

Sunday morning, 4 July, Emmanuel URC, Cambridge

I don't know about you, but it's very easy, reading a passage from the New Testament such as we have just heard, to feel a certain sense of dislocation when we think of the state of the churches in Britain today. The Gospel message comes to us seemingly in sharp, distinct and challenging events, in primary colours, as it were, and yet the life of our churches all too often seems to be painted in bland pastel colours. The Gospel speaks of renunciation, love, sacrifice, blessing, lack of regret; church life bespeaks instead a certain confused noise about resources, buildings, anxieties, administrative processes, necessary compromises. My church, the Church of England, finds itself immersed this week in dreadful murmurings about women bishops and in hand-wringing about bishops' houses and palaces. And these things can manifest themselves in the most trivial of ways, or in instances which are eloquent of the pettiness of aspects of church life. The most ferocious argument on the church council I remember from my days as a curate in Battersea was an argument about the provision of mince pies after Midnight Mass – not, you note, there were too few mince pies to go round, but that there were too many. How very far it all seems to be from Jesus's instructions to the seventy he sent out, according to Luke – “Carry no money belt, no bag, no shoes”. And elsewhere, of course, Jesus says “No one who sets his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God”. (Luke 9.62)

There are many texts in the Gospels which could have given us the same sense of dislocation, of disconnect. But this text from Luke surely focuses our attention particularly on the question of mission, and though there are plenty of people who suggest that, one way or another, we're not getting mission right, you could hardly claim – in this time of dire warnings about shrinking churches – that no attention at all is paid to mission. So the account of the sending of the seventy is a timely and useful way into thinking a bit about what mission today might mean. There is a conceptual rhythm to the Gospel understanding of mission. It is bound up with the notion that we're sent out to promote and to enable what we ourselves have received. We receive the love of God, and the forgiveness of God; we are sent out to deliver the love and forgiveness of God; what we receive, so we hand on. Christians therefore do not stand in the role of mere instruments of God's purposes, mere puppets put up to do a job on his behalf, but they become, in and through faith in Christ, complete human beings, aware of their relation with their maker, and it is that human completeness that in turn they're encouraged to share with their fellow human beings. And that suggests, again, that no one receives the love of God for themselves alone, but they receive it on behalf of others, for they must share it with others.

The seventy are sent out to run ahead of the Lord. Like John the Baptist, their task is to prepare his way. They are to seek others to share in this task – “beseech the lord of the harvest to send out labourers”. They must travel light, so that they are not burdened unnecessary cares and responsibilities. They will receive gladly the hospitality of those who welcome them. And so their mission is almost certainly a divisive one – some will welcome them, and others will not. Where the peace they

wish is welcome, the blessing they bring will remain with that house; where it is not, it departs with them. And after they return to Jesus to tell him how even the demons flee his name, their authority is confirmed by Jesus – “I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy”.

In Matthew’s treatment of this sending of the seventy, the strangeness of the text to modern ears is intensified by the fact that Jesus tells the seventy to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and cast out demons. It would be very easy, then, to seize with relief on the gap between the thought-world of the Gospel texts, with its references to demons, to raising the dead, to miraculous cleansings and healings, and assume that there isn’t very much to be got out of this account for our own understanding today.

But there are, I think, at least three points that it’s worth drawing out of Luke’s account. First, it would be wrong to assume that the seventy sent out are some sort of prototype of a specialized, ordained ministry in the Christian Church. Nothing is said here about their selection. We do not know if they included the twelve or not. Even leaving to one side the question whether the number ‘seventy’ is really figurative, and should be taken to mean something like ‘a lot’, we do not or cannot know if those sent out were a tiny proportion or the entire number of Jesus’s followers. If we add Matthew’s little list of tasks – healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers, casting out demons – we have a description of mission which is closely modelled on the very tasks Jesus himself performed. Nothing here suggests a special delegation or the commissioning a specialized group within the followers of Jesus. Everything, rather, points to the opposite – that the role of those sent out is so closely identified with Jesus’s own actions, that something here is being said that is a paradigm of the Christian life itself, the lives of all who are ‘in Christ’ and followers of Christ. Whoever and whatever we are, this text applies to us. It is an insight into what mission means for all Christ’s people.

