

Sermon: Sunday 7 July 2019 - Fourth Sunday after Pentecost St, John's Toorak  
Readings: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:7-18; Luke 10:1-12, 17-24.

Here's a question for you. Who is responsible for mission in the church?

We'll come back to this question later, but as I unpack and reflect on our Gospel reading for today, I invite you think about what mission in the context of the church means to you, and by the end of this sermon we'll find out if we're on the same page or in completely different books.

When we read the Gospels, we rightly begin our focus with Jesus. After all, he is the Messiah, the one sent by God to proclaim the good news of God's reign and share God's concern for people.

Jesus is the lens through which we see and understand God.

We rightly prize and value Jesus' words, but it wasn't just him sharing the good news was it?

Of course, there's the twelve disciples also called Apostles. From Luke chapter 6 we have: Simon Peter, and his brother Andrew, James, and his brother John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, another James son of Alphaeus, another Simon, who was called the Zealot, and then the two Judases, one the son of James, and the other, Judas Iscariot, who would betray Jesus.

These are the inner circle the famous ones we name churches after, apart from Judas Iscariot. But that's it, right?

Well, no.

There are also the women who travelled with Jesus and the Apostles, who played their part in proclaiming God's reign. There's Mary of Magdala, Joanna the wife of Herod's steward, James' mother Mary, and Susanna, "and many others who provided for them out of their resources" to quote from Luke chapter 8.

And today we hear about more disciples, seventy followers that Jesus sent out in pairs to all the places he planned to go.

We aren't given all their names, but Jesus says that their names, "are written in heaven".

Jesus trusts them to go before him. They have heard Jesus' words, they have seen his ministry and Jesus trusts that they understand enough to go before him with the power of God's peace as an advance party to the various places he himself intends to go.

The Jesus Movement, what later becomes Christianity as we know it, was much bigger than one person, even if that person is the Son of God.

Even the Son of God used a team of regular people to share God's good news.

Jesus sent them to share God's peace.

I'll admit that I find the flip side for the places that don't accept that peace a bit harsh, but the message is the same for all people and places, whether they accept the messengers or not, "the kingdom of God has come near."

Jesus sent 35 pairs of disciples out with the same message for all people, welcoming or not, and the proclamation comes from the same person – Jesus – through these people that Jesus chose – regular people who have been touched by Jesus' ministry, by his teaching, his words of hope and peace and love.

In tradition, these seventy are variously referred to as disciples or apostles.

Disciple means student or learner.

Apostle means one sent on a mission.

Either way, the point I want to make today is this, these people chosen by Jesus, trusted by Jesus, weren't necessarily experienced Biblical scholars. They probably didn't have degrees in Theology, they hadn't take a Missiology course or trained in public relations and marketing and how to use social media platforms to promote their message.

But Jesus saw their gifts and chose them.

As far as modern standards of empowering leadership go, Jesus' approach appears rather haphazard, but that doesn't mean we can't learn and adapt the lessons for our own context.

In any case, the seventy return, and they return with joy.

Sent in the power of God's peace, sent into the unknown, the overall result is joy.

So what does this episode teach us about Christian Mission?

When people in the wider church describe something as Missional, it can notoriously go undefined. For myself, I have come to this understanding: Mission is sending and being sent as an outward and visible sign of God's love, and each community of faith should discern what that looks like in their context.

Make of that what you will, but I have struggled with the term 'mission'.

In the Christian context, it can be a problematic word. Historically, when linked with Imperial and Colonial perceptions of the world, it could be part of a package that included invasion, oppression and cultural destruction, and we have to live with that legacy.

But God's mission is bigger than what human beings have done with it so far and the term needs to be reclaimed as bigger than solely human concerns.

Part of following Jesus is accepting that we are sent by Jesus to proclaim what we have learnt from Jesus, via the teachings that have come to us through the centuries of revelation, reflection and discernment.

We are part of the mission to continue proclaiming Jesus' teachings. How we choose to do that will depend on our gifts and talents, our skills and our resources, but my main point is this:

In answer to the question, "Who is responsible for mission in the church?" the answer is, all of us.

Each of us is to live lives that proclaim to the world that God's kingdom has come near, and we could do worse than to use as our constant touchstone the two great commandments: Love God with our whole being, and love our neighbour as ourselves.

Mission is not just about going overseas, it can and should be done in our own metaphorical backyard, by living as if God's kingdom has come near and sharing what we have learned from a life of faith.

We should help each other deepen our understanding of God's love to enable and empower us to share that love in our actions and perhaps in our words if the opportunity arises.

That may involve some formal study in Theology or Ministry. It may involve reading what other Christians around the world and throughout history have to say on these matters, or listening to people that ask the big and difficult questions about faith and Christian living.

Being chosen by Jesus to continue his ministry is an awesome responsibility. We are to go where Jesus himself intends to go, including into the lives of those who do not yet know Jesus.

Through Jesus we have a guide for our part in God's ongoing mission.

We have found something of value in Jesus, and we should equip and support each other as best we can to share this precious gift, rather than keep it to ourselves, hidden away.

We cannot and should not assume that everyone has an intelligent understanding of the Bible or Jesus' teaching.

We cannot assume that everyone we meet will have a true, deep or nuanced understanding of what being Christian really means, and we need to equip ourselves to enter into that space.

As we walk in the footsteps of Jesus into the unknown, we follow in the footsteps of all the apostles and disciples who have gone before us and we pray that the fruits of our journeys will also be joy.

We are not in this alone. We are in this together, and together we can discern how to be proclaimers of God's kingdom here in Toorak and wherever we happen to find ourselves.

Talk to each other, share with each other and prayerfully support each other and discern how you can be part of the church's mission and God's mission.

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