is the surprise the crowds that Jesus saw were not homeless because of an earthquake they weren't bereaved because of a cyclone or some natural disaster the crowds that Jesus saw on whom he had compassion were normal everyday people admittedly their standard of life would be lower than what we know today they would be largely rural dwellers in Galilee there was an element of Roman occupation but they weren't desperate homeless impoverished Jesus was certainly healing people who are sick and diseased but he's not in a disaster area he's not dealing with refugee camps he's dealing with ordinary everyday people and as he sees them he is moved with compassion it's a strong word actually it's not that

Jesus felt a little bit of sympathy or empathy with them but rather moved in his bowels or guts is literally how the ancient world thought of compassion quite a strong word in fact now sometimes when we are moved with compassion it's literally gut-wrenching for me perhaps the biggest example in my life of that was on holidays some years ago in Cambodia in Phnom Penh and visiting what's called the old school in the very centre of Phnom Penh which became the notorious prison in Pol Pot's regime 15,000 people or so passed through there and only I think 14 survived just last month I read in the monthly magazine that you see in the newsagent that it's perhaps the worst atrocity of the 20th century a pointless senseless atrocity of killing well over a million people for no other reason than trying to destroy a country of their own people and I remember walking around that prison and almost wanting to just vomit because it was so appalling the things that had been done now sometimes our compassion is not quite as strong as that and we're not quite moved almost to vomit but it's a strong word about Jesus compassion for everyday people why is he moved that way we're told in verse 36 it's because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd he's not referring there to being harassed by the Roman occupiers but rather by the leaders spiritual leaders who were failing so abysmally in their task the conflict that we see through the gospels with Jesus and the Jewish leaders is implied in that statement the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the other Jewish leaders who are so misleading the people even though they have a rich heritage of what we call the Old Testament but we're misleading them by adding rules and regulations and obligations far beyond what the Old Testament prescribed and distorting and changing its whole message so the people are sheep without a shepherd same expression is used in that first reading from the book of Numbers the reason why Joshua is appointed to succeed Moses so the people are not sheep without a shepherd it's an allusion also back it seems to the prophecy of the book of Ezekiel which castigates the false bad evil shepherds who've been looking after the people the kings and the priests and so on but little had changed in Jesus day and so he sees an ordinary everyday crowd of people from the villages around Galilee in the north a relatively beautiful part of Israel and relatively peaceful in Jesus day and he's moved with compassion because of their spiritual plight he's moved with compassion because their spiritual leaders are failing are not teaching them, providing for them nourishing them or guiding them or protecting them it's a rebuke in effect to those scribes and Pharisees of Jesus day what Jesus is reflecting and showing us is that ordinary everyday people without shepherds to lead them to the good news of the kingdom are people who deserve at least our compassion

I think there's a real challenge here because I'm not sure that the way we view the people of our society and our world matches Jesus yes we may be moved to compassion when we see the pictures from Samoa and the Sumatra and so on but what about the everyday crowds that we see when we're in a crowded bus or train travelling into the city or somewhere in Melbourne what do we think?

[10 : 48] often we're just blind and indifferent or numb or just irritated because we can't get a seat are we moved to compassion because the bulk of the people on that bus or train even if we don't know them are actually sheep without a shepherd the vast majority of people in our country do not know Jesus as the good shepherd when we're standing in a queue at the supermarket there are crowds around us jostling and bustling are we moved to irritation that the queue is slow or to compassion for the crowds needing a shepherd if we're part of a crowd spilling out of the MCG some of whom are delirious with joy and others despondent how do we respond?

