**REFLECTION 12 : FROM DISCIPLES TO APOSTLES**

**Matthew 9:35 – 10:8**

**The Gospel Reading**

*35 Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. 36When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; 38therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.’*

***10****Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. 2These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; 3Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; 4Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.*

*5 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, 6but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” 8Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.*

**The Reflection**

A few years ago, Helen and I took a holiday in New Mexico. One day we decided to visit a place called Ghost Ranch, where the artist Georgia O’Keeffe had once lived. As we drove into the grounds, a young man hailed us and asked us to pull up and wait. When we asked why, he pointed to a cluster of Wild West-looking buildings in the distance and reverently told us that “Denzel is about to shoot a scene.” It turned out that we had stumbled across a film set for the remake of *The Magnificent Seven*. “Denzel” of course was Denzel Washington.

If you’ve seen the film, you’ll know that it’s all about a reluctant leader bringing together a group of oddly-assorted followers who find themselves saving a village from the depredations of a local gangster and his marauding bunch of thugs.

At first sight, this would seem to bear little resemblance to today’s Gospel passage. But look a little harder and you’ll find one striking similarity: the twelve disciples that Jesus sends out are just as much an odd bunch as Denzel’s hastily recruited seven.

Now, for the first time in his gospel, Matthew gives us a complete list of the Twelve. It includes the impulsive Simon Peter, Matthew the questionable tax collector and Judas the pilferer (who, as we know, ends up as the betrayer). The other nine don’t particularly stand out, so this is not exactly an A Team. As the scholar Stanley Hauerwas puts it, “We know little of the individual disciples, but we know they are not a distinguished group.”

Yet it is this group that Jesus chooses to be bearers of the Good News. And as he sends them out, we see a subtle shift in the language Matthew uses. They move from the role of disciples to that of apostles. No longer merely followers but now messengers. They are the “sent ones” (the literal meaning of the word *apostles*).

**No Different**

That Jesus should choose such a random group must surely encourage us. For if he could pick such as them, then he can surely call us too. We are essentially no different. We are flawed, difficult and sinful human beings, just as they were. Select any twelve members from the average congregation and you will find similar strengths, weaknesses and failings as there were among the Apostles. In the words of Hauerwas once more, “The undistinguished character of the disciples is a sign of hope for us who inherit their task.”

But what was their task? In a nutshell: to tell the Good News of the coming of God’s kingdom. Jesus’ commission to them to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons (verse 8) – astonishing as these might seem to our modern ears – declared something crucial: that Jesus the Messiah had come to revolutionise people’s lives in unprecedented ways and that his disciples were empowered with his authority to carry out the same kind of ministry. This was the meaning of apostleship.

Such ministry, though, was more than a demonstration of compassion to those badly in need of it. The healings and everything else were signs of a new age dawning as the kingdom of God began to break into human life in all its power and glory. Doing the same things as Jesus had done bestowed upon the Apostles in all their vulnerability and flawedness the mantle of Christ-like ministry. Again, it cannot be said too strongly: this is astounding.

As we read this passage, then, two big questions arise for us. Firstly, how are we, the people of God in the 21st century, to live as inheritors of the Apostles’ ministry in a radically different context and age? And what are we to make of the specific instructions that Jesus gives to the twelve from verse nine onwards to ‘travel light’ in ministry? Put a little differently, in what ways are Jesus’ commands to the Apostles relevant to us today?

**Sending Out**

Before we can answer these two questions, however, we need to recognise that the sending out of the Apostles (and by implication the sending out of Christians to proclaim the Gospel throughout the ages) was a *missionary* act. Its purpose was to embody the transformative power of God’s kingdom in word and deed and to call those who would listen to receive it. In today’s gospel passage, we see this beginning with God’s chosen people of old, the Jews as Jesus tells them that they must, at this moment, carry out their ministry only among Israel. After Jesus’ resurrection, as we noticed last week, the vision changed, as the Apostles were commanded to carry the Good News to the entire world.

The starting point for the Church’s ministry today, therefore, must be to see ourselves as a *missionary* Church. Only in this way will we fulfil the last words of Jesus: “Go into all the world and make disciples.”

But this recognition of our calling and purpose is only the first step. We are still left with the challenge of the two questions posed above. In a slightly upside down manner, let’s begin with the second: what are we to make of the specific instructions Jesus gave to the apostles to travel light?

It would be easy to dismiss these commands as merely culture-bound and relevant only to the immediate context faced by the twelve. But this would be to miss the deeper point: that Jesus commands them to travel like this so that that they can make it clear that they have nothing to commend other than Christ himself. They can’t put themselves forward as promising wealth or power or worldly goods because they have none of these things. They have only the Gospel of God’s kingdom.

Once we appreciate this, we can begin to see how the people of God today, the Church, might act as inheritors of the Apostles’ ministry. For all too easily in history the Church has associated itself with power and wealth which in turn have acted as distractions from its mission or, even worse, as temptations that have led it down dark paths.

**Power, Wealth and Influence**

But if we are to be true to the commands of Jesus as he sends us out into the world around, we shall need to say no to the lure of power, wealth, influence and status, however much they may call to us with siren voices. As one commentator has written, “Faithfulness, not numbers or status, should be the characteristic that shapes the witness of the Church.”

How, then, shall we be faithful in the midst of the crises and challenges that surround us, whether the ravages of the pandemic, the threat to democracy from autocratic regimes or the persistent racism we have seen so vividly portrayed on our TV news screens of late?

Faithfulness in this context requires us to go back to the reading from Luke with which we started. The Apostles were commissioned to bring healing and to cast out evil. That, too, must be the Church’s ministry today. And we can play *our* part. How? By speaking up on behalf of the poor, the vulnerable and the oppressed. By acts of compassion and kindness, even where these are not deserved. And by offer our heartfelt prayers for the coming of God’s kingdom of justice, truth and love.

**Francis Bridger**

**Some Interesting Points about Today’s Gospel**

1. It’s significant that Jesus’ sending out the Apostles follows immediately from his words at the end of chapter 9 about the need for workers to gather in the harvest. This reinforces the missionary message of chapter 10. But what is our harvest to be?
2. Why 12 apostles? Why not 10 or 15? The clue lies in chapter 10, verse 5 where Jesus sends the Apostles only to the Jews, “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Israel was constituted of 12 tribes, so the symbolism of 12 Apostles being sent to them is very great. After the Resurrection and the Day of Pentecost, the mission of the 12 is expanded to reach out to the Gentiles and is given to the whole Church. We are therefore in some sense all missionaries.

**Other Readings for the Day**

**Genesis 18.1-15**

*18The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. 3He said, ‘My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. 4Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.’ So they said, ‘Do as you have said.’ 6And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.’ 7Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 8Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.*

*9 They said to him, ‘Where is your wife Sarah?’ And he said, ‘There, in the tent.’ 10Then one said, ‘I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.’ And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. 11Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. 12So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?’ 13The Lord said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, and say, “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?” 14Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.’ 15But Sarah denied, saying, ‘I did not laugh’; for she was afraid. He said, ‘Oh yes, you did laugh.’*

**Romans 5.1-8**

*5Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

*6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. 8But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*