

do not be afraid

a sermon preached on the

feast of st luke

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Jeremiah 8: 22 -9:3; Psalm 145: 10-18; 2 Timothy 4: 9 -17a; Luke 10:1-9

Luke is mentioned in the Letter to the Colossians as a beloved physician and is widely regarded as the patron Saint of surgeons and physicians; there is also an ancient tradition that claims that Luke was a painter and was for centuries was regarded as the patron saint of artists.

It is though as author of the third gospel account and The Acts of the Apostles that he is best remembered. We would be very much the poorer if we did not have in our heritage and tradition the material that is unique to Luke; Dante described Luke's gospel account as the gospel of Christ's meekness. Luke was deeply sensitive to the role of women in the story of salvation and he was also committed to portraying Jesus as one who was kind and deeply humane.

The gospel reading we have heard this morning comes then as a bit of a surprise! It is possible to imagine that those appointed to go out and spread the message might well have responded in this way:

“Thank you, Lord. Thank you very much; you have put us right in it. There you go, appointing seventy two of us to go out and tell people about the God who loves, forgives, heals, restores, puts things right and so on and so forth, and just before we head off into the wild desert, you give us a little pep talk.

Well, all we can say is that we might have hoped for something a little more encouraging – something to put a spring into our step and all that. Something helpful – a powerful motivational talk to get us running out into the community – bursting to record some success in helping others to recognise God in their lives.

But oh no. What did we get? The worst pep talk in the history of the world. The job is enormous; the labourers are scarce; don't bother taking any money, or back up equipment in case anything goes wrong, which it is sure to do. Travel barefoot, like there is a soft carpet of green grass all the way to those outback desert towns. Don't talk to anybody on the road, like we don't need to find out if we are on the right track or not. Hope some nice people will put us up and give us food, but then what happens when we do not meet nice people out there? Tell them that they will cop it big time at the Day of Judgment – just wait and see. No prizes for guessing how all this is going to go down – they will probably set the dogs onto us – which is probably how you arrived at the idea of lambs amongst wolves—very comforting I must say. Excellent marketing – just the headline we need for a recruitment drive. I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.

Now, in our humble experience, Lord, the chances of a lamb keeping on living near a wolf for anything more a few seconds is somewhere between zilch and minus zilch. So what is going on here Lord? Is there, like a real mission action plan? Or is this it?

If you don't mind us saying Lord, this is not a very flash work place agreement – all we can think of Lord is that it is sort of like irony – but then it is not like you to be ironical. This 'lambs amongst the wolves' bit sounds, a bit too frightening.”

This is the situation for us – this gospel reading for today could make us very frightened. The reading is about followers of Jesus being sent out, and told that they could expect to be torn limb from limb, destroyed and devoured, just as though they were helpless lambs set loose among a pack of ravenous wolves, and there's not much worse than that.

We could certainly read this and be very frightened.

But when we think about it, it must be wrong to take something in the gospel as something that makes us frightened. That must mean we have not understood it, because the gospel means 'good news', and so everything in it must be for our good, and it cannot be for our good, if we are terrified.

Let us then put aside a literalist understanding of this commission and try to look at it in a different way; the first Christians were unscrupulous. They had no inhibitions about the way they talked – they were exuberant. And this shows itself in the early Christian writings. They don't write cautiously, prudently or guardedly. They write expansively, loosely, even recklessly. They use excessive language to get their point across.

And the point that Luke wants to get across here is something he regards as crucial to the spreading of Jesus' message. In order to get us to see clearly what is important, he tells us what is not important. He tells us what we must get rid of. Something that will be bad for us, unless we do get rid of it. But if we can get rid of it, then we shall be more effective disciples.

And what we are to get rid of is fear.

No more fear, is Luke's message – and if no more fear, then no more timidity – no more caution. We are to be reckless – exuberant, supremely confident in our proclamation of God's saving work. We are to get rid of the fear or we will be unable to minister effectively as disciples of Christ. We are to relinquish the fear that discipleship is beyond us and that we are not up to it.

We have no need to surround ourselves with accoutrements – slaves, extra clothes, money, food, shoes even. They don't count. They could even get in the way of what really counts. We are to have confidence in ourselves as ambassadors for Christ, and we can have this confidence because the Holy Spirit will empower us.

So there is to be no place for timidity or caution. We are to have no fear that we will not be able to convey the experience of the risen Christ, for the One who calls us is the One who will enable us.

Against all human expectations, we will be given the courage to say what we believe, and we will be given the sense to say it effectively. We will be strengthened to cope with the trouble and confrontation that preaching of the gospel will provoke, and we will be enabled to cope with ridicule, rejection, even hostility.

The good news of this passage is that we are assured we need have no fear when we stand up for what we believe, and that we should never doubt our ability to do it. When we reach the kingdom and the saving acts of Jesus, we can be confident, and throw aside all trepidation. We are assured that God is our salvation, and that God will see us through. We can trust in this gracious, supportive God, who is with us, inside us, at our elbow, and we need never to be afraid.

No matter how terrible our circumstances may become – even though it may be for us as though we are lambs amongst wolves – we will have no fear, because at all times the Risen One is with us.

And so it is to this good God that we owe all thanks, praise, worship and glory, now and always. Amen