do we see them as happy people who are comfortable in their life and all okay? or perhaps as Jesus would have done people without a shepherd in need of the good news of the kingdom these are everyday ordinary people and in the midst of that Jesus is moved in his guts with compassion I found it somewhat easy to be moved like that when I'm in places like Burma teaching but much less so in Melbourne what we need are the eyes of Jesus we need to see the world as he sees it see we see comfortable crowds who are fairly well off and we don't recognise often that the bulk of people around us are lost Jesus goes on to speak about the lost sheep in chapter 10 verse 5 Jesus came to seek and to save the lost you see the whole world view of Jesus is that the world is lost without the good news of his kingdom but sadly we don't always see the world in that light we're not moved with compassion as he was recognising that thousands and millions of people in our own city are lost because they don't have the good news of Jesus' kingdom it's as though we need somehow to put on those right glasses to get the right perspective on how we view this world so that our compassion is not simply at the physical needs that so many desperately have and it's right to be compassionate in those cases time and again but even more so to be moved with compassion at the spiritual and eternal plight of the millions around the world in every country and place who are lost without Jesus as their shepherd so that we see the crowds in the shopping centre and we're moved with compassion because they need Jesus more than anything that we see the crowds at a sporting venue and we're moved with compassion because above all else even if their team's just won a premiership they need Jesus more than anything that's how we should view our world sheep of course are defenceless animals they're stupid they go all over the place and that's the analogy so frequently used in both Old and New Testament human beings are sheep fairly dumb and stupid animals and desperately in need of a shepherd to feed and protect and guide them and Jesus guts and bowels yearn for these people yearn with compassion because they are sheep without a shepherd

Jesus' own ministry of going round and teaching in these places and teaching in the synagogues and curing the sick is showing that he is the true shepherd he's fitting the model expected in the Old Testament of the shepherd who would come more than anything you see these people need Jesus and our world needs Jesus for without Jesus all people are lost Jesus models for us our first response to the world and people in which we live compassion but that compassion doesn't just stop with an emotional gut feeling for Jesus it leads then secondly to prayer Jesus said to his disciples the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest by nature

I think when I see needs I want to do something run a programme a new course do some visiting or whatever it is but first and foremost our response should be flowing from compassion prayer sometimes we belittle prayer sometimes we say well I can't really do anything I can just pray as though somehow prayer is just a minor thing and really I should be doing more but actually prayer is a major thing it's the first and foremost thing here that Jesus commands in response to the helpless sheep around him he says to his disciples ask the Lord of the harvest pray that is to God pray and keep on praying indeed sadly I think we have a small view of prayer as though somehow it's almost an add-on an optional extra inconsequential in the course of things but not so for Jesus he's not saying do nothing but pray but rather do nothing without praying pray to God for him to raise up labourers into the harvest for the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few

Jesus own example is showing the need for other labourers he's going around all the towns and villages in Galilee curing and healing and teaching but it's a small area and he's by himself the metaphor shifts from the flock agricultural imagery to the harvest agricultural imagery now instead of sheep needing a shepherd the image that's used is of a harvest that is ready to be harvested but the labourers are few praying for more labourers and he's praying to God who is the Lord of the harvest God is the one who is sovereign over this harvest God is the one who is calling people to himself but praying that God will raise up more labourers for his own harvest it is God's work to bring harvest and it's God's work to raise up harvesters it is our work to pray beseech plead with

[18 : 24] God to raise up more and more labourers there's an urgency and persistence about the prayer that Jesus exhorts his disciples to do why then are we so poor in such prayers I suspect partly because we're not moved with compassion for the world in which we live as Jesus was we don't see the needs when we see the crowds in our streets and shopping centres and supermarkets and city and so on we don't see them in the light that Jesus saw people we don't see their desperate lostness and their need for a shepherd we don't see them as a harvest needing labourers to proclaim and promote the gospel in their midst but when we see the world with the eyes of Jesus not only will we be moved with compassion but we will be moved to prayer as well when we see this passage and hear this passage spoken about very often it's in the context of mission and mission society and we're told that the fields overseas are white for harvest and we should be praying for people to go and true that is but also at home the labourers are few everywhere

