

from disciples to apostles

a sermon preached on the

seventh sunday after pentecost

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by father ken hewlett

the lections: Ezekiel 2: 1-10; Psalm 123; 2 Corinthians 12: 2-10; Mark 6: 1-13.

This morning we have just heard in the gospel reading about the local boy who is known to have made good has come to his home village. He is given a space to speak at the centre of village life, at the synagogue gathering on the Sabbath day. Initially his words and ways provoke admiration from the villagers he knows, but the admiration soon turns to something else, it degenerates into petty comment and trivial gossip about his domestic situation and his parentage. At home, Jesus's mission flounders on his fellow villagers' pre-conceptions about who he is. They could remember him, playing in the fields as a child, working with his father as a young man; it seems that their very memories prevented them from being confronted with his present reality, grown up now, as a bearer of the message of God. So Mark in his gospel account records Jesus' failure in his home village, truthfully and honestly.

Behind Jesus' reception at Nazareth lies this very basic human reality, that when words pass between people, there is always more than the words, there is the history and personality of the speaker, and there is the experience, pre-conceptions, prejudices of the hearer. What the speaker means to say may not be what the hearer hears. The reality is that to live in the world is to have the truth of what we are and what we say threatened by ambiguity, our own or the 'others'. The pure disembodied word we search for in vain. But the witness of the scriptures is clear. The threat of ambiguity is never an excuse for silence or invisibility. We could have expected that the words Jesus spoke to his fellow villagers would have found a ready acceptance, instead the villagers rise up in a murderous fury. Furious they may be – but Jesus' work goes on.

In today's gospel reading from Mark the work goes on. Immediately after his rejection at Nazareth, Jesus calls the inner core of his disciples around him and sends them out in twos to make the gospel of repentance and the Kingdom of God known. These were the orders. 'Take nothing with you except a staff for your journey: no bread, no bag, no money in your belts: wear sandals and one tunic...': the bare essentials. How do these words strike us? No food, no money, no protection, the clothes you stand up in—that's all! Are we volunteering?

Jesus says, 'this is what discipleship is all about'. This is an action parable about vulnerability, defencelessness, living with uncertainty, about going out relying on the grace of God, which means, not on our own resources and efforts, which means relying on the world around us and the people we meet. Let's have a very honest moment. I am a preacher of the gospel. I've been at it for quite a long time: for years I have preached week by week. By and large I feel pretty secure in the task, though there have been times when I have come to the lectern to speak with more than a little apprehension. I feel pretty secure in the task, standing on my step before my protective wooden lectern, dressed in these distinctive clothes, speaking in a building which usually lies empty most of the rest of the week, and to be honest, is much less than full now. But sometimes I wonder, often I wonder: are we just talking to ourselves? What is the relationship of what we're doing now to what Jesus sent the disciples out to do? How does the

word get out into the streets today? One thing I am clear about, is, getting the word out onto the streets is a common task, one for all of us, our task, together and no one is saying that it is easy!

But it begins by meeting people where they are, not where we would like them to be or where we think they should be. It begins by being open to them, hearing their story, listening to their pain, their questions, maybe sometimes their anger. It begins by being prepared to be open, and to be open is to be vulnerable, being prepared to admit that we don't have all the answers; we don't hide in an armour clad invincible gospel. It means making time and space for that encounter on open ground where we share all the vulnerability and uncertainty of the first apostles.

If it's Jesus himself who sends us out, look who stands beside us to encourage us, no less than St Paul. 'When I am weak, then I am strong', he tells the Christians at Corinth. That paradox of strength out of weakness, freedom through surrender, gain out of loss runs as a great broad theme throughout Paul's writings. It comes from two sources, from his contemplation of the mystery of Christ's cross, and from his own experience, both of the trials he had endured in Christ's service and of what he called in today's reading, 'his thorn in the flesh'. He says, 'I could tell you of spiritual experiences that would make you marvel; but these are not my real credentials. I would rather tell you of this unnamed handicap, which from time to time lays me low and keeps me humble. It reminds me that I'm anything but superman; that my own efforts by themselves count for very little. It reminds me that God's grace is always at work in me, even in my weakness, especially in my weakness, and it's that grace which gives me all the strength I have.'

We could say that today's gospel reading marks the moment when Jesus disciples, those who have been called to be learners at the school of Christ, become apostles, those who are sent out to make the kingdom known. That twofold movement in discipleship continues, with each feeding the other—and an integral part of being disciples today. There's also the pertinent question as to whether we haven't laid too much emphasis in recent times on being disciples and apostles, both hearers and doers of the word. Have we been too often infected by the activist spirit and have left not enough room for the inquirer, the unsure, the uncommitted, and the sceptic even? The sceptic's voice is certainly one that is heard frequently in story of the Scriptures. Seeking to build an open church means that there is room for all, and room for all to make their voice heard and have their questions voiced and opinions raised. The parable of the sower casting seed indiscriminately over all sorts of different ground remains a paradigm for the way we as Christians need to operate both at a personal and corporate level. The dynamic of today's gospel reading as Jesus moves from being estranged at home to sending out disciples to be at home with strangers reminds us of the costly and vulnerable going out at the gospel's heart.

So the discipleship question never goes away; it's the key question Jesus asks us, the key invitation he makes. 'Follow me' he says, 'and go into the world in all its ambiguity and with all your vulnerability, in my name'. For this is the invitation into the unfolding mystery of transformation, which we see in the events of Christ's passion and in the life of St Paul and countless others who have come after him. In the seeming unpromising field of our modern secular world shoots of new life grow, seeds of hope flourish. There is, all around us, if we have eyes to see, in the words of John Bell, 'evidence of transformation in which God is known and seen'. Jesus says, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' Paul says. 'When I am weak, then I am strong.'