

## TELLING PEOPLE ABOUT JESUS

Isaiah 66. 10-14

Galatians 6. 7-16

Luke 10. 1-11, 16-20

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Today, as we consider the story of the sending out of the seventy disciples, I would like us to think for a moment about evangelism. Most of us, I would imagine, are not very comfortable with evangelism. It just doesn't feel *natural* to a lot of us. And if we are honest, we are hesitant about evangelism because we have seen it done badly on so many occasions.

Each one of us has negative examples of evangelism that we could give. I remember once using the public conveniences at a major American airport; and one zealous person had left cards in each cubicle which told us that 'all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God' and that we needed to 'repent of our sins and trust in Jesus'. I didn't take my card with me; I decided to leave it for the next lucky occupant.

Or there's the true story of a group of Christians in Toronto, Canada that assembled regularly in front of a particular house which was owned by a couple that was thought to 'need saving'. Every Wednesday evening, *for a period of seven years*, the group gathered in front of this house to read Bible verses out loud, so loudly that they seemed to be shouting. The group was finally chased away and banished from the neighbourhood by neighbours who lived near the couple. Personally, if I had been the couple, I would have called the police straight away.

Another reason why we are hesitant to evangelise is because we fear what others may think of us. People who tell others about the Lord are often laughed at or mocked

(and sometimes, as we have just seen in the cases I mentioned, for very good reasons). Yet it is still true that even when evangelism is sensitively practised and well-meant, it can lead to misunderstanding and criticism.

Despite any discomfort we may feel, it remains the case that every one of us is called to proclaim the gospel of Jesus. It is not a job that lies only with religious professionals, like bishops and priests. It is a job for every follower of Christ and it has been so from the beginning.

That is the great point of our passage from St Luke's gospel today, the account of our Lord sending out the seventy (or seventy-two, depending upon the translation you are using). Jesus didn't have only the twelve appointed disciples, his special inner circle; he also had wider groups of followers. And Luke's special understanding is that these other followers, these more extensive groups, were also sent out by Christ. No other gospel writer tells us this except Luke, who thereby makes an important point, that everyone who follows our Lord also receives a commission from him. That commission is to go out and spread the good news.

This, and not the specific instructions about purses, bags and sandals, is the important point of our passage. The specific instructions just mean that when we venture forth, God will provide us whatever we need. So we don't need to expend energy on, much less fret over, such things as where's the best place to stay and what will I do when my shoes wear out. Just go, Jesus says.

It is an amazing little passage, this section of chapter 10 of Luke's gospel, for we aren't told where these seventy-odd people went. They went to different places. But wherever they went, when they came back they were full of excitement. It actually worked! They are amazed. People listened to us, they said. People were healed. Lives were changed. It all worked out for the good.

Of course it did, Christ said. And the more we know about who our Lord really is, the more we will come to expect such powerful change. He, after all, is the one who saw Satan fall from heaven (Lk 10. 18). And he is the one, as we saw recently in the story of the demoniac, who sends demons to hell (Lk 8. 33).

So what does it look like, to go out into the world with the gospel?

We have already spoken about coercive methods of evangelism and know that these are generally doomed to failure. Some of us, I imagine, have sought to practise another method, which we could call ‘evangelism by osmosis’: that is, we have attempted to be good friends and acquaintances with people, and have hoped that as we got to know people, they would find out that we are Christians.

But funnily enough, this ‘osmosis’ strategy is about as effective as the coercive evangelism strategy. The people who find out that we are Christians discover an interesting fact about us, indeed; but it remains that, just a fact. It doesn’t explain anything remarkable about us, except an interesting religious preference.

We have all heard the saying which is mistakenly attributed to St Francis of Assisi, ‘Preach the Gospel at all times; use words if necessary’. This is good advice, to the extent that it points out that our entire lives need to be proclamations of God’s good work. But it is *bad advice* if it encourages our silence about Jesus. Although it is not always recommendable to talk, talk, talk about Christ, we may need to use words more than we do.

There was a man who found himself in the emergency room. His friend, who had brought him there by taxi, was concerned: it had seemed that a heart attack might be in the works. But the tests came back negative, and the doctor was rather confident that what we had here was a case of anxiety. Medications were given; a

follow-up appointment made; and the patient went home. His friend, however, was troubled. Why? Because he had never offered to pray for him. His friend had thought of it, but was just a little too shy, or a little too bashful, to put the thought into actual words. Personally, I think that if the friend had said, ‘Could I say a simple prayer with you?’ the man would have said yes.

What else might going out in the world with the gospel look like? Think of your family. It is perhaps hard to mention the Lord to those who are closest to us, because they see and know things about us that we don’t expose to public view. But it is important to do so. So you might say, ‘Last Sunday in church, we looked at that story of the woman in the crowd who touched Jesus and was healed. Christ turned to look for her. He was being touched by maybe a hundred people at once, and he turned to look for *her*. What do you think that’s about?’ As we say this, we are sharing something from our heart that struck us in the scriptures. But we are also taking the gospel into that part of our lives. With words.

What I’m trying to do today is to encourage us to risk sharing the gospel. And we have good reason for hope that, if we take some risks, God will bless our risking in ways beyond our imagining. Remember the surprise with which the seventy returned to our Lord. It worked out better than they had thought it would. Why?

There is a clue at the beginning of our passage. Luke tells us that Jesus sent the seventy out ‘to every town and place where he himself intended to go’. That is to say, we never go alone anywhere. Christ always goes with us. And in fact, our Lord is already there, ahead of us. So to speak the gospel in our lives, to pray honestly with people we meet, to talk about Jesus from the heart with people we meet— whoever it is, wherever it is, Christ is already there. That’s why if we just take a little risk and share just a little bit, we will find him all around us. And that, friends, is amazing. Amen.