

Pentecost 6 C  
July 8, 2007: St Aidan's & Wesley 10.30am  
Commissioning of Elizabeth Richardson

### **Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20**

When I sit down to watch the news or read the newspaper it is usually with the intention of becoming better informed, but it sometimes has the side effect of bringing on a feeling of helplessness in the face of the crises of the world. Some of you might have a similar reaction. Stephanie Dowrick once wrote in the SMH that it's important for your mental health to occasionally have a news free day. I am sure she is right. It is easy to find yourself numb before the tragedies that fill our screens night after night.

We are all involved in Christ's mission of renewing the world,  
of bringing hatred and injustice to an end,  
of establishing God's kingdom of grace and peace.  
That, I imagine, is why it hurts –  
because we dream, with Christ, of a renewed humanity.  
In the face of the intractable problems of the planet  
we feel that our efforts are, at best, a drop in the ocean.  
Are our efforts at faithfulness and mission  
of any significance at all?

These are the questions we bring to God today as we worship.  
Before reflecting on them,  
two details about the reading from Luke are interesting.  
They help us to understand what the story meant  
for the people to whom the gospel was written,  
and can therefore help us see what it means for us today.

Firstly, there is the number of disciples Jesus appoints and sends out. Our translation said seventy, some others say seventy two. This is due to there being variations in the early versions of Luke. The fact that some say 70 and others 72 gives us a clue about what the number means.

Moses, in *Numbers* chapter 11, chooses 70 Elders to be his helpers. This may have been in Luke's mind. But in actual fact it is more likely that he was thinking of the table of the nations of the world which is found in chapter 10 of the book of *Genesis*. In the Hebrew translation of Genesis there are 70 nations of the world. But in the Greek translation, which was commonly used in the first century, there were 72.

This is the hint.

The fact that some early versions of Luke have 70 and some 72 indicates that it is this table of nations that Luke has in mind.

When Luke writes that Jesus sent 70 or 72 preachers, his first century 'listeners' would recognise this as symbolic of Christ sending his followers out to all the nations.

Only Luke has this large a number being sent – Matthew and Mark have it as being only the 12 disciples. It is clearly very important to Luke.

The message: there is a worldwide scope to the harvest to which Jesus sends out his labourers.

The second interesting feature of the passage is the puzzling instruction to the disciples that they are to "shake their dust off the feet".

The Jews of the first century had a custom that, if ever they went onto foreign soil, they would shake the foreign dust of their feet before they returned to Israel.

It was an action that characterized their feelings about the absolute holiness of the land of Israel.

So strongly did they believe that God was with Israel alone, that they didn't want to contaminate the nation by mixing its soil with the soil of 'godless' lands.

But here the dust image has nothing to do with that.

The message: Jesus sends his labourers out with a new understanding of holiness, and it has nothing to do with 'nationalism'.

Rather, all those places where people welcome the sign of God's presence are sacred, regardless of where they are located. There are no borders around God.

Now, back – firstly - to what the text says to the church today, and – secondly – to whether or not what we are doing is worth doing at all, especially when the task seems so daunting.

What might the text be saying for us today?

Firstly, I think it is saying this:

Elizabeth Richardson is the future of the Uniting Church!

Why do I say that?

There is a quite a crisis in the provision of ordained ministers.

We may wish it were otherwise, and there are various reasons for it, but whatever the reasons there is a positive to be gained:

We are being reminded of the importance of lay leadership.

What we need to do is overcome our sense that lay ministry is somehow an 'inferior' form of ministry.

Certainly there are differences, and there are distinct tasks,

But as St Paul would say – we are all part of the one body,  
and each part is needed for the whole to function well.

*The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the  
harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.*

I am a labourer; you are a labourer; Elizabeth is a labourer.

We are all in it together.

It's everyone's job,

and we're all as important in God's plans as any other.

You don't need an elegant degree in theology

to love and share good news. We are all Christ's ministers.

Now, to the second contemporary issue.

We are being sent out, *like lambs among wolves*.

We are being sent out:

to share the peace of Christ,

to respond in mercy to sickness and brokenness,

and to talk about the nearness of God, of God's kingdom,

to the world.

That is Christ's commission to the whole church.

It is a privilege, but it is also a problem.

These days – perhaps in many 'days' –

the church tends to be retreating back upon itself.

I imagine it is because we are finding it increasingly hard  
to see significance in what we manage to do in the world.

The harvest is so large – that is, the amount to be done is so vast –  
yet we seem to be achieving little return for a lot of effort.

However, there is an important message here

for all parts of the church where we are disheartened.

It comes when the 70 / 72 return from their work.

What Jesus would say to us,

is the same as what he said when his labourers reported back:

"I watched Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning."

*What?*

All I did was help with Sunday Club

so that the kids might have a little grounding in the faith.

"I watched Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning."

*What?*

All I did was help at the Veranda so that struggling families  
might have a little extra food on the table.

"I watched Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning."

*What?*

All I did was go to pray on Thursday mornings for the sick and the struggling.

"I watched Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning."

So what on earth has Jesus seen?

Something which the disciples missed?

Is he having an hallucination?

It's no wonder we rarely hear this reading  
about the return of the seventy although we take great delight  
in sending them out.

This bolt of lightning is going to take some explanation.

Clearly the language is not literal but it is metaphor.

It is like saying – 'the sky fell in';

we know it didn't really happen, but we know what you mean.

The issue is a matter of vision; small and large vision.

The disciples see the small,

individual incidents of the overcoming of evil,

but in these small incidents Jesus sees a larger picture.

Jesus sees the demise of injustice and darkness itself.

The disciples saw small errors corrected.

Jesus sees the whole power of evil take a tumble.

It might seem very hard and disheartening when we  
are among those seventy that Jesus sends out, with no sandals,  
to say "the kingdom of God has come near."

But God and his Christ can see our seemingly small efforts  
against the broad horizon.

The kingdom of God has come near,

and we might not be able to see the full significance

of our small part in that *nearness*,

but through us, and many others, the nearness remains.

God's tide of love and truth is pushing back the currents of pain and longing  
with the small waves of that people like us are making.