

LABOURERS FOR THE HARVEST - HOMILY FOR TRINITY III – 2022

St Luke is the only gospel writer who speaks of Our Lord sending out 70 disciples in groups of two as we heard in the gospel this morning. Much of the rest of what we heard is also recorded by Matthew and Mark, but they make no mention of 70 disciples. What are we to make of this second sending out as recorded by Luke of a much greater number of disciples than the sending out of the twelve, which Luke had already recorded in the previous chapter...chapter nine?

The number 70 was a significant number for Jewish society of the time. Firstly 70 was the number of elders who were chosen to help Moses with the task of leading and directing the people of Israel as they were wandering in the wilderness.. (*You can read about that in Numbers Ch11*). Moses could not accomplish his onerous tasks of leadership and judgement. One person can only do so much! It was his father-in-law who advised he choose 70 elders from the 12 tribes of Israel to assist him in this task.

As well, the supreme council of the Jews at the time, the Sanhedrin, as it was called, was comprised of 70 men. This group made all the important decisions about just about every aspect of Jewish life, that was still left to the Jews themselves to determine, during the Roman occupation of Israel.

In the ancient world there were reckoned to be a grand total of 70 nations. Quite possibly, St Luke, is here alluding to the universal mission of the followers of Jesus to take the good news to every nation in the world.

Whatever, Luke's intention may be, the number of disciples who went forth in the Lord's name to the towns he was journeying through is a significant number in recognition of its size, if nothing else... there were 35 pairs of disciples making seventy of them! Luke records Jesus saying.. "*The harvest is great but the labourers are few, pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest*" (*Luke 10:2*) St Matthew in his gospel records the very same words (*Matt:9:37*). The harvest is great but the labourers are few... never were truer words spoken.

In the western world, and we in Australia are very much part of it, most of the churches are presently facing a vocations crisis. Let me give you a few indications

of that. In Germany the Catholic church was ordaining about 240 priests a year in the 1990's. That average has now plummeted to about 70! In France, the number of active catholic priests has declined by about 50% over the last 30 years to about 14,000 today, of whom about half are 65 or over. There are about 100 French dioceses and this year only 120 priests will be ordained. In the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne, the Archbishop is proposing a 75% reduction in the number of parishes, that is amalgamations of groups of four parishes into one, so acute is the present and future shortage of Priests in the Archdiocese.

Its not just a Catholic thing either. In the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne there are currently 34 vacant parishes, that's about 18%. Ten years ago the number at any given time used to be about 12 or about 7%. Small country Anglican dioceses in Australia often find themselves with many long term vacant parishes without a resident priest. For example, a priest we all know well, Fr Martin Nadarajan, recently became the first Anglican Parish Priest in the town of Ararat in five years. The Diocese of Ballarat lists over 40% of its parishes as vacant. Here's a last figure that is of great concern... the number of orthodox Anglo-catholic priests under the age of fifty in the whole of Australia would be less than 10 and probably quite a bit less! The Labourers are few...very few indeed.

There is, of course an underlying reason for much of this and that is the overall decline of the Christian faith, especially in what are termed its 'mainstream' forms. A decline which is now so glaringly apparent. Here's a few numbers for you that highlight the present situation in that regard.

The Episcopal Church of America itself released figures in 2019 which suggest that come the year 2040, if present trends of decline in the Episcopal Church of the USA continue (trends which indicate an ongoing ageing of the church population and a 25% decline per decade) ... there won't be anything much of that church left.

The story is very similar in the Anglican Church of Canada where a 2018 report to that church stated... *'simple projections from our data suggest that there will be no numbers or givers in the Anglican Church of Canada by approximately the*

year 2040.' The story is eerily similar in England where worshipping Anglicans now make up less than 2% of the population.

Here in Australia the latest 2021 census figures show that people who state that they are Christians have declined to 44% of the population, down from 60% in 2011. Roman Catholics make up about 20% of our population but less than 10% of them now attend Sunday Mass compared to an attendance rate of 75% back in 1954. Even though the Catholic population has more than doubled in the last 60 years, about one million less Catholics are going to Sunday Mass now than in the 1950's.

Us Anglicans remain the second largest denomination, at least in terms of the Denomination indicated in the census form, we are about 9 - 10% of the total population with about 3-4% of that number regularly attending the worship of our church ... that is about 80 -125,000 people.

What do we do in the face of so much indication of serious decline? The answer is we must redouble our efforts to proclaim our sincere belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Today's gospel is a powerful reminder to all of us that our church and our faith, stands in great need of willing workers who will proclaim the message of salvation... the message that Jesus Christ is risen and that His saving death and mighty Resurrection is the true hope for everyone who will turn to him repentance and faith.

As said last week, there is a cost to that willing discipleship. There is no comfortable rose-garden waiting for any who will answer the call to proclaim the good news.

The ministry of faithful discipleship and proclamation is always a challenge and answering the call to serve the Lord as an ordained minister especially requires courage, perseverance and above all of that it requires a humble reliance on God's grace which is the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us in order to achieve that which we cannot do for ourselves.

As well, there are many of us in this church who are of an age where we can no longer set off on a ministry of discipleship as an ordained person. However, we can still play our part (and we must play our part) by always remaining faithful to our

church. Especially in our faithfulness and loyalty to its Sunday worship, every Sunday. Especially we can play our part in our kindness, encouragement, friendship and generosity to the younger members of our congregation. Especially we can play our part by our faithfulness to enabling its mission by our sacrificial giving. Especially we can play an absolutely crucial part in our devotion to daily Bible reading and daily prayer. In that regard, and in particular, making it our business to pray daily, every day and tirelessly, that the Lord would send labourers in his harvest.