

The church on its knees

Last week I was talking to a very worried Lutheran. They had, in my opinion, good cause for their worries about the church. He said to me: this church is *on its knees*. We are shrinking in number; we are divided and we have desperate shortage of pastors. Yes, I thought. You are right. My heart sank. And I began to ask myself: What can we do? Where do we start?

Then I read the Gospel reading for today, and God answered that question. Let me explain.

In Matthew chapters 8-9, Jesus begins his kingdom work in earnest. He is healing and teaching: he is moving around in the territory of Galilee, doing as much as he can. In chapter 9 alone, leading up to verse 35, Jesus performs five healing and raises a young girl from death.

Matthew's description in v35 gives the impression of Jesus moving throughout all the towns, almost with a kind of desperate urgency – preaching in the synagogues, healing the sick, proclaiming the Gospel. He is moved, Matthew tells us, by compassion for the people he meets – they are harassed and helpless. They are on their knees. They were anxious and burdened by the weight of sin and its affects, and harassed, vulnerable, lost, scared and unprotected from the devil and the world, shepherd-less sheep. People are like this today too – looking around in search of true life, trying to find the truth, trying to find love, longing for a sense of peace and safety, wandering around like lost sheep.

Matthews tells us that Jesus' heart goes out to these people, and he is trying to get to everybody. Jesus loves these people. He wants to care for them and save them, and he is aware that he only has a limited time, so it is urgent.

His statement in verse 37 almost has a note of surprise, as if Jesus himself did not quite expect this and is a little overwhelmed by this huge crowd of people needing his ministry all at once. He says, and this is a more accurate translation, *the harvest is vast but the labourers are a tiny handful*.

He uses the picture of a harvest, ripe and ready, here and now. Anybody who knows fruit or grain production knows that when the crop is ready you only have a limited window of time to get it off before it is over-ripened and spoiled.

So there is a big problem emerging here and it is urgent. Who will go out and gather in the souls who need to find salvation? The labourers to go out into

that field are few – not nearly enough! Jesus’s mission to reach out with God’s love is in danger, on its knees! How is the kingdom of God going to come without laborers, workers? This is not just a challenging task; it is an impossible task! There is a real crisis of resources here.

What would we do at this point? Problem solving! HR management. We need to get workers. A recruiting drive – get em organised and motivated and involved! That is quite reasonable, I would suggest! In fact it is my own first instinct! Get up on my feet and get something happening.

My friend who shared his concerns about the church with me last week was right: our LCA *is* facing exactly this kind of crisis. We have massive lack of pastors! Pastors are leaving ministry, and we have very small numbers of students coming in to begin their studies.

We have more work to do than ever. We are faced, like Jesus, with many people who are harassed and helpless, sheep who need to know the good shepherd, but the labourers are very few. Common sense tells us that we need to get moving. We need to do something. We need to have strategy and a plan for recruiting new pastors and training them and getting them out there. These are all good ideas, and indeed there is a time for planning and effective action.

But Jesus’ response to the crisis in v38 is not what you might expect, is it?

Ask the Lord of the harvest therefore to send out labourers into his harvest. Jesus says that the right way to respond here is *not* to go into overdrive and throw *ourselves at the problem* – it is too big for us. Instead we need to give the issue to the only one who can meet the need – the one *whose harvest it is*, and who alone can handle this impossible situation.

Do you remember Jesus’ feeding the 5000 in Mark 6? He is faced with an obviously impossible crisis – 5000 hungry people and almost no food. He tells his disciples: *You give them something to eat. They say Are you crazy, Jesus? It would take 8 months’ wages to get enough bread for this mob!* And Jesus does a miracle; he proceeds to feed this huge crowd with five bread rolls and two fish.

Jesus is not limited by human crises and shortages. He is able to provide. God is *able to send out labourers* into the harvest. He is able to do what we cannot do. He does miracles. He can change hearts, move minds, he moves money, he overcome obstacles in ways we cannot begin to imagine.

We do not need to be anxious. God is in charge of his harvest, its timing, its completion, its success. Jesus says: *Pray to him*. As in the feeding miracle in

Mark, we, the few workers no doubt have a part to play. The time for planning and action will come. But what is most essential is not that *we act, but that we pray*. We need to be on our knees, not on our feet.

Many great Christian teachers have pointed out that this prayer for the harvest has often been the missing essential ingredient in mission efforts in the church's history, where human plans and actions have taken centre stage. One theologian, Frederick Bruner, writing about this section of Matthew's gospel, makes an extended comment on this point. He says that in the church's history it is quite clear: where there is prayer there is mission. Where there is little prayer, there is little mission.

If you read the book of Acts – prayer is the constant activity of the apostles' mission, as they face issues and problems, and, at times, overwhelming opposition. They pray and trust in God's power, and receive the help they need.

The great 19th century mission societies in England and Europe were largely groups of praying Christians. They held mission rallies and gatherings. What did they do at these events? Plan, strategise, recruit? Well, those might be good and sensible things to do at some point, but the fact is that mostly, they prayed.

And God answered their prayers – sent out labourers. T

he Hermannsburg mission in central Australia is the fruit of that prayer, as are Lutheran churches in Indonesia, Africa, South America and many other places.

This morning in our prayer of the church, you may notice the prayer we pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest, a prayer which is often included, in obedience to Christ's command here in Matthew 9. It often goes unnoticed and flies under the radar, but is very important.

And as we pray we will be where Christ wants his church to be, on our knees – not in desperation but in hopeful, confident and joyful prayer.