

The Kingdom of God is at Hand

Think about the last time you went on a journey, or holiday, or anywhere away from home where you were going to be away for more than a day. How much did you take, how much preparation did you do in planning what you were taking, what you would need for the trip. Lots, probably. If you are anything like me, it may all be packed at the last minute, but the lists, physical or mental, have been developing for many days, if not weeks. So why was Jesus asking these 70 chosen people to go on a journey into places unknown and take nothing for the journey, no clothes, no food, no money. They were to go to places beyond the family village and trust entirely on the hospitality they may or may not receive when they got there. Now granted it was a different era, hospitality was different then, it was not unusual for the village elder to offer food and protection to strangers. But when you ventured beyond your family village, you entered a dangerous place; death was always there in the shadows, always a possibility. Travellers relied on the graciousness of the village elder to provide not just food but also protection. So these travellers were, literally, like lambs in the midst of wolves. But in this ancient Middle East world, there were also no free gifts; all gifts came with strings attached. The proverb, 'don't thank me, you will repay me', epitomises this. Jesus advises those he is sending to be discerning in the hospitality they accept. If their peace is reciprocated, they are to remain there, preach and heal the sick. If it is not, they are to go to publically return the insult they have received. Both these gestures; preaching and healing and publically insulting, bear witness that 'the reign of God approaches and is indeed near'.

Notice, these 70 were not volunteers, Jesus did not ask who wanted to go, he chose the 70 and he sent them. So who were these 70? We are not given any names, they were not the 12, and as far as we are aware none of them became the 12. So what do we make of these 70 who willing went out into places unknown armed only with 'special powers' to preach and heal. Do we see them as just our clergy, or do we see everyone here as one of the 70? I suspect they represent everyone here. I see the 70 not as the ordained, but the baptised. I think our gospel today is about every Christian anywhere in the world, today, tomorrow or next week. It is about the everyday baptised person who has Good News to share with those they meet. In different ways, at different times we all have the opportunity, and privilege, of sharing Jesus with other people. Sometimes it is done by speaking, sometimes it is done through actions, but everyone has the ability and the invitation to show those around them who Jesus is for them. Our gospel tells us the 70 were 'empowered'. That can be a scary thought for some. It is both an assurance, but also a challenge. We are no longer able to dismiss our call to witness by simply saying, 'oh I'm no good at public speaking', or 'I'm not sure what I would say'. We are assured that we are all empowered, we are not told we all have a natural ability to speak in public, but that God has empowered us to share God's message with all we meet.

At the end of our service today we will all be charged 'go, in peace to love and serve the Lord' and our response will be 'in the name of Christ'. That does not just mean, go home until you come back again next time. It means go and may God be with you in all you do between now and the next time you are back. Go, and take God with you and share God with all you meet, that charge is for everyone, all of us.

I hope it is clear I am not suggesting this is an easy thing to do. Jesus warns the disciples that they will meet resistance. He warned them about those who will not return their greeting of peace. Today we often meet resistance to following God, today we may be perceived by many as 'odd' or 'weird'. There are many in our community for whom God and the Church is a negative thing. Some have been hurt by the Church, some have been put off by a message of fire and brimstone, some have been told they will never be good enough, or will never 'meet the mark', some have just never heard the message or never heard it in a way that 'speaks to them'. That is the challenge before all of us, are we willing to be the one who shows the love of God to someone who is hurting, or antagonistic; are we ready to be the one who just might be able to light a spark in the life of another person. We cannot always know how our lives touch others, we cannot always know what effect our words, or example have on the life of someone else. Sometimes others may ask us about our faith, other times they see us something which changes them in a positive way, although they may not know what has caused it. Jesus tells the disciples when they return excited about the successes they had, not to bask in their own glory, because all power they have comes from

God. We cannot bring God to others by our own ability; we can only do it through the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

One of the problems in 'modern churches' today is that we are focused on 'statistics' and 'numbers'. We see 'growth' only reflected in 'people in the pews', we become fixated on 'the bottom line', we are at risk of becoming like the Archdeacon in the recent ABC program *The Rev*, in measuring success by the number of people who we see on Sunday morning. But God's message is more than that, and it is not us who can tell how successful we have been. We are charged to take 'God into the world, share the message of the kingdom of God with all you meet'.

Paul, in writing to the Galatians, implores them to 'never give up'. Don't focus on outward appearances, it is not what we look like that is important, but what we do. Paul tells us 'by the Spirit alone is everything transformed' and this 'new creation is everything'.

Look again at the instructions Jesus gives to the seventy: they are to enter a town, and if welcomed they are to stay - that's Christian hospitality. They are to eat what is given to them -that's table fellowship. Then they are to cure the sick - that's compassion and care. Finally, they are to proclaim that the kingdom of God has come near. We often hear people speak of the kingdom of God as a metaphorical and idyllic symbol of life as it will never be. But this is not Jesus' message to the seventy as he sends them out. Jesus declares that, within the mission and ministry of these believers, the kingdom of God will come near. There is something about the Christian faith that must be lived in order to be understood. Jesus knew this, and so he sent his disciples out into the world with only the message of the kingdom to guide them. It was all they needed. We can stay in our comfort zones, safely skirting around the real issues of faith that call out to us. But if we do, if we refuse to get our hands dirty and our hearts changed - then we risk missing the kingdom of God that has already come near in Jesus Christ. We risk missing the terrifying and empowering journey that requires nothing but faith in God to sustain us and trust in fellow travellers to support us. Jesus is sending everyone one of us out into a complex and hostile world. The bad news is that all we carry is a message. The good news is that the message is this: the kingdom of God has come near!

St. Teresa of Avila's well-known saying reminds us that we carry on the ministry that Jesus gave us:

Christ has no body on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out to the world.

Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which he is to bless others now.

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