

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 15 Year B 2021

The Gospel we encounter today sees Jesus encourage, indeed exhort, the Twelve to travel light. Earlier in Mark's Gospel Jesus had already chosen and appointed the Twelve to be with him and to share in his proclamation of the Kingdom. And now he activates that appointment by sending them out two by two. In the Old Testament two witnesses were required by law for valid testimony. And so, as they are sent out in pairs, the disciples can give witness to the in-breaking of the Kingdom. By going out in pairs assurance is given that the good news of God's renewal of the earth is not simply the misguided musings of one delusional person.

But the ever-practical Jesus, rather than just send them to it, gives guidelines about how they are to travel and what they are to do about lodging. They are to travel light and so open themselves to the risk of hospitality. Because hospitality is a risk – both ways. You never know what you will get when you *ask for* hospitality. And you'll never know what you'll get if you *extend* hospitality. The disciples are to take no bread, because food should be provided for them. No traveller's bag, (the equivalent of a sleeping bag) because lodging should also be provided. And for the same reason, no money. Sandals, yes, and a staff, because they will constantly be 'on the way'. If they are met with inhospitality and rejection in any place (as Jesus experienced in the story immediately before what we hear today, in Nazareth, his hometown) then they are to shake the dust from under their feet and move on. Because just as Jesus experienced inhospitality and rejection, as he sends the disciples on their way, they too should expect that this will be in store for them.

Importantly, the lightness with which they are to travel will show *trust* in the mission that has been entrusted to them, trust that God has called them to this task, this high and holy calling. They must also have confidence – *trust* - that the treasure they are carrying and hoping to share in the form the Gospel, the Good News of the kingdom, so vastly outweighs any burden their stay may impose. Even if they are met with trouble, inhospitality, rejection, none of that compares to the fruits, the blessings, that will come when they *are* welcomed, when the good news is received.

The mission the disciples were commissioned to share we too share. That we are here today shows something of dynamic behind Jesus' commissioning of the Twelve. This work Jesus invites the Twelve to share in cannot be a once off occurrence. It is not a unique, historical moment in the life of the church. Every age and every context must find ways of continuing and extending this work. If not, if there is no ongoing proclamation of the kingdom, then there is no church! We are only ever a generation away from extinction! Just one. We are living with the residue of *three generations* failing to adequately impart the gospel to our context. The work of the Twelve reminds us of an essential part of the church's life, that it is always a community on mission, always entrusted with imparting the supreme treasure of the Gospel and the healing ministry of Christ. To be sure, it has been a struggle for many in the contemporary church to wake to the fact that yes, we do have a mission, and that all who bear the name of Christ are in fact missionaries.

Now, for us this ought to play out in two principal ways, two ways in which we might further the gospel of Jesus Christ in the world. Firstly, one which is perhaps the more obvious dimension, but for most of us I imagine, one that requires a significant mental (and indeed spiritual) shift. Namely, that we see *ourselves* as part of this work. What Jesus says to his disciples today, we need to hear spoken to us. Now, there has been a long temptation to see the work of announcing the good news and furthering Christ's presence in the world as the 'job' of the clergy or the professionally religious. But all the faithful people of God need to be actively involved in witness, in service, because this is a pattern of ministry given to us in the Gospel and a pattern by which the Church has been constantly renewed. Yes, the clergy have their vital place, serving you at the altar, the pulpit, the bedside. But it is the laity – you - by whom the world will be converted. And however lousy a Christian you are (and as soon as you think you're a pretty good one, you've just taken two steps back), you are the best Christian someone knows. You are their closest and firmest link with the Body of Christ. As Jesus sends out the Twelve, and who must learn to trust, trust that this is true, that *you are* the best Christian someone knows. All of you, in your own spheres of influence, the circles in which live and work, can be the arena in which you can carry Christ's truth.

Then secondly, we draw back from the individual and personal to the local and communal, to what we might call *the quality* of our shared life. *This* place, our worship, our activities, our shared life, is a field for evangelism. And in this too, we all have a responsibility, a part to play. Now, we often take this to mean as ‘getting more people to do more stuff.’ But this approach sells us short. We are really taking about culture here. At its most basic understanding culture is the passing on of a set of beliefs and values. That is exactly what we should be seeking to do. Again, we must learn to *trust* that there is a distinct Christian culture, a church culture - a set of belief and values – that is worth passing on, and right to assert it. Running after the fool’s errand of making the church ‘relevant’ has only left a wake of ruin. The gospel of Jesus Christ is *not* served when our life, our beliefs, our culture, is indistinguishable from those around us. When we speak of proclaiming the good news, we are talking about communication. Yes, we can do that by the quality of our own personal lives. But we also communicate the truth of Christ by the quality of our shared life. When people look at us, they ought to be able to say, *yes, something ‘else’ is going on here. These people believe in something important.*

When we understand that, this very place, and all that we do together, and what we do here day by day, week by week *actually communicates something*, then we will learn to take what we do here *seriously*. Not be confused with a dour joylessness. But what we seek to communicate is nothing less than the truth of the Lord Christ, and that he can be known, indeed encountered amongst us! So, yes, this is serious business. This is why our personal conduct when we come to receive Communion matters. It is why we invest in music, vestments, in a beautiful sanctuary. Why we must take care of our physical surroundings, that it is well cared for, that it looks like it is loved. And it is loved precisely because something important happens here. This is why we must be generous and sincere in our welcome and hospitality because we are Christ’s living body. And together, these actions and attitudes, collectively communicate something. That through his word, through his body the church, through the sacrament, Christ is encountered. Even here, even amongst us, we meet the Lord! We must learn to trust that this is true. And that through our own lives and our life together, we can make Christ known. Amen.