



Sermon: It's Harvest time – are you ready?

Awareness Week 2017

Drama: by OtB team – Jesus and the Taxman

Reading: Matthew 9.35-38

To be honest, it's not often that you hear Christian music played in public outside of church, or maybe in a mini-cab driven by a Christian of course. So, imagine yourself sitting in a café one Saturday morning next to an open window listening to a busker with a saxophone playing the best of English hymnody and songs – from the ancient to the modern. He has a quite a range – you pick out 'Great is thy faithfulness' then 'O Happy Day' (the old version), 'Will your anchor hold', along with 'Rock of ages'. He seemed to be going through the *Redemption Hymnal* which perhaps you grew up with. Then, as you listen, the man with the sax moves into the 1980s and 90s. You hear classics from *Mission Praise* 1, 2 – and 3: 'Majesty, worship his majesty', followed swiftly by 'The king is among us'. After a couple more, he moves on – this time to what seemed to be the best of Graham Kendrick: 'Shine Jesus shine', 'The servant King', 'Meekness and majesty'. You find yourself humming along. Then 'sax-man' plays a tune of a song written by another 'giant of chorus-writing', this time Chris Bowater. A chorus which is one of the hardest to sing – not due to the complexity of the arrangement or indeed the tune – but of the subject matter and the words.

The song is this one:

**Here I am, wholly available
As for me, I will serve the Lord
Here I am, wholly available
As for me, I will serve the Lord**

**The fields are white unto harvest
But O, the labourers are so few
So Lord, I give myself to help the reaping
To gather precious souls unto you**

**The time is right in the nation
For works of power and authority
God's looking for a people who are willing
To be counted in his glorious victory**

**As salt are we ready to savour?
In darkness are we ready to be light?
God's seeking out a very special people
To manifest his truth and his might**

Chris Bowater © 1981 Sovereign Lifestyle Music

As soon as you hear it – you stop your humming.

There is a lot going on in this song – but at its heart is the willingness to give our all to Christ in order to be signposts for Christ to those around us.

In the song, Chris Bowater picks up the words from this year's Open the Book Awareness Week's reading from Matthew 9.35-38. But what's Chris's chorus played on a saxophone one Saturday and telling kids Bible stories got to do with it?

Let's have a think.

Up to this point in the passage we've been hearing how Jesus has been demonstrating what it means to do 'the good news'. He's been healing (a paralysed man in verses 1-8; those who are visually impaired and unable to speak in verses 27-30 and 32-34, along with a lady with a haemorrhaging complaint in verses 20-22); he's called Matthew the tax collector (a traitor and a cheat) in verses 9-13; answered a seemingly random question about fasting in verses 14-17; AND raised the dead in verses 18-19 and 23-26. All of this shows Jesus' heart for people – people on the fringe of society, people who were being oppressed, people in desperate circumstances – even people who have sided with the enemy. Jesus touches all. His message is a message for all of us – whoever we are, whatever our background and circumstances – whatever we have done.

The Bible is full of Jesus – the Old Testament foretells him, the New Testament reveals him. And unsurprisingly when people encounter Jesus – their lives often change for good. Of course there were a lot of folks (like the Pharisees in the chapter) who hated Jesus and his message, who refused to be called and to change. But more often than not – people were blessed. It's still happening today.

There is a problem though. You would have probably recognised the songs the 'sax-man' was playing on that Saturday, yet for most people passing by they would have been oblivious. Sadly it's the same when it comes to the Bible. For most people, it's a dusty old book stuck up on the top-shelf. Never opened, never referred to, never thought of.

The statistics around the use of the Bible in our culture are a bit grim to be honest especially when it comes to the next generation – our children – your children and grandchildren are just not connected to Scripture. I won't bore you with a long list of numbers but if you are interested, do have a look at the research carried out by Bible Society a few years ago – it makes challenging reading: [Pass it on report](#).

It's not all bad news though as the same research shows that when children (and their parents) encounter Bible stories – they want more!

This is where Bible Society's wonderful primary schools project Open the Book comes in – bringing the Bible to life for hundreds of thousands of school children (in fact over half a million) on a regular basis.

The whole concept is really simple – teams of people like you (actually 14,000 people like you) from churches like this, up and down the country get together weekly or fortnightly to tell Bible stories in their local primary schools. They dress up – produce props and have a whole load of fun – simply sharing stories from Scripture with children. And the kids? Well, the kids love it... one child from recent research said:

'It helps me understand more about the miracles. It was much better seeing it because it helped you understand what it was like from a normal person's point of view. If you just read it – because the Bible doesn't have any pictures – you don't know what it looks like. Being acted out makes it come to life.'

A volunteer Storyteller told Bible Society:

'I've worked with children most of my life and I just love them. For me it's just so magical seeing their faces and the things that their faces light up at. It's surprising, really.'

Teachers love it too. Andy Browne, a Head Teacher from Wantage said:

'At the heart of the impact of OtB on (our) primary school are the relationships that have developed over many years between the members of the OtB team and the pupils and staff at the school. As well as armfuls of props and bags bulging with costumes (mainly dressing gowns and tea-towels), the team from OtB bring warmth, kindness, generosity and love into school. Some would say that the presence of Christ enters the school on the mornings that OtB is with us.'

Let's get back to the passage and the song.

After all this activity Jesus turns to his followers and says, 'Look – there's a lot more work to be done – there's a harvest waiting – I need your help to bring it in.'

In terms of Open the Book – there is a harvest waiting to be brought in. Every week the small team, based at the Bible Society offices in Swindon get requests from primary schools who've heard about Open the Book, and who want it for their school – and more volunteers and churches need to get involved to meet the demand.

We need to get back the tune that 'sax-man' played – because the words of the song make challenging reading don't they?

**The fields are white unto harvest
But O, the labourers are so few
So Lord, I give myself to help the reaping
To gather precious souls unto you**

Perhaps this is the first time you have heard about Open the Book – perhaps you've heard about it many times, so I'm asking you today to pray carefully about this work. Could you

join a team? Could you start a new team in your community? Today will you 'give yourself to help the reaping' and take the Bible that's full of Jesus – into your primary school?

If you want to know more, here's a great video to watch: vimeo.com/114557432

Or you can contact the team at enquiries@openthebook.net or call 01793 418355.

Thanks for listening.