

Lord Jesus Christ, open our ears, our minds and our hearts to receive your word.

They came, crowds of them, in villages and in towns, journeying across hillsides, filling the synagogues for teaching, all world-weary and hungry for what was on offer.

They came because they were unable to access a physician, because they were victims of a government demanding extortionate taxes, because they were disillusioned with life as it was. They came with questions about forgiveness, about family disputes, about whose laws to follow, about property and wealth management and how to access the eternal life on offer.

They came, unsure of their direction, harassed and helpless, sheep without a shepherd.

Such overwhelming need, such potential for changing lives meant that this master shepherd needed more than a curate to fulfil his mission, more even than a few LLM's or a trained pastoral assistant or two. Shepherding was to be a community effort, so the disciples are summoned.

But who are they, these disciples? Well there's fisherman Peter of course, extraordinarily insightful at times, but who at other times puts his foot firmly in his mouth. There're James and John, also fishermen, but with an underlying ambition to secure places at the top table in eternity. There's Thomas, the sceptic who prefers doing his own research, Matthew, the once government tax collector cum money shark, Simon the Zealot into politics so perhaps looking for a new political leader, and of course Judas, easily bought into traitorhood. Others we know very little about except their names. They're the quiet ones, their real personas overshadowed by the more flamboyant characters.

None, then, are model citizens, or even biblical scholars, they're just a motley crew of imperfect people inspired by someone offering answers to the deepest questions that they struggle to understand.

So having been summoned these disciples are urged to pray for helpers. And the answer comes, but it's unexpected. It's them - each of them is the answer to their prayer. Was there perhaps some consternation? Us? Did they try to say "We can't?" Did they say, "We're not trained, we've not got the skills?"

No. Having been summoned, these unskilled disciples simply go. There's no time for internships or studying towards a degree in theology. They just go, with nothing but Jesus's authority, a message of good news, details about who to seek out and their own faith.

Fast forward to now. In towns, in villages, the harassed and helpless, the world weary and hungry, are still seeking healing of various kinds, are still troubled about the growing evils in society, are still hungry for answers, still hungry for hope. But crowds no longer come; instead they look to alternative ideologies, away from God, whom they consider irrelevant in today's complex world.

But there is still harvest potential, and so the disciples are summoned. They gather to pray for help, for answers to ethical questions, to learn from the master shepherd, while feeding on the heavenly food provided.

And who are they, these disciples? Some are already committed labourers, some have business commitments so are short on time, others hold individual opinions and are sceptical about accepted truths, some come for the fellowship over coffee, and then there are the quiet ones following in the shadows, sheltering behind the more well-known characters. They're a motley crew, these disciples, imperfect people, drawn together by their commitment to following a God whom they struggle to understand. Not all are learned people, and few are erudite biblical scholars.

And the answer to their prayers comes, but it's unexpected. It's them, it's us. We're in some way, the answer to our prayers. Is there perhaps some consternation? Do we try to say "We can't, we're not trained, we've not got the skills?"

It can be tempting to think that other disciples are being called, those more qualified, more skilled. But discipleship comes with shepherding responsibility built in, and the authority to share the gospel from personal experience, providing opportunities for healing. Those words we hear sometimes at the end of a service: "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord," are words of commission as well as a blessing.

So where are we to go? To a soapbox at Hyde Park Corner or to approach strangers? Well that may be the calling for some courageous and high profile disciples, and indeed in a couple of weeks the message of the kingdom will be taken to a tent on the Bourne Green where there may well be sheep looking for a shepherd. But no, we're to begin with those familiar to us, those in our workplace, our book group, the Pilates class, or friends who are searching for hope.

And there will always be the fear of not having the right words, or how what is being offered might be received. But Paul reminds us that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and he should know. Every summons from God is going to carry with it a cost. Is faith really faith if it's never tested?

But behind every disciple is the family of God, praying together, worshipping together, supporting each other, deepening relationships. And behind that family is the ultimate shepherd, urging us on, feeding us and pouring his love into our hearts. So much, given so freely. Are we up for some shepherding? AMEN