

Gospel: Luke 10:1-12, 17-20 *Jesus sent the seventy missionaries to share in his powerful ministry* 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. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.' And I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

Going two by two

When Jesus sent out his volunteers to continue his work, he gave them definite directions. Afterwards they returned in a spirit of celebration, to report their missionary success. At election times we get lots of literature in the post, or through social media, or people call to the door, to canvass our vote. The canvassers, who usually travel in twos, will be well briefed, and they have their arguments polished and ready. Since they are representing the election candidate, and, therefore, they stay "on message", echoing the political manifesto of the candidate's party. On a regular basis, they return to headquarters to report on progress. Today's gospel is about a deeper target than vote-seeking votes, but there are similarities. He sent them out in pairs. Although Jesus called each one individually, he never sent missionaries out alone. There are just two episodes when an apostle went out alone: one was to betray him, the other ended up denying him. The support of others is essential to living the gospel. Even a hermit has to be commissioned by a community, and must stay in touch with that group.

Jesus sent them out like lambs among wolves. That wasn't very encouraging, but they had a choice. They could preach a message that made people comfortable in their complacency; or they could preach the message of Jesus, that called for fundamental change. But he promised them the gift of healing, and they returned full of enthusiasm for the welcome they got at people's doorsteps. They had obeyed Jesus, and it worked. They experienced for themselves his healing power. And further still, Jesus assured them that their names were registered in the heart of almighty God.

Our discipleship can be summed up in two phrases: "Come and see" and "Go and tell." If we have personally felt the value of having Jesus in our lives, we will want to tell others about him. There is a difference between witnessing and preaching. We are all called to witness, but not all are called to preach. Many good Christians would melt rather than preach in public. But we can all bear witness to Christ, through the quality of our living. Let's ask ourselves the challenging question attributed to G. K. Chesterton: "If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

Imagine there were only a hundred people alive on this earth, after a nuclear disaster. On today's statistics, about seventy of them would be poor, while thirty would be comparatively well off. Ninety-three of them would have to grumble that seven of them owned half the money, ate one third of the food, and had more doctors looking after them as the other ninety-three. The real problem is when the seven have the nerve to attempt to evangelise the ninety-three! How can they tell about the wonderful Saviour they have, who talks about sharing, feeding the hungry, while the seven throw out more food than would feed all of the ninety-three! A certain simplicity of lifestyle would be needed, if the good news is to be really credible from those who try to share it.

What kind of peace?

One word, PEACE, recurs in today's readings. In Isaiah, peace flows like a river through the ideal future landscape that he predicts. Then St Paul prays for peace for all who follow Christ ("peace be upon them, and mercy"). And when sending out his disciples, Jesus says their first message must be: "Peace to this house."

But while most people agree that peace must be sought, many seem to want peace only on their own rigid terms. Even many Christians hardly give it more than lip service. Bitter divisions are obvious in the epistle to the Galatians. A radically conservative Jewish-Christian group want the Church to keep the Jewish rite of circumcision, while others like Paul considered that ritual as now obsolete, replaced by baptism. Such arguments and misunderstandings are probably unavoidable. Every age in the Church has its own controversies and sectarian divisions, often based on arrogant refusal to hear competing visions of what God requires of us. Notice how, when the first disciples returned to Jesus, flushed with joy from their success, they were too proud of the people's response to their preaching. They were in danger of arrogance and needed his word of guidance. Pride is far from the poverty of spirit taught by Jesus. It leaves us less compassionate towards a world which needs to know the compassion of Christ.

The splendour of this joyful hymn in Isaiah is that it comes from the Suffering Servant. It is the joy of one who has suffered from hatred and rejection, and yet acts as a reconciler. Paul appreciates this paradox: "The only thing I boast about is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world is crucified to me, and I to the world."

Christian peacemakers and servants of the Gospel must be prepared for their share of the cross. The total, self-emptying service shown by Christ shows us how to behave. We need a simple lifestyle, prepared for service and not tied to material things: "no purse, no haversack, no sandals." He rules out all pride and arrogance. Even those who reject him should be loved and served in his name. The generosity of God must remain our message. In an often cruel world, we can do our part only by remembering Jesus, staying close to him.