

Send & Receive

Matthew 10:40-42

Our Gospel reading today is perhaps the shortest I have ever had given to me by the lectionary, the readings that we use in common with Churches around the world. As I started preparing I kept checking to make sure that I hadn't made some kind of mistake in the roster, then I started looking at the other readings to see if there something with a bit more meat to get my expository teeth into. However I thought I should keep persevering with our readings from Matthew and the more I read and pondered I started to see that in this very short reading there are all sorts of things related to missiology, Christology, true theology, eschatology, epistemology and even hermeneutics, or to put it more simply, there is a lot in this small passage and we should not despise the days of small things.

At its heart this passage is about God's mission to the world and our part in it, so I think we should give this little passage a little time.

THE APOSTOLIC MISSION

Matthew has a number of long passages of teaching by Jesus with the most famous being the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew Chapter 10 could be called the Sermon on Mission.

Jesus has been preaching the kingdom, casting out demons, and healing every disease and sickness (9:35). He has looked on the crowds and called on his disciples to pray for more workers for the harvest is plenty but the workers are few. The disciples quickly discover that they are the answer to that prayer as Jesus sends them as his apostles, or sent ones (10:2). Jesus pulls no punches as he reminds them that as they share in his mission they share in its urgency, danger and cost. It is no surprise that Jesus speaks of them having to carry their cross (10:38).

But as he draws his teaching to a close he reminds them of the absolute importance of the mission with the rather astounding statement with which our reading starts. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." As people welcome in the apostles message they are welcoming in Jesus and ultimately God. It is all said so quickly that we miss how astounding this is, and how much we can learn from this short verse.

God - the sending one

Firstly we are reminded that this mission starts not with Jesus and the apostles but with the Father. This mission starting with Israel and ultimately to the whole world finds its genesis in God, the true creator and saviour of the world.

How do you think about God? If we are to have a true theology and understanding of God we need to understand that he is not absent and dispassionate, separated from the world he has sent Jesus. To slightly misquote the Gospel of John "For God so loved the world that he gave and sent his Son"

Jesus - the sent one

Jesus then is the true apostle, the true sent one. Unless we grasp this about Jesus so much of what Jesus says and does will sound simply arrogant and cause us to ask "Who does he think he is?"

No spiritual leader would speak this way, no great moral teacher would act this way, no prophet would make himself so central, as the one great mediator between humanity and God.

When we see him as the sent one it all makes sense. Here is true New Testament Christology.

We can see why he can speak of himself as one who has come, how to acknowledge him will lead to him acknowledging us before the Father, how commitment to him is more important than family ties and even life itself. This all only true because he is the sent one, the one who has come from God.

Is this how you think about Jesus?

The Apostles - the sent ones

Now we need to do a bit of hermeneutics, the science or art of interpretation. When Jesus speaks of "whoever welcomes you", the "you" is not any old, or for that matter young, Christian missionary. In context it is quite clearly the 12 apostles, those whom Jesus chose and sent to carry on his mission, and who are named for us at the beginning of the chapter just we don't miss the point.

They have a special role in this unfolding series of sent people for they are the ones who had been with Jesus, observed what he is doing, asked him questions, and ultimately the ones who will be witness to the resurrection and to whom the risen Jesus will say that they are to go to all nations in his name to teach them all that he has commanded them. (Matthew 28:17-20)

Apostolic Church

This means that the mission of the Church is fundamentally apostolic; it is based on the teaching and witness of the apostles. Jesus didn't write a book or leave us an instruction video, he left behind the apostles, those who had been with him and on this the Church is based.

So the Paul, also chosen to be an apostle, can speak of how the household of God is build on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20). Their witness and teaching is basic.

It means that when we listen to their witness it is not only their words it is the word of God. Again the apostle Paul says in 1Thessalonians "We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers" (2:13) As people receive the apostolic word, just as Jesus said, they receive God as well.

This is why we have an Apostles Creed, it does not come from the apostles themselves but it comes from their teaching. This is why we say each week that we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. Each of those words is important and worthy of consideration but it is enough for us at the moment to recognise that we are an apostolic Church, based on the witness of those whom Jesus sent in his name.

Application

Given this link between receiving the apostles, to receiving Jesus to receiving the Father, two further points need to be made. The Church has always maintained that the way to ensure that the message of the Church remains apostolic is to go back to the witness of Scripture the repository of the teaching of the apostles. This ensures that true apostolic succession is not a case of Chinese whispers but of public witness.

This is not just stubborn traditionalism, or fundamentalism, at its heart it is ensure that we continue to have the ability to receive the Son and the Father. If we will not receive what the apostles taught, if we do not treat it as the Word of God this chapter has many warnings. They are to be prophets, those who bring God's word, or we will suffer loss. (Hence the very bad original sermon title of Prophet and Loss). We need to treat the New Testament with due reverence and respect.

Further more as we think about missiology, the mission of the Church, at its heart it must continue to be based on the apostolic proclamation of the Kingdom of God to be found in Jesus. It should be at the heart of all we do in foreign mission fields, and all we do at this Cathedral. This is not a defence of insensitive hot gosselling bible bashing, no mission following in Jesus footsteps can ignore human suffering. But it must be based on the apostles' witness to Jesus, for it is only there that there is the promise of reconciliation with God.

God has sent Jesus who sent the apostles and it is in receiving their witness that we receive God and all the blessings that brings.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR US

You may be thinking “Richard this is all very theoretical and not of much use for me.” The first part may be true, and we need to do some theory, but I would want to disagree with the second part. What is said in these verses is extremely useful.

Firstly it reminds us that all we have to do to receive God and all the blessings that it brings is to accept the message that he has sent through Jesus and the apostles. We do not have to do anything, simply receive in faith the message. Romans 6 reminds us that the eternal life which God longs to give us is a gift. He has sent it, all we have to do is receive it. God does not want his sending to be treated like junk mail but to be fully received for unlike most things we receive promising great things, this one really is for us, and the rewards are far greater than any email from Nigeria can offer.

Secondly as we understand God’s mission we will surely want to be involved in it. Now not all of us are called to follow in the steps of the apostles, to go to the mission field. But did you notice the last two verses of our short reading. As we support those who are called to do this active work of speaking the word, of doing good, indeed all those who have aligned themselves with Christ, Jesus says this is just as important and just as rewarded as those who seem to be the great ones in the faith. Any act of financial support, practical hospitality or emotional encouragement to the workers in God’s mission is, in God’s eyes, as worthy as those who are the workers themselves. For all receive the same reward, eternal life and being acknowledged by Jesus before his Father (Matthew 10:32-33).

We all then have our role to play in God’s great mission. Firstly to receive what he has sent, but then to play our part in sending it on to others, whether it be taking opportunities that we have or supporting others. That is the challenge before us this morning, it has been sent, will it be received?