

On Message?

Matthew 10: 1-7

Elite athletes lining up at the start of a big race are called out by name to the acclamation of excited fans. Some wave and beam at the cameras confidently, others are so keen to focus on executing their game plan that they simply acknowledge the cheers with a nod to the camera, and then re-enter their special “zone.” There will be many who know that this is where they must put on their “game face”, striking a pose whilst they are inwardly desperately tackling their nerves and excitement.

Once they have been introduced, a strange silence descends. Eye contact is exchanged, whether a warm smile to wish a friend well, or a colder gaze to attempt to unnerve a rival. The runners spring to their toes and practise sprinting on the spot.

Families, friends and coaches call out their good wishes and final instructions as the klaxon blares out and a wave of athletes sets off. Will the eager front-runner be victorious, or have they spent their energy too soon? Did the debutant remember the coach’s advice about how to time their surge? How will that little niggling injury stand up to the rigours of competition? What if it is simply a bad day, and the best-made plans come to naught?



Imagine Jesus’ twelve closest disciples as that band of athletes. Jesus has been coaching them, getting them ready to go out on their own. Each one is carefully named in our Gospel reading: each one has his own story, his own struggles. We know that one of them, Judas Iscariot, will go on to betray Jesus, but at this stage he is here, named and set apart with his fellow disciples to go out, filled with the authority to “drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.”

Despite any misgivings they might have, despite any failings or failures, Jesus has fully authorised them to undertake these momentous tasks. Perhaps some of them were full of excitement, itching to get out and imitate what they had seen their Teacher do on so many occasions. They may have been a little more overwhelmed or apprehensive: to tackle the spiritual world of evil spirits and the physical, as they are called to heal **every** disease and sickness are no small acts.

They are given a particular focus for their authority: “the lost sheep of Israel.” This mixed bunch of Jews from all kinds of walks of life and locations would find this calling challenging enough. Jesus’ first desire is to work with his own Covenant people, and he tells them to be single-minded. They are not to mix with the Gentiles or go into Samaritan villages.

They are also given a specific message for these “lost sheep”: “The kingdom of heaven is near.” This is not a coded message for an imminent political uprising, although many might interpret it in that way. It is a message which tells the Jews that there is a different kind of change to come. By coming amongst them, the disciples are living in a way which makes it clear that a new kind of relationship with God has been created, one which comes into daily lives and struggles to transform them. They are pointing to Jesus, the Son of God, the very presence of the Father coming to be with them.

Jesus has begun his work of equipping others to take his message out to the world. The exciting new future has arrived!

The disciples are far from being perfect, finished products. As we see when we continue to read Matthew's gospel, this group of twelve individuals are often to be found bickering with one another, misunderstanding Jesus' words, and – as we see so tragically with Judas Iscariot, betraying him.

However, these frailties did not stop Jesus from sending them out with all his authority to bear in some of the most challenging situations and locations. Yes, they would get it wrong, they would have days which they would rather forget even as they would also have ones which they would treasure forever. They are still part of his loving purpose to transform people's hearts and minds, beginning with the Jews.

We are also given a Commission, a vital message to take to the world: the risen Jesus tells us that we are all called to "go and make disciples of all nations." The scope of Jesus' message of salvation and reconciliation has spread to everyone, everywhere. We, like those first Twelve disciples, will also make mistakes, bicker with one another, and, sadly, some will fall by the wayside. However, in the knowledge and encouragement of Jesus' promise that "surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." we can be assured that he is there with us and for us.

Our names have been called up in that roster of servants. Let us remember that our calling as followers of Jesus is a calling to go out and make disciples. Let us also remember that as Jesus and "all the company of heaven" are cheering us on, we are engaged in a marathon, not a sprint.

To take your prayers further:

- We read the names of the twelve disciples in verses 2-4. Who has helped you to become a disciple in your journey of faith? List them and give thanks for their guidance, whether recently or longer ago.
- Jesus sent his disciples out to "the lost sheep of Israel." Where and to whom is he sending you? This might be over the phone or video-call or in real space and time. Make yourself available to be a messenger for Christ. You may find that simply sitting quietly, praying "Here I am, Lord," is a start.
- "The kingdom of heaven is near." What do you imagine that will look and feel like for you and other people today?

The Collect (4th Sunday after Trinity)

O God, the protector of all who trust in you,
without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy:
increase and multiply upon us your mercy;
that with you as our ruler and guide
we may so pass through things temporal
that we lose not our hold on things eternal;
grant this, heavenly Father,
for our Lord Jesus Christ's sake,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Rev'd Vicky Barrett