

Fifteenth Sunday of the Year 2021

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Our gospel reading this morning is a brief and almost stark account of a phase in Jesus's ministry of teaching and healing (Mark, 6, 7-13). He calls the twelve disciples and sends them out in pairs, having given them authority over unclean spirits – those same unseen forces of evil troubling people whom I considered several Sundays ago in the context of the story of Jesus stilling the storm. The pairs' task is to preach repentance, and to heal those sick in body and spirit. These are the signs that the Kingdom of Heaven has broken in on human life in the presence of Jesus. Of course we hear echoes here of a longer passage in Luke (ch.7, 18-23) which tells how John the Baptist sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask if he really was “the one who is to come”. Jesus replied, picking up prophecy from Isaiah, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.”

But the beginning of our reading emphasises that these travelling preachers and healers must not depend on their own preparations or their own resources. They are to take nothing for their journeys except a walking stick each – no food, no money, no spare clothes. They are to be utterly dependent on what God does in and through them and the people they encounter.

It is a salutary and perhaps provocative reading for our times – as the church begins to emerge from the extraordinary constraints and losses caused by the covid pandemic. I am not suggesting that we should all abandon our churches, and become

wandering preachers and healers: far from it! Even the early church did not consider this story a template for the work of the church. That great itinerant preacher, St. Paul, earned his own living by tent-making at least some of the time, and stayed with friends he knew who clearly supported him. Some Christians have through the ages taken the Mark story literally, but they have been a tiny minority. But I think the Mark passage does suggest some important lessons for the present. There is much conversation in the church about planning for a post-covid church, about new initiatives and new targets, about cutting expenditure, about planting new churches and possibly closing down small and so-called uneconomic ones, particularly in rural areas. In many ways there is an uncomfortable sense here that some people view the church as if it were a commercial organization, with a product to sell, and that new ways must be found of presenting this product. But the church is not a John Lewis, for example, closing down some outlets, going more on line, to reach more customers and to maximise profits. Nor can Bishops be seen as equivalents to CEOs of big companies: nor should they act as such. The rite for the ordination of Bishops, drawing deeply on scripture, makes this clear.

So what is the church for? What should we be doing as faithful Christians in this place and at this time? It is often said that the church is unique among voluntary organizations – in that it does not exist for the benefit of its members. Nor fundamentally does it set its own goals and priorities. It exists because we are called by God, first and foremost; and called to do his work. We are not members because belonging is a particularly enjoyable pastime – often it is not. We do not at some very deep level actually choose to belong – we participate because we are compelled, prompted by some deep impulse planted within us to be where God might be found –

in Word and Sacrament. Our task is to worship God, and in so doing to receive his forgiveness and grace to become his body on earth – his hands, his feet, his eyes – to quote St. Teresa of Avila. From this process of transformation – perhaps we could call it saint-making, sanctification – flows the imperative to share the news that the Kingdom of God is among us, and to serve his people, particularly the poor, the sick, those whom the world despises – just the people Jesus touched most profoundly in his earthly ministry. A church which forgets that it is there to worship and to serve those around it is in trouble: worse than that – it is ceasing to be church in anything but name.

The Mark story also emphasises that those who preach the gospel should not rely on human plans and provisions. The driving force, the source of guidance and of the means to do this is God alone. This takes us back to our epistle reading for today from the first chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians. Although we often think of this as one of Paul's letters internal evidence from style and theology suggest that it may well have been a circular letter to a number of churches by a slightly later author who had drawn deeply on Paul's teaching and writing, particularly the letter to Colossians. Whatever its precise origins, the opening is a quite extraordinary passage of blessing – blessing God for all that He has done through Christ for those who belong to him. God is creator and redeemer who has poured out his blessings through Christ. Christ is the beginning and the culmination of the mystery of God's will for humankind. Here is something very similar to the words from Hebrews (ch.13) said as the Easter candle is marked at the vigil – "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." In Christ, in the fulness of time, all people and things will be gathered up. It is a great

cosmic song of praise and blessing, and a declaration that it is in the love and outpouring of Christ's life that we become children of God.

This is a great vision of God's on-going work of creation and redemption through Christ. It is rooted in a sense of the riches and glory of God's grace, lavished on those he has chosen. Above all when we think about the nature and work of the church in our day and situation we need to remember this. It is God who makes himself known in word and sacrament. Whatever the church does has to be at His behest, has to reflect the total dependence on Him which the passage from Ephesians demonstrates, as does the Mark story. The writer of John's gospel is even more forceful in the account of Christ's final teaching to his disciples. We read (in chapter 15) that Christ is the true vine. If we are to bear fruit we must abide in him, be profoundly attached to the vine which is the source of all nourishment to the branches. "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

So we come to his table to be fed and nurtured as his children; to be empowered to worship and to serve in this place and at this time.