

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

The seventy ... that's us

As I age and move closer to the grave, I'm learning to more intentionally treasure each day, mindful that it won't come around again. And I sometimes find myself impatient with stuff that I consider superfluous. I wonder if that's how Jesus was feeling when he sent the 70 followers out to share the good news. There's a sense of urgency. He's aware that his days are numbered, so he commissions this group to share in his work – to be his agents.

Reading Luke's account, I get a sense of how it might be for us. Jesus is just one person, so he has to multiply his ministry.

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

When we were baptised, we were given the task of representing Christ. At Confirmation the candidate promises, 'I will proclaim by word and action the Good News of God in Christ.' And in case we lose sight of this call, we're reminded of it at the end of every Eucharist.

Go now to love and serve the Lord. Go in peace.
Amen. We go in the name of Christ.

Representing Christ is the call of all Christians. It's what we call ministry. When we were baptised, we were called into ministry. We say it at every baptism:

May you grow in the Holy Spirit,
fulfil your ministry and follow Christ your whole life long.

Ministry isn't the vocation of a select few. It's the calling of all the baptised – a calling which, as *Catechism* says, leads all the baptised to witness to Christ in the world using the gifts the Spirit gives them.

There are, of course, so many different ways of sharing the good news – of witnessing to Christ – and how we go about it depends on our different gifts and talents. The choir minister to us by drawing us in the presence of God through the gift of music. I see parishioners who spend time with those who are struggling in different ways – who engage with the wider community. There are those who, behind the scenes, serve our faith community from work in the office to arranging the flowers. Some are deeply committed to a ministry of prayer and others minister with residents in rest homes or the housebound. While for others their ministry is rooted in their place of work. I could go on, but my point is, these people – that is you – are serving – you're ministering, whether it's through word or action, quietly behind the scenes or in a more public way. And in that, you're Jesus' representatives.

This passage gives us some pointers to how we might go about our ministry; whatever form it takes. The seventy went off in pairs. Immediately I think of JWs who take this quite literally, but there's something bigger here. It reminds us that Christianity isn't a 'me and God' thing. Christian life is lived out communally. We need one another because Jesus warns us that at times we'll be rejected, and it can be disheartening. Ministry can be tough, even hazardous. I falter, become discouraged, and wonder if I'm doing anything worthwhile for God. I'm sure you know that feeling – and that's when we need the support and encouragement of one another, as well their challenge and wisdom. We need each other to fulfil our baptismal calling.

We also need one another because the task before us is so big. 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few...' There's a sense of urgency about the need to share the good news. Jesus uses the metaphor of a harvest. It wasn't until I'd ministered in rural communities where there was cropping that I appreciated this image. The farmer works a year to prepare for the harvest, which must be undertaken when the crop is ready. Failure to do so can mean the loss of the crop. So, the combines work 24/7 to get the crops in. I wonder, is that a sense of urgency we've lost when it comes to sharing the good news? Do we get sidetracked by other issues?

Jesus offers these instructions.

'Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.'

A female colleague of mine translated that as 'don't take your handbag,' but to be inclusive, I add, no man-bag. It poses the question, What is the baggage we might need to leave behind? It's about priorities and not getting diverted. What really matters when it comes to living out the gospel? It's the same when Jesus says not to greet anyone on the road. He's reinforcing that sense of urgency. The job before us requires our full attention. There's a challenging question here – what claims most of our energy and time as a faith community? Is it sharing, by word and action, the good news of Jesus, or something else?

Then Jesus gives us certain things... the gift of his peace.

'Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!''

People hunger for meaning and purpose. Those I meet don't always express that hunger in religious terms, but if we engage with them, we may discover that they're yearning for what God has to offer – the gift of God with us –restoring wholeness and new purpose to their life. It's also about bringing healing – 'cure the sick ... and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' It's not just words that we offer, but also compassionate and accepting action that heals and restores people to full dignity and wholeness. As it's been said, preach the gospel and when necessary use words.

We're warned that not everyone will accept or want what we have to offer. We're not in charge of how people respond. We're simply agents. Often all we can do is sow seeds and then leave it with God.

Jesus doesn't tell us how to measure our success. If people don't accept the good news, he says, shake their dust off your feet and move on. Don't impose yourself or try to impose God. We live in a culture that's obsessed with measuring success, and the church gets drawn into this. How do our stats compare to last year's – how do they compare to other parishes? But we can't measure ministry like that. All we can rejoice in, is whether we've lived a life that people can say of us, 'Here's something different – here's God's transforming love.'

When the seventy reported in it seems they were rather surprised by the impact they had made. I'm frequently taken aback by how God uses me (and it's often when I thought I wasn't doing much good). But that's a reminder that so called 'success' isn't up to us. In our ministry, whatever it is, it's about us being faithful to living out and sharing the good news.

At the end of this Eucharist, when we're sent out with those very familiar words – we're being sent out as those seventy were – living out our baptismal calling – going as labourers into God's harvest.

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