

## Reflection for Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2022

### Galatians 6:1-16 & Luke 10:1-11,16-20

Life today is complicated. In my opinion, unnecessarily so. There are many reasons why it is complicated, one being that a consumer culture lends itself to complexity. The art of complication is a great asset to the producers that drive the culture. Through it they can mystify us into thinking that we need products and services that we actually do not. Complexity also arises out of our anxiety to ensure that every base in our lives is covered. I have been introduced to many tools for ministry that supposedly essential for the smooth running of church but in reality, just add more complications. Perhaps my suspicion of complexity is just a sign of my age but when I think about it, I've always taken the view that the simple option is usually the best. The problem with the complicated is that it demands a great deal of effort to keep up with it. In my metalwork classes at school, it was drummed into us to look for the simplest workable design in anything we made. Simple machines demand less of themselves and therefore wear out less quickly. Complexity and showy often go together. Complexity looks good and clever, so we are tempted to adopt it wherever we can to create an image for ourselves. So often this way of thinking is taken into ministry. We try to build churches through engaging with intricate projects, advertised with big colourful banners and using hi-tech infrastructure that we think will be attractive to our 'market.' As it turns out, in a consumer minded society, those things do attract. People seem willing to be drawn to image rather than substance. Churches that create the image of worldly success do often grow numerically. If our aim in ministry is to draw a crowd, then this is perhaps the route we need to follow. Yet I somehow think that such a motive lacks authenticity. The primary aim of church is, I suggest, to be a genuine sign of God's kingdom, and for the most part, God's kingdom is not about size, influence, power, wealth or complexity of organisation. We should also remember that the larger and showier a church becomes the more complicated it is to simply keep the show on the road. I return to my metalwork days and remember that complex designs tend to wear out sooner. With this in mind, I am a great fan of small church.

To explain why I've taken all this time to go into these things I'd like to turn to our reading today from Luke's gospel. We see here, Jesus appointing 72 of his followers to participate in his ministry. There is I think, a sense of urgency in Jesus' words, 'the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest therefore, to send out workers into his harvest fields.'

We notice then that the 72 disciples must not only ask for workers, they must also be among those workers. They are to go ahead of Jesus into the towns and villages where he was about to go. They were to prepare the way for Jesus himself, and maybe that is our role too. To prepare the hearts of those we meet for an encounter with Jesus. The instructions he gives to the 72 are therefore also relevant for us today. It is a ministry that has evangelism at its heart. The task is simple – show people what the kingdom of God is like and let them make their minds up about it. His method is also simple and not dependent on extensive material resources. His instructions are more to do with what these early apostles didn't need than what they did.

Before looking at Jesus specific instructions, I should make clear that the harvest is God's. He is the Lord of the harvest, and the workers are sent into his harvest field (verse 2). The task of evangelism is to build God's kingdom, not any kingdoms of our own, but His is a kingdom founded on relationship and so he involves his people in the harvest. All of us then who belong in God's kingdom are to participate in helping it grow, either by asking the Lord in prayer to send out workers, to be the workers or as is the case with Jesus followers here, both. Whatever role we take though, the salient feature that comes out of Jesus' instructions is that workers who go into God's harvest fields, must do so, not in strength but in vulnerability. Jesus warns the 72 that even though some people will welcome them and the message they make known, there will be others and indeed whole communities that reject them. They will be accepted and rejected in just the same way that Jesus was accepted and rejected. Our problem is that we don't like rejection and will do whatever we can to avoid it. We like to engage in our evangelistic ministry from a position of strength, because then we feel safe, but it is not how Jesus does it or how he asks his followers to do it. His disciples are to minister like

lambs among wolves. Evangelism most definitely carries with it a degree of risk. It is significant I think that in our day, the most effective seems to happen through small churches ministering in places where Christians are persecuted and powerless.

So it is that Jesus does not give the 72 any material resources to do their work. In fact, he tells them to get rid of any resources they might have; money, food and even a clean set of clothes. Now, in those days and in that culture, hospitality was important. People were expected to offer strangers travelling through, food and drink and a place to stay. It was regarded as an honour to host a guest and guests were likewise honoured and cared for. In Britain today, going into a town or village, meeting with its inhabitants, and expecting to be offered food and a bed for the night is somewhat unrealistic, but the principle behind the practice still applies. Followers of Jesus, then and now cannot minister effectively from a position of superiority, yet neither should we place demands or expectations on those we meet. I'm quite sure that the 72 did not so much ask for food and drink but simply turned up in a town or village and gratefully received what was offered to them. They responded to an invitation rather than demand the expected hospitality. 'When you enter a house' implies that an invitation had been given. I'm sure that they didn't just walk in, and 'when you enter a town and are welcomed' also suggests that hospitality is offered rather than requested. They were to leave towns and villages where a welcome was not forthcoming, wiping the dust from their feet as they left (verse 11). Evangelism is not about forcing the gospel on unreceptive people, but, it seems, to respond to offers of welcome and friendship and then demonstrate the ways of God's kingdom.

I can see two big reasons why Jesus advocated this non-material approach. The first is that it distinguished communities and people that were open to the gospel and with whom ministry was most likely to bear fruit. In my time in ministry, I have benefitted greatly from people outside of church circles that have offered support to our ministry. Some have come to faith. I suggest that it is people such as these to whom we are most called. The second reason Jesus denied the disciples material resources was to help them learn to be

open to the support of others and also dependent on God. Stripped of any material resources they could not minister in human strength. In their weakness, their ministry would be stronger through the power given to them by God, something that we in a materially rich but spiritually poor society, find hard to grasp.

All of this takes us to the task given to the 72, to reveal the nature of God's kingdom. They were to go in pairs, not I think primarily, as some suggest, for security in a hostile environment, but to emphasise that followers of Jesus must have the humility to realise that they need others to work alongside them. The strategy they were to adopt was the one modelled by Jesus himself, a demonstration of the kingdom through signs and wonders, followed by an anointed explanation of what was happening. The disciples were specifically instructed to heal those who were ill, for healing and wholeness is a sign of how things are in the kingdom of God. When people were healed, the disciples could genuinely say 'the kingdom of God has come near to you' (verse 9). Somewhere in the mix would also be the selfless way in which the disciples lived and the trust that they placed in Jesus.

So what can we learn from this early evangelistic mission to take into our ministry in the overcomplicated world of today? We first need to resist the cultural lure into the complicated and showy. Secondly, we must value and build relationships with those around us in a world that has forgotten how to do relationships well. Thirdly, we should give thought to how we might rediscover an authentic and compassionate ministry of healing in a world dominated by sickness and anxiety. Finally, we must avoid seeing evangelism as a means of strengthening church organisations. Neither must we use it to gain personal or corporate status, reputation and success. Too often we judge the worth of a church by numbers and use those we convert to simply help build our kingdoms. With this in mind I will finish with words from today's reading from Galatians; 'whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.' (Galatians 6:8-9).