

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Tasks For Disciples

The missionary task of the disciples of Jesus is described in the context of three pictures of their Master: in the very dense first line of today's Gospel we find him *wandering through towns and villages* to teach, preach, and heal, then *seeing the crowds and feeling sorry for them*, and finally *speaking to his disciples* to explain the situation to them and tell them what they must do.

Feeling sorry - *Splanchnizomai*

This strange word, literally "moved in the guts", belongs to the first three Gospels, reflecting the Hebrew belief that human emotions run from that anatomical place. We talk of *gutlessness* for a coward, and we have the expressive slang term *gutted* for feeling disappointment, grief, compassion or sorrow - all of which can be related to the gospels' usage. It is strikingly used in Jesus' parables, so maybe the evangelists are picking up a favourite usage of his. The good Samaritan is *gutted* when he sees the mugged man, the father is *gutted* when he sees the prodigal son. Every other use shows *Jesus* moved like this when he sees crowds. This means that, in real life, the word is almost reserved to Jesus the Messiah; he carries into the world the compassion of his Father, and this is the task he is to pass on to his disciples.

Unshepherded Sheep

In the Old Testament prophecies, the shepherds of Israel are the Kings, and indeed the crowds Jesus knew have no king. We remember David, who was *called in from the sheepfolds* to be anointed. Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one; in this Gospel we shall see him coming in glory, to judge the people, separating them as a shepherd separates sheep from goats (Mt 25). There is an older image here: Moses too was a shepherd, the first Redeemer: in the book of Numbers his departure raises the fear that *Israel will become like sheep without a shepherd*. God's response is to nominate Joshua (his name is another form of *Jesus*) and to promise that he will govern them with divine help. This promise evolves into the great hope of *another prophet like Moses* in the Jewish mind. So the apostolic mission is meant to undo the sad history of Israel's leaders, and their failure to gather the flock. The prophets allot this task to God himself: *I myself will be their shepherd: I will bind up the wounds of the injured, I will gather the lost, I will lead them to safe pasture.*

An Urgent Harvest

The apostles must harvest a kingdom that is all ready to come. *Harvest* in the Bible is an image of judgement, with God himself, or his angels, putting the sickle in. Here, the harvest has begun now - as if the task of the disciples will signal the end of the world. Jesus does not respond to the situation by weeping or wringing his hands. He tells his disciples to *pray*, and then to be ready to *act*. It isn't for men to create the new situation: it is for God, *the Lord of the Harvest*, to see his work provided-for. Our task is to let the Father create the right conditions for his harvest to come in. And the harvest isn't ours: it belongs to Christ, and he will judge what is worth gathering, and what will be burned.

The Twelve Apostles

Matthew's Gospel began with a list of Jesus' ancestors - his pre-history. Now we hear a list of his apostles - his post-history. They have no accomplishments or qualifications, except that Jesus calls them. His orders are that they should take up the same tasks he himself has already assumed: they are to imitate him. Everything they have comes from him, and, at his order, they are to begin to gather the scattered children of Israel. The *Acts of the Apostles* does not suggest they were formed as a body by the early church; so it seems certain that it was indeed Jesus who chose and commissioned them to be sent to the twelve tribes of Israel. He is clearly signalling that God has come to the aid of his people, that the promises of God are about to be fulfilled. So this passage is full of urgency, and conscious of the end of time. The next part of the Gospel will tell us about the opposition we must meet as apostles. Perhaps we can do deeds of the Kingdom which serve as a sign to the world around us, that the ages of salvation are coming towards their end: as the early Church proclaimed the imminent end of time, and burned its earthly boats in anticipation.
Fr Philip