I'm not sure that there is one place on earth where we could say there are sufficient labourers for the harvest not one place not in the midst of so called western Christendom is that the case let alone in the other parts of the world we are in desperate need of more labourers to lead churches and plant churches and preach in this city in every city in Australia in every suburb in Australia we need more labourers to teach CRE in schools to be kids hope mentors to run youth groups and girls groups and boys groups to be evangelists in inviting our friends to come and do the ideas that change the world cause to invite people to church and so on the labourers there's a few everywhere and yet why are we not more desperate in prayer why are we not praying more and more for

God to raise up labourers into the harvest is it because we don't see the world with the eyes of Jesus as desperately lost without him certainly without his compassion we won't pray we ought to be praying that God will give us Jesus eyes to see the world as he sees it and then pray and pray for labourers but there's a danger in praying for God to raise up labourers into the harvest the danger the disciples discovered as have I as soon as Jesus has asked the disciples to pray for the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into the harvest the very next verse chapter 10 verse 1 Jesus then commissions and sends his 12 disciples to that very task he urges them to pray and they are in part the answer to the prayer now this is not a model of world mission they're only to go to the house of Israel to the sheep of Israel who are lost sheep without a shepherd but it's like a prototype of the mission that comes at the end of the gospel after the resurrection when Jesus sends out his disciples into all the world to preach and teach and baptise and to disciple people here it's a preliminary mission a prototype simply to the house of Israel chapter 10 verse 5 and 6 say go nowhere among the

Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and proclaim the good news the kingdom of heaven has come near but if the house of Israel was lost and needed the good news of the kingdom how much more was the case for the Gentiles to whom God sent or Jesus sent his disciples after his resurrection notice you see that the disciples are urged to pray for God to raise up labourers and then they're sent as though they are part of the answer to the prayer it's dangerous you see very easy for us to say God please raise up labourers into the harvest but not me I preached this passage in a sermon series here on the 30th of April 2006 three and a half years ago I'd already begun to feel about future ministry where God might be leading me but this sermon and this passage had a huge impact on me

I remember after the sermon Rod McArdle in the days following just said to me that really has impacted you hasn't it I finished the sermon actually trying to share some of the impact that it had had on me I finished the sermon by saying that I'd been challenged three ways by this passage I'd been challenged to see people with gospel glasses in need of a shepherd and to be full of compassion for the lost I finished the sermon by saying secondly this passage had challenged me to pray more for God to raise up laborers and thirdly and in some senses here was the hint for the congregation that it made me pray to God that I would be prepared to go wherever he would call into the harvest wherever I could be of best use for the gospel this passage and this sermon didn't begin my thinking but it certainly was a significant catalyst for the ministry to which

[24 : 43] I'm heading in a few weeks time it's dangerous you see to pray that God will raise up laborers it may be you who is part of the answer to the prayer certainly as I've taught in various parts of Asia in recent years the needs there are significant for the Christian church in theological education which I think is highly strategic the resources are very few to teach and train pastors and teachers and evangelists and missionaries and so on from those countries to reach their own countries with the gospel of Jesus Christ and to do so in places where it's very hard often to be Christian and very hard to be a missionary and so to be able to be short term and to meet these places on a repeated basis is I think a strategic thing to do but it's certainly not to say that there are no needs here in Melbourne it's been my prayer for years for God to keep raising up laborers into the harvest more and more gospel men and women to be ministers and preachers and teachers in the

Anglican churches at least in Melbourne there are still needs because looking around Melbourne there are still plenty of churches as the synagogues were in Jesus' day where the teaching is not teaching the kingdom of Jesus to people people who are sheep without a shepherd the needs are still great here they're just as great if not greater overseas people God's God's God's not going to call every one of us to be a laborer in the sense of a preacher a teacher or an evangelist he does call us all to be prayers and I covet the prayers of each one of you in partnership in the ministry to which I'm called and would encourage you to be officially prayer partners and supporters in that but for all of us the challenge here is to be laborers in our neighborhood at least in our context of work pray that prayer and be prepared for God to say you are part of the answer let's pray