

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ
Amen.

Our sermon text today is written in the gospel according to Matthew 9:35-10:8

Let us pray ...

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight; we pray through Your son, Jesus Christ.

Sheep Without A Shepherd

Today's Gospel reading says, "*When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*" The reason for His compassion is the state of the people. These words tell us that the people were constantly being targeted by evil. They were like a flock of sheep surrounded by wolves, who were constantly nipping and probing at them. Seeing who is the weakest ... the slowest ... looking for their next meal.

Being farmers, I'm sure you understand that sheep cannot survive long without the care of a shepherd. Sheep without a shepherd are some of the most helpless creatures on earth. They can easily fall sick. They can easily become injured, and they are easy prey for predators. Their lives have no meaning - they have no goal and no purpose. They are born. They eat. They sleep. They pass their gene pool on to the next generation and then they die.

Sadly, we human beings aren't much better. As God's creation we are born with a desire for the spiritual. But since the fall of Adam and Eve, this desire has become distorted, rather than desiring after God we desire for our lives to have meaning. Look at all the art that searches for a deeper meaning to life - paintings - sculptures - songs - books - movies - and so on. There are religions all over the world that offer to help us learn what there is beyond this world. Every human being knows that there is something fundamentally missing and we can't help ourselves so we go searching to find it.

There are several possible outcomes of this search. Some search for a while and then give up and decide to get on with their lives as best they can; they take up all sorts of activities to take their mind off of their dissatisfaction. Others incorrectly believe that they have actually found the answer; they too take up some sort of activity to help them fulfil the requirements of that answer. Finally, the truly honest seeker continues to search indefinitely - finding nothing that satisfies the need for meaning.

In the end, all three of these searches lead to intense activity that accomplishes nothing. It's like the pet hamsters that run in their little running wheels - expending a

lot of energy, but not going anywhere. No mere human search can ever find the true meaning of life. The only thing that a mere human search can find is the hopelessness of being eternally separated from God.

That is what Jesus saw when He looked out at the crowd. People endlessly searching for something they can never find. That is the reason his heart went out to them with such deep compassion. He saw the meaningless struggle of their struggle for meaning.

Jesus knows the meaning of life. He was there when God breathed the breath of life into Adam. As the Word who was with God and is God - as the Word through whom God the Father created all things, He knew of the perfect, immortal relationship that God had with man at the beginning. He knew of the intimate love that God had for man in Eden and the perfect relationship that came from that love.

Jesus also knew that Adam and Eve destroyed that relationship with their sin. They took their eyes off their relationship with God and focused on their own selfish desires. They could never again focus on God with their own resources.

Jesus knew that no human being, no matter how diligent, could ever find a way to heal that relationship. And even if a human did find a way, no mere human had the resources to follow that way.

This is why Jesus humbled himself and came down from His heavenly throne. This is why He took humanity onto Himself. Why He became something infinitely greater than a mere human being. This is why He became the God-man Christ Jesus.

He became true man to take our place under God's law and fulfil it perfectly. He also took our place as the target of God's justice against our sin with His suffering and death on the cross. As the Son of God, the ransom of His life, suffering, and death was enough to redeem the whole world from sin. As true God, He defeated sin, death and the power of the devil.

With His resurrection on the third day, He proclaimed the restoration of our relationship with God. He proclaimed His victory and He validated everything that He taught during his ministry. His resurrection provides the assurance that the true meaning of life is ours once again. His resurrection promises that we too will one day rise from death to live with Him forever.

In today's Gospel, Jesus looked at the crowds around Him and He also looked beyond them to the hungry souls of all time. He saw a vast harvest of souls ready for redemption. Even as He instructed His disciples to pray for labourers to work in that harvest, He prepared His disciples to carry on that labour. 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. Jesus passed His mission on to the Twelve Disciples.

He taught them about the true meaning of life - Who He truly was and how He would save the world from sin. Then He prepared them to carry on this teaching to others. He gave them the privilege of working in His harvest. The same harvest that has continued to this day and God has sent out His labourers in every generation. He has thrown them into His harvest and passed on the Good News of Jesus Christ to generation after generation.

Unfortunately, we have come to think of the harvest as something that people do in far away lands like New Guinea, the Philippines, Kenya, and so forth. We look to the missionaries of the past and present and marvel at the Church of God and how it continues to spread and grow in those far away lands. As we know, the day would come when Jesus would say, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations*" (Matt 28:19).

And likewise in the Book of Acts just before Jesus ascends into heaven He says "*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*" As history shows, these men did go out, and for the rest of their lives they traveled and preached and taught, bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth until the day that they died.

But, in today's reading we heard how Jesus called his twelve disciples and gave them power to preach, to heal, and to defeat the enemy. We heard how He sent Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, the brothers James and John, Matthew and Thomas and all the others; with the instructions to "*Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" Here we hear that Jesus did not send these twelve men to some far away land on that day, but instead He sent them to their neighbours, the lost sheep of Israel - the sheep without a shepherd.

In the Gospel according to Mark we hear that *Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."* That was how Jesus loved his people: and that is what He told them to go and proclaim to the people of Israel.

They didn't have to take money, for the people they preached to would supply all their needs. If the people wouldn't hear and believe, then the disciples were to move on. There was to be no charge to hear the good news, because it was to be a free gift to the world.

Folks, things haven't changed. You and I, *we have received without paying for all the goodness of our Lord.* In our baptism we have been freely made children of God - heirs of eternal life; forgiven, healed, restored; given new life. Thereby we know and

experience the presence and blessings of God Almighty himself - every day, and we certainly have received greatly without deserving it or having to pay for it.

Like in the days of Jesus there's a world of people out there in our community who either haven't heard or haven't considered the possibility that the gospel might be true - and we have the, ever important message for those who are *harassed and helpless - the kingdom of heaven is near*.

We have the message of Jesus Christ. That Jesus Christ and his death on the cross alone is the answer to the deeper meaning to life, it is He and what He has done for us that gives life and gives meaning to life. Without him we are nothing. With him and the salvation that he has won for us we have what enables us to live with and cope with whatever it is that we face in life. Jesus Christ alone is what our world around us desperately needs to hear.

It is Jesus Christ who has done everything to make it possible for their salvation to be delivered to them. Which means that we have something to say - something to share - with others as we go about our daily lives, because we are the only workers God has to get this message of love and forgiveness to all those around us who need to hear it.

Therefore folks, *trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths* (Prov 3:5-6)

So pray that the Lord will not only send you, but go with you, to help you and to bless what you do in his name, as you go out and proclaim that *the kingdom of heaven has drawn near*. For to our great God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit alone belongs all glory and honour, now and always.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen