

Sermon for the Feast of St Luke
Christ Church South Yarra - 18 October 2009

‘THE LORD appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs, to every town and place where he himself intended to go’, we just heard in today’s Gospel reading. And I wonder what the emotions of those newly-appointed ambassadors would have been like when Jesus sent them away? No doubt there would have been a sense of excitement, certainly, a sense of new beginnings, perhaps even adventure. But there would have also been a sense of bereavement, of sadness of leaving behind familiar surroundings, friends and family. And then there would probably have been a sense of awe, perhaps even inadequacy, of feeling ill equipped for the daunting task that lies ahead: the task of being an Apostle, of being sent out.

What was it that went through the disciples’ minds as Jesus directed them away from the familiar surroundings of their Galilean home to travel away from Nazareth and the cities around Lake Galilee? For many of them, the Lake had been their breadwinner. As fishermen, Peter and Andrew, James and John relied on the Lake for their livelihood, while Levi collected the road tolls on the main trading route—the *Via Maris*—that encircled the lake. Most of the people whom Jesus called into discipleship were Galileans; many had a home and family in the harbour town of Capernaum. Until now, they had remained in the landscape and among the people that had been their home, and which had been so familiar to them. And now Jesus sent them abroad: away from their Lake, their families and friends.

Unlike St Matthew’s parallel of this morning’s gospel, which tells us that the disciples are to go ‘nowhere among the gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans’, St Luke does not explain in detail where it is that Jesus sends the disciples—‘every town and place where he himself intended to go’ covers a

huge area. In order to fill in the gaps, we need to take a look at the previous chapters of Luke's Gospel. A few chapters before today's reading, in chapter 6, we hear how 'a great multitude from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon' – the heartlands of the Jewish faith and its neighbouring territories, came to hear Jesus at the lakeside and to seek healing. And in chapter 8 we hear how Jesus himself travelled across the Lake to 'the country of the Gerasenes' – still on the lakeshore, but no longer Jewish.

As the disciples are being sent away from Lake Galilee, they are instructed to seek out the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel', are told to proclaim Jesus' message of repentance to the very people who had already travelled so far to seek out and hear Jesus' teachings. Because that, I am sure, is what Jesus means when he encourages his disciples, 'wherever you enter a house ... remain in the same house. ... Do not move from house to house' – 'when you travel, stay with those who have already come to hear us, and share with their friends the news they themselves had travelled to hear'. Here then, we reach a watershed in the Gospel, as the good news travels far beyond the lake counties, the home of Jesus and his friends, and the seedbed of his message.

This is therefore no ordinary journey. And so, as they set out to bring back into the fold of faith the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel', Jesus firmly instructs his disciples not to rely on their own strength and resources but orders them to 'carry no purse, no bag, no sandals'. Jesus' directions here match the instructions for entry into the Jerusalem Temple as laid out in the Mishnah, the orally transmitted ritual law of the Jewish faith (Mish. Berakoth, 9.5). Just as no one was allowed to enter the temple with provisions, or money, or ornate clothing, so Jesus' disciples also are to travel as if they were on pilgrimage, as if they were journeying to the Holy of Holies – light and taking only the barest of necessities.

Jesus instructs his apostles to travel as if they were pilgrims approaching the Temple Sanctuary, because he believes that the place where God's presence can be discerned is not only located in Jerusalem, but rather that it can be found within the souls and bodies of those who hear and respond to his message. Our reading of the Gospels shows that his own relationship with the ritual temple cult was ambivalent at best, which is surely why he asks his disciples first to seek out those people who respond to his message with generosity – the 'living temples of the faith', as it were.

Certainly St Peter later spoke of mission in those terms, when he explained that we all are 'living stones' called by God to be formed into a spiritual temple on the foundation that Christ himself has laid (1 Pet. 2.5). Today's Gospel reading illustrates well this principle: on the foundation of Jesus' words and works, the seventy messengers are to build up into a spiritual home for God people throughout the Jewish world: That's why Jesus tells his disciples in our Gospel first to seek out the 'living temples', those whose interest for the good news is already awakened, whose faith can be discerned, and stay with them awhile as they make known the Gospel in their towns and villages.

And as he sends them on their mission Jesus pairs up his seventy ambassadors – so that each disciple will have a companion who walks with them. He 'sent them on ahead of them – in pairs', we read. Again, the reason for Jesus' action probably has its roots in Jewish law. As we know from the reports of the trial of Jesus and our reading of the Old Testament, in a court of law valid testimony requires two witnesses (Deut 19.15). His disciples are clearly sent to be such witnesses – faithful observers who speak of the wisdom and his deeds of power that had astounded so many in Jesus' homeland. Yet they are not only sent as witnesses who will testify to another's deeds – mere 'hearers of the word of God', as it were – but rather they are sent to witness to

Jesus' power by their own deeds – 'are doers of the word of God' – when they themselves cast out demons, and heal the sick.

Being sent to speak of Jesus' deeds to others forms the foundation of Christian ministry, today's Gospel reading makes clear. We are all called to be ready to be make known what we have witnessed of God's work in those places into which he sends us. We are all called to be God's ambassadors, speaking of our experience of the work of God among us, and the hope we have for that work in future.

Some of your Christ Church South Yarra-ambassadors shared their impressions, hopes and visions of your parish with me. They painted a compelling and attractive picture, telling me of your outreach to the local community and Grammar School, your mission project in Dogura in PNG, your support of other churches by resourcing parishes and ministries in the diocese. Above all, they told me about how they have come to experience that this church is being transformative in their lives, how it has offered a place of welcome to them and many others, without judgement or prejudice, how Christ Church is growing to be a place that hopes truly to be able to include all.

In an age where the bad news about Church so often dominate public understanding of the Christian faith, it is doubly important that we take our role as ambassadors of Christ's work in our own communities seriously. That we tell others—especially those friends of ours who don't share our commitment to the church--the *good* news about our own faith, that we share our hopes for our church for the future. And, that we don't just talk about our faith, but also work on our faith. Work to become a community that truly will welcome and include all – a church, in short, we'd not only be happy to talk to

our friends about but, more importantly, a church we'd be happy to take them to!

Ours is the calling to be evangelists, like Luke whose writings and ministry we honour today; people who are sent out to make known how Christ's good news can transform real lives and communities—*our* lives and our community. Ours is the calling to be ambassadors of Jesus, sent so that many others may hear about, and come to experience, the love and transformative power of God in this church and parish. As we give thanks for Luke's example, and his good news, I want to encourage you to pray about what it may be that God is asking you to do as you seek to serve him, and continue to make known your gospel, in this place.

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