

# SERMON: BECOME AN INFECTIOUS CHRISTIAN

*Matthew 10:40-42*

It was several years ago, but I can remember the day as if it were yesterday. I was walking out of a charity shop in Lymington High Street and I was feeling very guilty. I want to make it clear that I hadn't found a priceless work of art and paid nothing for it. I hadn't even browsed for hours and then left empty handed after the rain stopped. In fact I had brought a very fine 2000 piece jigsaw.

What had made me feel guilty was the conversation I had just completed with the sales assistant. She commented how beautiful the picture was on the box and reassured me that all 2000 of the pieces were in the box. She told me she had checked personally by assembling the puzzle then sealing the pieces in a plastic bag. The reason I felt badly was that I knew there was no chance that the puzzle would ever be whole again. I had brought it to give a single piece to each person in St Saviour's and St Nicholas' to illustrate a sermon on how we are all just a small but important part in God's great vision for His Church.

But the assistant was so right. Making sure we have all the pieces to put in place is so important. Today's short reading is the last piece in a jigsaw that we've been looking at for three weeks: the second major section of Jesus' teaching recorded in Matthew's Gospel. It's a passage that is hugely relevant to our lives as Christians in the 21st Century. Let's remind ourselves of what we've learnt so far as Simon has started to construct the picture on the box.

In the first sermon, we learnt that Jesus' mission had three particular elements:

- Firstly, to teach in a way that helped people to encounter God, rather than live the rule-bound way of the Pharisees that masked God;
- Secondly, to proclaim the good news that God's Kingdom that was open to all;
- Finally, to bring wholeness and healing to people who were broken, sick and marginalised - people who the scribes considered excluded from God's realm. We think of the disciples as being set apart - perhaps, special - but they too were a disparate group showing that all - even you and me - are welcome in God's Kingdom and in God's service.

In the second sermon, we focused on Jesus' words to prepare the disciples for the work of spreading the same Good News themselves. In particular, Jesus counselled them about the anxiety and rejection they might face. He talked of the endurance that would be needed for this work. Such endurance comes from emulating Jesus' example of trusting His heavenly father implicitly and communicating constantly with Him through prayer. The disciples were to do the same.

So if I were to think about the jigsaw picture this reading is beginning to evoke for me, it is of an inviting calm sea with a brooding sky above, punctured by the setting sun. The inviting sea is Jesus' example - drawing us closer to Him and the work of helping others to recognise all that His way offers. The brooding sky shows that - however worthwhile this work is - life might be stormy, although the Sun - our relationship with God - provides hope and encouragement.

But the picture is not yet complete. There is detail missing, which today's reading provides. Let me explain.

The wider passage started with Jesus' mission, before talking about how the disciples would - with some challenges along the way - take that mission further into the world. Immediately before our reading this morning the passage broadens further by describing the attributes of a future

band of disciples: people who would acknowledge Jesus, recognise the truth of the gospel and allow Jesus to take an important position in their lives. Disciples like you and I.

Today's three verses explain what happens next. These people who welcome the message of existing disciples are welcoming Jesus into their lives. And in welcoming Jesus, they are also inviting God into their lives and becoming part of God's big picture: being part of God's mission to the World.

And the reason you and I are exploring our faith today is because it is a chain that continues to this day. People through the generations have continued to believe and then inspired others to do the same. Each of us can probably remember who inspired us and how they demonstrated that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Now it is our turn to inspire others so that they make their own commitments in the future.

But that passage also makes it clear that, whilst all who welcome God into their life will receive the same Kingdom rewards, the earthly effect of the new believers will vary according to the qualities of the established disciples that inspired them:

- Many new disciples will have been inspired by acts of kindness that follow Jesus' example.
- Some will have observed people living good lives explicitly acting out scriptural teaching.
- A few will have encountered established disciples who have taken the time to know them well, before deeply enriching them by showing the relevance of God's ways to specific aspects of the non-believer's life.

It is human nature that the disciple each new believer encounters, will be the type of believer they become.

There is no doubt that all three examples are present for people today. But which inspiration are you providing to those around you - kindness, the example of a life explicitly centred on Christ, or something more direct?

Today, I want you to think about how you are providing a personal legacy of faith. For me, the part of the jigsaw that has been missing is a fishing boat with someone who is harvesting the calm sea of Jesus' example and taking it ashore, into the world. For me, each one of us is that person on the boat. We each need to ask ourselves three questions:

- How am I speaking God's truth into the lives of those I know and love?
- Which people recognise that I am living a life that is explicitly Gospel inspired?
- What acts of kindness might people glimpse as I live my life?

Each of these actions provides a seed of faith that creates an impact for others. You might consider these as the actions of an infectious Christian spreading God's love.

In these days of Coronavirus, we've become familiar with the idea of the R-number - the number of individuals an infected person spreads the virus to. We have seen how a small change in R-number makes the difference between the virus being contained and the virus taking off like wildfire. But unlike Coronavirus, we want our Christian R-number - the number of people who have become committed Christians through our direct, personal efforts - to be as big as possible. So what is your personal R-number? How infectious are you? Will you help the Good News to spread like wildfire?

This passage reminds us that our personal, Christian R-number varies with the way we interact with the world around us. To borrow another Coronavirus term, the Super Spreaders are the people who build relationships and then speak the direct relevance of God's Word into people's lives. And the disciples who just hope that others will notice their Jesus-inspired kindness are least effective.

But perhaps the biggest factor that protects the world from infectious Christians, is our own inaction. Inaction based on doubting our own abilities, concerns about what people will think of us and - perhaps - memories of people with sandwich boards hectoring passers-by. In response I'd say think of the picture we have been constructing over recent weeks. Remember that our relationship with God will keep the brooding clouds at bay and see us through the challenges - and I can assure you that there's lots of earthly help available too.

Please - overcome inaction and become an infectious Christian. Increase your Christian R-number. It really does come down to you and I to determine what the final jigsaw picture looks like. You see, we are the final pieces needed to make the picture complete for the next generation.

Amen