

Luke 10.1-11,16-20

In the name of God in whose name we are baptized: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear friends,

I have a secret for you, church, but it really shouldn't be a secret, and it's about who these passages are about. Yes, the lesson from the Hebrew scriptures is about Naaman and the lesson from Luke is about the 70. Just one chapter earlier in Luke, Jesus sent out the 12 disciples. Now it is the turn of the 70. Why 70? Because it is a symbolic number: in Jesus' culture, the number of all the nations in the world. When Jesus sends out the 70, he is telling us that we are all sent out – whatever culture, or social or educational background we are from. In fact this is a crucial moment in Luke. From this moment on, the word 'disciple' will never mean the same again in this Gospel. It will no longer be used to refer to the 12 disciples, but instead any follower of Jesus in ever-widening circles.

The point is clear. All of us are sent out by Jesus in this Great Commission: Because according to Luke it is this, and only this, that marks someone out as a follower of Jesus: their willingness to take part in God's great sending out of the Kingdom of God to the world.

So what does this mean? What are we being challenged to do? In today's reading the disciples of Jesus are told to do three things as they go out. These three things mark the 70 out as followers of Jesus and bearers of the Kingdom of God. And so each of us who seeks to be a disciple of Jesus can ask, how do we show these three marks in our daily lives?

The first mark is vulnerability and interdependence on others. The 70 are not commanded in the Gospel to hold a party and act as welcoming, generous hosts. Instead they are commanded to go out and receive hospitality. A much harder challenge. Of course elsewhere, the Bible does command us to give hospitality. (And Jesus had a rather unsettling habit of making himself host even at

other people's parties - at the wedding of Cana for instance). In this Great Commission, however, we are commanded to receive hospitality – reminding us that this hospitality must be reciprocal. We can only expect people to come to visit us, if we are willing to visit them first. We must first be willing to meet people on their turf, on their terms, where they call the shots. Where they choose the topics of conversation and ethos. Not us. Where they are in control. Not us. We are reminded that followers of Jesus are not to meet people from a place of superiority, nor even equality. But from a position of vulnerability.

In the Gospel, the disciples are asked to put themselves in an incredibly vulnerable situation, dependent on their hosts for food and shelter: no wallet, no bag, no safety net is allowed. No creditcard to get them out of tricky situations. No self-reliance, no sense that they don't really need the people they are asking to give them hospitality. They really do! The point is laboured to intensity. Their only support is each other, for they are sent out in pairs. There is no place for individualism or self-reliance in the Kingdom of God: an incredibly countercultural message for our society. Instead the Kingdom of God is about interdependence, vulnerability, a willingness to rely on each other. Not just those we trust: the one who is our pair. But also those we don't even know yet: those we are sent out to visit.

We are challenged to wonder how do we show this first mark of discipleship in our personal lives and in our church? Are we willing to take the risk to make ourselves vulnerable to others? To depend on the people in our community that we don't even know? Willing to meet them on their terms? Willing to let go of control? For this is the first mark of a follower of Christ.

The second mark is staying. The disciples are explicitly ordered not to move about from house to house. They must not be continually on the look out for better offers: whether it's a more comfortable place, or a more challenging place where they might be more successful. They are to stay put: for better or worse. The

Gospel reminds us that the mark of a follower of Christ is someone who is willing to stay with it, to take the time to form deep and loyal bonds with people: whether rich or poor, interesting or boring, useful to us and our objectives or not.

We are reminded that as a Christian, the grass is not always greener. We are challenged not always to be looking over someone's shoulder when they are talking to us, but rather to fully attend to others as they speak. Not thinking 'what will I be doing next, who else could I be talking to?' Again, a very countercultural message in today's world. We are also reminded that being a church is not about trying a new project then leaving it if it doesn't work straight away. It's about sticking with the difficult things, taking time to get beyond the superficial. Giving new things time to really take root. A massive critique of our culture, where goals and targets are continually being set, and expected to be met almost immediate. Where people can become just statistics – a means to an end in achieving those goals. Goals don't matter in the Kingdom of God: people matter.

How do we show this second mark of a disciple of Jesus in our daily life? When we meet people around and about us, how do we show this willingness to stay? How do we demonstrate the Christian denial of the myth that the grass is always greener?

The third and final mark is that we are bearers of peace. On entering the houses of those to whom they are sent, the 70 are commanded to convey just two messages. And the first is 'Peace be on this house!' These words are not just a polite greeting but a generous demonstration of acceptance. An acceptance that is then shown visibly in the act of accepting hospitality – through the action of eating their food whatever it might be - a powerful indication in almost any society that says 'we accept you for being you; we want to get to know you as you are; we are prepared to learn about our differences; you are important to us.' Anyone who's been asked to eat unfamiliar food as a guest (particularly those who have eaten it even if they find it distasteful) will know

exactly what I'm talking about. Eating someone else's food is a powerful message of acceptance.

We are reminded that first and foremost, disciples of Christ are to be bearers of peace. Bearers of God's acceptance of us: God's willingness – shown in Jesus – to come to where we are, to eat what we eat, to live as we live. Of course, the Gospel is also counter-cultural – challenging us. We see this throughout the reading. And yet God's first impulse is always to accept us as we are. 'Peace be on this house!' the 70 are to proclaim even before they know anything about the place to which they go.

Indeed it is only after having received hospitality that the 70 are to proclaim the second message, which is simply 'the Kingdom of God has come near!' Nothing else. Because according to this Gospel reading it is in these three marks – the willingness to be vulnerable, the commitment to staying, and the bearing of peace – that the world will learn something of what the Kingdom of God is like: a place where vulnerability is treasured as a place where God's power is more visible, a place where we're not always looking over each other's shoulder looking for someone better to be with, or someplace better to be; a place that offers peace and acceptance for all, if only they will accept it.

We are challenged to wonder, are we first and foremost bearers of peace? And, as bearers of the Kingdom of God to our community, what are we showing about the Kingdom of God through the way we live our lives?