

Psalm 24

Epistle: Ephesians 1. 3-14

Gospel: Mark 6. 1-13

The disciples are sent out looking for hospitality; they go empty-handed. Our normal social practice is that we take something when we go to visit; some flowers, some food to share, a gift of some kind, bring a bottle of wine; fulfilling the usual social niceties. But the disciples are not going in the usual way. They are not looking for friends, rather people who might be friends of the kingdom. They go in humility and they are vulnerable as they go. They don't know what the journey will hold for them.

When I read these accounts in the gospels of Jesus sending the disciples out I find it difficult to imagine what these stories might have to say to me. In our powerful and highly organised world I wonder, what would be the point of this simplicity, this powerlessness? I am reminded as I read this account of Buddhist monks who go out from their monasteries to beg. Their presence in their communities is a part of the life of their wider community. They carry something in their religious practice for the whole community. Their vows of poverty, their simple life, their devotion to prayer is like a window into another world for the communities of which they are a part. Their lives and their life-choice point to the world of the spirit and to the transcendent. They point to a world other than that with which most of us busy ourselves, most of the time. Their societies honour them and by their hospitality to them they affirm that these people are essential to the community's collective wellbeing and soulfulness. IT strikes me that this practice of Buddhist monks still in our own time resembles the missions that the disciples were sent out on. And that the life of the early church in many places resembled this simplicity and humility and vulnerability.

In the early centuries of the church – probably for the first 300 years – the life of the church was very precarious and vulnerable. Christians were often subject to significant persecution. Many of them lived simple lives and undertook vows of poverty and adopted contemplative lives as hermits. There was during these early centuries many monastic communities living in the deserts of the eastern Mediterranean – from which we receive the writings of the desert fathers and mothers.

But in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century the emperor Constantine decided to make the Christian faith the state religion and all of a sudden the church attained a new, protected status, closely linked to the political, financial, military and legal power of the empire. Everything changed from the church being a group on the margins to being at the centre. As a sign of this movement toward power the architecture of churches also underwent a transformation. Churches buildings went from being spaces where people gathered around, to spaces based on hierarchy, with the leader at the front. Churches were modelled on the Roman basilica – known as the Constantinian basilicas. But the basilica was the Roman building from which justice was dispensed – it was the court house. The bus model of church which this church was is a legacy of this change 1700 years ago – authoritarian minister at the front dispensing a message about an authoritarian, legalistic God. Is this not the image of God that too many of us were raised with and which still lurks within. Our continued inhabiting of this architecture still shapes us. As Winston Churchill said, we shape our

buildings and forever after they shape us. After Constantine the church began to inhabit buildings that were designed with a legal purpose and this architecture shaped the church's self-imagination. The humility of the disciples being sent out in pairs – vulnerable, with no security and seeking hospitality - had undergone a 180 degree turn to being at the centre of power and projecting itself as the dispenser, the intermediary of divine power. This is the 1700-year long legacy which as Christendom is crumbling around us – which began with Constantine – passes away.

So, as I read this story of mission I am wondering about our own Uniting church's missionary efforts. Wondering if what we call mission in any way resembles or resonates with what Jesus instructs the disciples to do, and the spirit with which they are to go. They have no charity to dispense, they have no program to run, they have no building to occupy, maintain or invite people to, no plan to eradicate poverty. They go, impoverished themselves in many ways, seeking hospitality– and if they don't receive it they are to move on. In the Gospel of Matthew as this account is told the disciples are to say as they go that the kingdom of heaven has come near. When the church comes and does its work amongst people, do they at some level know the kingdom to have come near? Is that what they know in their bones? Surely this is what the nearness of the kingdom engenders in people. The Gospel accounts consistently tell us that Jesus offered in himself something the religious leadership could not. Their relationship to power meant they dispensed legalism, not spirit. This is what people seek in their hearts. Might we shape our collective life in a way that spirit might be shared? What would this look like?

I am conscious of the missionary efforts made in the settlement of this country, as well as in our own time. The church came with power and a desire to shape, rather than to receive. The church came in the wake of, sometimes hand-in-glove with, the colonisation of this country which we now recognise was not benign, but violent and driven by a sense of entitlement to take and displace. And the moral certainty with which the church too easily operated meant that we came, not in humility and vulnerability in order to receive, rather to wag the finger and take control of people's lives. Did this Christian colonisation point to the kingdom of heaven, we might ask? Too many people's experience has been no, the coming of the church has not brought the kingdom near.

The church is, slowly, being disabused of its power. Maybe, by the work of God's Spirit we are slowly being turned to a simpler way of being, where we might go and be in the community in simplicity and humility. We are losing our power, we are losing the respect we once seemed to have, we are losing our status. Maybe we will be able to become God-bearers, like the disciples. Or fools for Christ, like Paul.

This call of discipleship which points to the nature of God as shown to us by Jesus is a costly one, because we are invited to let everything go in order that we might live. This is the gospel pattern. Sometimes there are people who are grasped by a vision of this simplicity which points to God and are able to embrace a life of poverty and simplicity. For others of us, we find this is not our calling, or the trappings we have hem us in and we find it difficult to move to this simpler way. In truth, though, at times the spirit calls us to let go when we discover what is essential in life – maybe significant ill-health, failure, the approach of death – through some circumstance we find we need to let slip all those things which surround us and face the merciful grace of God which embraces us as we are.

Many of you talk about the fortress-like image this church building projects to the street. This week a few of us will gather to think about the design of the new facility and how a new building will relate to this fortress. One of the questions which needs to be addressed is how to project a more hospitable face to the street – an entrance and an interior that says: welcome, we are people of the spirit here.

We pray as we travel and travail through these times of change that God will continue to be present with us.

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