

Harassed and helpless

Exodus 19:2-8a; Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

There have been too many scenes from across the world and our own country where in the face of some calamity or other – flooding caused by the destruction of a dam in Ukraine, the sinking of a boat full of immigrants off Greece, the senseless murder of three people in Nottingham, the evacuation of whole areas of India and Pakistan in the face of an approaching storm, people have been harassed and helpless. And more.

It has been heart-wrenching to hear all over again the voices of families who lost loved ones during the Covid pandemic and lockdown and were not able to be with them in their time of need, or at their funerals. In the last few days reading that the disgraced former Prime Minister Boris Johnson's reputation and conduct was demolished, and that the affirmation that the fundamental pillars upon which public life, and society at large, are based are conduct, behaviour, believability, integrity, a contempt for lies, and the sanctity of truth, would have been some though not much comfort for those who left feeling harassed and helpless during that grim time in our nation's.

Feeling harassed and helpless is seen in the office and in the workplace. It is seen in the relentless pace of life where the positive benefits of being connected to one another can sometimes turn into a 24-hour a day pressure to respond immediately. On train journeys south and north last week I cleared my email in-tray twice, only to watch them fill up in moments. In Greek mythology the second labour of Hercules was to kill the Hydra, a serpentine water monster. If you attacked it and cut off one of its heads, another two immediately regenerated. Emails are a bit like that too.

It is not only in formal workplaces but also in charities and good causes, where the more that is done, the more seems required. In the unequal struggle to plug gaps left by statutory bodies, faith communities and charities provide essential support for people who don't have enough to eat, or enough clothing to wear, or a home to stay in and furniture to equip it. It's not that charity work in these areas is wrong. But when it is taken for granted and presumed upon by Governments and Councils, and when faith communities and charities only see more and more need, levels of harassment and helplessness grow and grow. In the clients with needs, and the good people trying to meet that need. In other areas too – where schools – for example – have to raise money to pay for sometimes basic equipment - this is not right. School children and students with increasing performance pressure academically and in extra-curricular activities. There seems so little space for the well-rounded amateur as everyone has to be the best and reach levels and standards not far off professionalism. When hospitals arrange fundraisers to pay for equipment, relying on supporters to raise money for the same good cause. This is not right.

We live in a world where I fear we have normalised harassment and helplessness. This sense of never-ending need and never-ending demand in whatever forms these take. It is no wonder that levels of poor mental health are so high

Nor should we ignore other forms of harassment and helplessness. If you do a word search on harassment, page after terrifying page of women and men being taken advantage of sexually, emotionally or being physically or verbally bullied. In the world of politics, the church, entertainment, business, education, the caring professions. Irresponsible journalism and abuse in social media is increasingly at the heart of this. I don't know if it is happening more today than in previous years, but we have rightly become more aware of it.

So much harassment. So much helplessness. What can we do?

Into this picture which is jagged and frightening steps Jesus. I had never noticed before that the text for this sermon, "harassed and helpless" is right there in the passage from Matthew's Gospel. Chapter 9, verse 36. Jesus is in Galilee, teaching, healing, challenging, encountering. Demonstrating that deceptively unassuming power that transformed lives in so many different contexts.

We get a summary of what Jesus had been doing, in the towns and villages and countryside, going into places of worship, meeting people where they were. Telling about hope, showing what hope looked like and the difference Jesus' Good News can bring. People came to Him with all the usual mix of emotions and motives. By being around Him, and with those Who were His friends, they got something to help them through the next stage of life. I doubt very much of all of them came because of their faith. I doubt even more that all of them came because they were looking for the Messiah Who was going to sort out every political and economic and social mess that existed. Some of them sick and in pain. Some of them fearful for loved ones. Some of them ostracised and edged out of society. Some of them unwelcome. Some of them awkward and difficult. All those harassed and helpless people. Jesus spoke to them, perhaps more importantly Jesus listened to them. Jesus reached out and touched them and let them touch Him.

It's only rarely that the Bible gives any clues about Jesus emotional motivation. Matthew uses a strong Greek word in v36, just before the "harassed and helpless" description. Matthew says Jesus had *pity* on them, or had *compassion* on them. Jesus' motivation came not only from His single-minded devotion to His God-given calling but also from a heart-deep, gut-deep sense of care for those He met.¹ These lost souls wandering and wondering through life, these, "Sheep without a shepherd".

There is Jesus in the midst of them, moving and talking and listening and touching and being overwhelmed by their sense of harassment and helplessness, and coming through and staying with them and doing what He could amongst the tired and the walking wounded. We've no idea if the healings 'took' and if all the problems were cured forever, but clearly something happened, something changed, something shifted in those people's lives. And even if only for a moment the harassment and helplessness lifted. These people had been heard. These people had been noticed.

We might think Jesus makes it look too easy. He goes about preaching in the synagogues, He cures every single ailment. No distance is too great, no audience too sceptical, no disease too severe. Jesus gets it done.ⁱⁱ

But note this. He doesn't do it on His own. He gets His disciples involved and gives them encouragement to do what He did to the best of their abilities. Imagine being told about integrity by Peter, who later denied. Imagine being told about peace, by James and John, often arguing. Imagine being told about how to steward your money and pay your taxes by Matthew, the tax collector. Imagine being told about faith, by Thomas the questioner and doubter. Imagine being healed, by Judas Iscariot. Imagine them being sent out to people they didn't know, to expect welcome, or rejection, food and drink and shelter, or only the open sky. It is a different culture, the Israelite one, where strangers and unexpected visitors were taken in as a matter of course. Not the planning and saving that we would embark upon. You can't compare C1st Palestine with C21st Scotland. Don't get hung up on a literalist interpretation and application which is a straight transfer from then to now. That's not how to read this passage.

This is about recognising that there are people with needs out there, some we might meet, some we might need help to meet, some we might not be able to do anything about, but they are out

there, they are in here. And as then, so now, people are harassed and helpless. What are we going to try to do? Not for all of us to fix everything, but for some of us to fix some of the things, and others to fix the rest. Or at least try.

Have we the inspiration, or commitment, or faith, or time to see that the gap between the real and the ideal can in fact be bridged. Have we, in our lives, in this Church and community, the vision to see what is going to work in our day and age, not copying exactly C1st ways of doing things, but drawing from the inspiration, the idea, that the harassed and helpless are still around us, and we might be able to do something.

Jesus, at least, seems to think we can get the job done, even if it will not be easy. It is not enough simply to see human need. It is enough to go out and try to do something about it. If we are looking to the future of the Church's mission, here it is!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Leith Fisher, 'But I say to you', p130

ⁱⁱ Alexander Wimberly, Feasting on Word, Year A, Vol 3 p140