Second, and equally significant, to my mind, is this injunction to travel light – carry no money, receive whatever hospitality is given to you. Now it doesn’t seem to me likely that this is a universal rule, a kind of practical regulation for Christians applicable in all times and all places. It’s said here in relation to the sending of the seventy, as messengers going ahead of Jesus. And yet it is eloquent of a certain disposition, a certain attitude Christians should have to the things of this world – a readiness to use them and enjoy them, insofar as we are fortunate enough to have them, and yet a readiness also to let them go. Mission, as seems to be implied here, takes us through the things of this world, to a goal well beyond them. Anything that impedes our travelling forward in the service of Christ is an obstacle we have to throw off, and that applies surely above all to the desire of domination and possession.

Third, and perhaps most important, twice in his instructions to the seventy Jesus says the kingdom of God has come near to you – in other translations, the kingdom of God is upon you. It’s hard to escape in the narrative the suggestion that

the coming of the kingdom of God is Jesus himself. The seventy go on ahead of him, and proclaim the coming of the kingdom; he is the kingdom, coming near to those who hear his messengers. The kingdom of God – the kingdom of the light of the world, of peace and of justice – comes upon us in the person of Jesus Christ. That is, there is no state to be attained beyond the presence of Jesus in the world. Jesus is not so much ushering in a new state of things which will arrive at some point after him; it comes in his entry into history, it arrives as a sudden irruption into our time, our lives. The kingdom is here, now, for us, since Jesus was and is. And since we, as a Christian community, celebrate every Sunday – and particularly on a sacrament Sunday – Christ's presence amongst us as a pilgrim people who commemorate his death and resurrection, he is always with us, and the kingdom is already upon us.

Now there are, of course, many things that churches have to do to carry out mission in the world today. And I don't mean to trivialize them. Churches have to try to understand the culture around them. They have to consider mission strategies, and train and equip people for special tasks. They have to consider the financial implications of their strategies. They have to be open-eyed about the nature of the difficulties people face today. They have to form committees and draw up reports and implementation schedules, and so on. It would be very naïve to think that we could get along without such things. Churches are human institutions, after all, and like other institutions they face particular pressures and have to react in particular ways if they are to survive.

As I say, these things are all necessary, and woe betide the person who thinks that being a Christian bears no relation to the ordinary, practical tasks of life. But there is a risk of turning mission simply into a set of practices and nothing more – you make it just one amongst a number of particular activities, and forgetting that mission is of the very essence of Christian discipleship.

And it is so, because of that rhythm of receiving and giving to which I referred at the beginning. God's blessing is poured out on us, as Christians, in a very personal way – it is poured out on us in the person of Jesus Christ, who died and lives again for us. But he lives, above all, in and through the community of Christians, who make up his body on earth. Forgive me for quoting an Anglican archbishop, but Michael Ramsey, in an address to students, said we should not look elsewhere for God's help but to each other, for we are God's hands in the world. Inasmuch as Christ is with us, and in us as a Christian community, we receive through him the love of God which binds us together with all humanity in one great company, one great destiny of love.

What we receive from God through others, we hand on to others so that they may receive God from and through us. The dynamic of Christian faith is one that cannot be wrapped up in itself, self-preoccupied, self-referential, self-obsessed. It demands we travel through the things of this world, unimpeded by them, so that we may give love, and be love, freely to others. The kingdom of God has come upon us. Christ sends us out, ahead of him, to be witnesses of his love for all, as we ourselves

receive his love. May we, led by the spirit of God, serve Christ truly as he has served us. Amen.

[Please note: some translations speak of *seventy-two* sent out, rather than seventy]