

When the going gets tough

Matthew 10: 24-42

During lockdown I've found myself watching a programme at 6.30pm on Saturdays called Ninja Warrior UK. Being really stereotypical here, it's probably *not* the sort of programme you'd expect your female vicar to be watching but I've found that it's strangely addictive. So what is it, you might ask? Well, it's the British version of the Japanese obstacle course show 'Sasuka'. 250 competitors – male and female – from across the country take on the first stage, consisting of six different obstacles such as the 'Crazy Cliff-hanger', 'Spider Flip' and 'Flying Bars'. From the five qualifying rounds, the ten contestants who make it the furthest the fastest in each round advance on to the semi-finals with nine obstacles. The top ten from the semi-finals then advance onto the final, before the eventual winner is crowned Ninja Warrior for the UK. The obstacles look absolutely impossible, requiring great strength and determination. Most obstacles are undertaken above icy-cold water so, if you fall, it's not just your pride at stake. Some fall very quickly, not getting past the first obstacle, whereas others go the whole way, some in record time. Contestants train hard to enter, with some coming back year after year in their attempt to win the title.

So, you might be thinking, what has this got to do with today's Bible passage? Well, in Matthew chapter 10, as Jesus sends out the twelve disciples to preach the good news and heal the sick, he begins to warn them about what they can expect. They're not to take any money or extra clothing with them, depending solely on others for shelter and food, and they won't be welcomed everywhere. But, more than this, they can expect to experience the same hostility that Jesus does, for he is sending them out '*like sheep into the midst of wolves*' (v16). Furthermore, they can expect to encounter persecution and trials, and be prepared for painful division within their families. For all of this risk and suffering, Jesus promises, '*those who lose their life for my sake will find it* (39).'

When you read what's required of them, it begins to make the Ninja Warrior trial look like a walk in the park! At least there's only icy water to contend with if you fail; the disciples, on the other hand, had to be prepared to lose their lives and I'm not sure that Jesus' words – '*Do not be afraid of those who kill the body*' would have brought much comfort. They *must* have been afraid, but

they went all the same, trusting that the Spirit would give them the right words to speak (v20) and that their reward – eternal life with the Father – awaited them.

Matthew, of course, is not only recalling Jesus' instructions to his first disciples; he is also speaking to his own community of disciples many years later. There is still need to send out labourers into the harvest, to send missionaries out beyond the community into a perilous world. And those sent will still need to depend on the hospitality of others. Jesus says of those who enact such hospitality, *'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me'* (v40).

Two thousand years on, we remain a sent church. But what does it mean today to be sent? Clearly, we're not all sent to be wandering missionaries, depending on others for shelter and sustenance, but that doesn't mean we are off the hook. All of us who are baptised are sent into the world to live and breathe the good news of Jesus Christ. All are sent to bear Christ to others with humility and vulnerability, being willing to risk rejection.

What would happen if we stopped expecting people to come on their own initiative through our church doors, and instead took seriously our calling to bring the gospel to them? What would happen if we truly believed that we bear the presence of Christ to every person we encounter, in every home, workplace, or neighbourhood we enter? What would happen if we saw every conversation as an opportunity to speak words of grace, every interaction as an opportunity to embody Christ's love for our neighbour?

If that fills you with just a little trepidation, remember that Jesus says in verse 40 that, in your serving, it will be God in Jesus Christ working through you. And then he says in verse 41 that those you serve, those who actually open up and allow you to serve them, will see, hear and receive Jesus, through the service that you give. What an amazing thought! And finally in verse 42 – even the smallest of acts, the smallest of service done as a disciple with the heart of a servant – as small an act as giving someone a cup of water - carries both a great impact and a great reward.

A couple of weeks ago, I told you about the work of Nicola Neal and her husband Simon through Every Life International in Uganda and I'd like to tell you another short story of their ministry there. Nicola and Simon hadn't been in Uganda long when they met Eddy, one of the young people who attended

the local church. They didn't know much about his story except that he'd recently lost both parents and was now responsible for looking after his family. One afternoon, Nicola was speaking at a youth event and noticed Eddy sitting at the side, not looking very well. She went over to pray for him and found out that he had typhoid. So, she prayed for Eddy and, almost as an afterthought, ran across the road to the local village shop to buy a few bottles of water for him to drink, as she wasn't sure if he had drinking water at home.

As time went on, Nicola and her family built a close relationship with Eddy. One day, they received a call to say that Eddy's little nephew had been rushed to the hospital and was seriously ill. He was dying from severe anaemia and needed a blood transfusion, but the hospital had no blood. While they were waiting for some to arrive, the little boy died in Eddy's arms. Eddy was heartbroken.

However, just a few days after the funeral, Eddy was back out in the slums with Nicola and her team, helping to run the Mobile Medical Unit, reaching out to some of the sickest children who lived there. Nicola writes, *'I asked Eddy 'How'? How so soon after his beautiful nephew's death was he able to be out in the slum communities and hold the sick and the dying again?'* And his answer blew her away. *'Don't you know?'* he said. Nicola confessed that she had no idea and Eddy began to talk about how after both his parents died, he felt he wanted to give up and die too. He was asking questions like, *'Who will look after me now? Who will love me? Who will ever care for me?'* Then he got typhoid.

He said that the day of the youth event, he had woken up begging Jesus to take him home. He wanted to end it all, as he had nothing and no-one and felt so ill. Eddy's next sentence stunned her... *'And then you went and bought me water.'* He carried on, *'I thought to myself, maybe someone does care, maybe someone does love me, maybe I do want to live. That's why I carry on, because I know I am loved.'*

Jesus says, *'And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.'* Even the smallest of acts, the smallest of service done as a disciple with the heart of a servant, carries both a great impact and a great reward.

So, if you worry that serving Jesus requires particular strength, skills and qualifications, and therefore rule yourself out, remember that it's often the

little acts done with the kindest of hearts that make the biggest difference.
And that's something that we can all do.

Remember that you are a part of the greater body of Christ, and you may be the only Jesus that people will ever see ... So ask yourself, what small action could I do this week to serve God? How, this week, can I show others Jesus and his church by what I do?

Let's pray:

Lord, you have called us to be your disciples.
Thank you for trusting us with this privilege.
Thank you for empowering us in the ways of service.
Thank you for giving us courage when we are fearful.
Thank you for your strength when we are vulnerable.
Thank you for knowing us, loving us, enhancing our lives.
Thank you, Lord. **Amen.**