

THE EMMAUS SERIES

11th Sunday, Year A

Exodus 19: 2-6

Romans 5: 6-11

Matthew 9:36 – 10:8

The harvest is great but the labourers are few

The mission of Jesus was universal. It could only be carried out through the ministry of collaborators who were empowered by a sharing in his own Spirit. The commissioning of the Twelve Apostles was a moment of immense consequence, therefore, in the earthly ministry of Jesus. It is important that we recognise that this commission involved not only the Apostles and their 'successors', the bishops of the Church, but also by every baptised member of the Church. Matthew opens up a broad vision in his introduction to the 'summoning' of the Twelve by Jesus. We are reminded of struggling humanity of all times and places, as Jesus shows concern for 'the crowds, harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd'; he speaks to his disciples of the boundless 'harvest' envisaged in the generous plan of God.

The word 'apostle' (used only here in Matthew's gospel) refers to one sent out with a special commission. Matthew refers to the Twelve as 'disciples', prior to their commission – the commission they are to receive presupposes and builds upon the relationship with Jesus they have shared with the men and women who – as his 'disciples' – have formed the new family of Jesus. Vatican II makes reference to this solidarity as paramount when it describes the role of the Apostles: 'the Apostles were the first shoots of the New Israel, and at the same time the beginning of the sacred hierarchy' (Decree on Mission, n.5). For Jesus, the choice of twelve symbolised the coming into existence of a New Israel. This commission, therefore, concerns not only the hierarchy but all the baptised. The 'successors' of the Apostles must make it their first concern, to foster, identify with, and give witness to, the authentic faith and life in the baptised community entrusted to their care. For their part, the whole community of the Lord's disciples must recognise that they are all called to share in the commission given to the renewed people of God. In other words, the whole Church should be apostolic and missionary.

For a long time, the missionary outreach of the Church has been associated in the Catholic mind with the foreign missions – an apostolic expression that has had a privileged place in the Church's life from the beginning. As they hear today's gospel, committed Catholic communities should ask themselves whether they are truly apostolic and missionary. Not infrequently, those who have joined our parish communities, through a well organised R.C.I.A. program, report that they are discouraged by the routinised apathy that seems to characterise so much parish life. Today's gospel indicates two gauges we can use to evaluate the apostolic spirit of our parish community, if we want to respond to this wake-up call. Those in need – physically and spiritually – had a privileged place in the concerns of Jesus. Do we share this concern by a genuine and practical outreach to these people? Time and time again, concern for the marginalised, after the example of Jesus, has brought new life to Christian communities. Our second gauge is the witness of a courageous and generous identification with all that Jesus stands for, in the vision of a renewed faith. The Christians of the early centuries were forbidden to disclose the essentials of their faith to outsiders; but they converted the world of their time, by the quality of their lives. ('Do not turn aside to pagan territory'. Puzzling words, until we realise that the first concern of Jesus was to call Israel back to the ideals expressed in our first reading. Ultimately, however, this was because he needed helpers in a mission to the whole world.)

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