

Proper 9

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on the third Sunday after Trinity, 3 July 2022

Gospel reading: Luke 10 verses 1-11 and 16-20

I remember that most signs on old French trains were simply in French. However, the signs warning travellers of the danger of putting one's head through the window were usually in English as well, and possibly other languages (although I don't remember which). I presume that the reason for this was that it was simply hard luck if an English visitor couldn't understand the menu. Whereas the consequence of an English-speaking traveller putting his head out of the window could cause considerable bother to the railway authorities. The use of English was therefore in the authorities' interest.

Travelling fairly frequently on planes, I have come to take for granted the safety demonstration before each flight. Whilst I don't think that I could recite the Aurigny script word for word, it's very familiar. But I am mindful of the captain's stern warning to pay attention. I usually resist the temptation to carry on reading whilst the flight attendants present the demonstration, and pay attention – knowing that, were there to be an emergency, I need to be prepared and focussed on what I must do.

As you may know, Judy found the ominous second red line on her Covid test ten days ago. I realised that she had put the required period of self-isolation to good use when I came into the kitchen one afternoon, to find many boxes and stuff that was destined for charity shops or the skips at Longue Hougue. Clearly, she had been hard at work at the necessary business of decluttering the loft. The unspoken suggestion was clearly that I should follow her good example – without, I trust, the need to contract Covid infection first. Indeed, one of the most memorably satisfying days last year was when we filled a skip with rubbish from the Rectory garage and stable, and reorganised the storage. Very satisfying. Another was when Terry and I set to work to burn a large amount of garden rubbish. Again, curiously satisfying.

I suspect that the extended group of seventy disciples were initially somewhat cautious in their reaction to Jesus' decision that they needed to be sent out to put into practice what they had learned from him. We might call it a 'placement' or 'work experience'.

Whilst they began with a mixture of caution and the expectant enthusiasm of aspiring novices, they returned as seasoned ministers, filled with genuine joy.

Jesus sent them as lambs into the midst of wolves. It was a difficult, hostile world about which Jesus warned, one true to life in every time and place. In their case, the social environment included the usual crowd of naysayers, sceptics, opponents from their own people as well as Roman officials. In order to undertake the task, they had to overcome their fears with courage and resolve. The obstacles may be different today, but we are all too aware that there is hostility to the Christian gospel. That makes us nervous.

Jesus told them to de-clutter: to travel light – no purse, bag, or sandals. In order to get the job done, they would not have time to care about material possessions or to waste time on other distractions.

He ordered them, when not welcomed by a community, to wipe the dust off their feet and move on to the next place. The urgency of the moment would not allow them to linger in hopeless situations.

They went out among the people, dutifully accomplishing the mission. They were so successful that they returned in a spirit of joy. It wasn't a superficial joy, but a deeper, satisfying, inner joy.

As the current members of the Body of Christ, we are the seventy for our generation. Our mission is not unlike that of those mentioned in Luke's gospel, and the guidelines and warnings are largely the same. The deep inner joy we can find in our 21st century mission for Christ can prove equally meaningful. As we follow our charge laid upon us in our baptism, we seek to serve God's people by offering to them the good news of God in Christ, both in sharing the truth and in the actions of care and love.

We, too, go out among wolves. We live in a world that is in turn fearful, emotionally paralysed, or aggressively angry. We know that both the Church and individual Christians have sometimes let people down, that our past actions have left damage or barriers to hear again the good news of Jesus.

Perhaps the hardest example to follow from Luke is to travel light. Many of us find it easy to acquire and hoard stuff, and difficult to do without what we want and think we need. We say, 'It might come in useful one day.' But we can easily see how the baggage of materialism can disable us from taking committed action.

Making sense of shaking dust off our feet, a practice of pious Jews during New Testament times, is also difficult. Many of us disdain the idea of giving up on any task. But, at the same time we know the importance of making the best and wisest use of our time and energy – prioritising, to make the best use of our time and energies to carry out God's work.

With all this in mind, we are invited to find the deepest joy that life in faith can bring, and to accept the challenge from Jesus to the seventy as our model to move boldly into our everyday world, into the lives of those around us – our friends and neighbours, strangers and enemies, sceptics and unbelievers, the bereaved and disconsolate, the poor and victims of injustice, the hopeless and diseased. God wants us to move forward with courage and commitment in telling others about Christ, bringing them into the life of the Church, welcoming those who come anew into our midst, ministering to all in need, sharing with them what we have, so that they may be healed of their brokenness and find the same joy in the Lord we have found. This is our common task, which we are invited to embrace to the best of our ability.

Yes, we will be fearful of failure, inclined to avoid doing anything because we fear that we will be embarrassed or rejected or that it will be too time-consuming or too difficult or costly. We are invited, like the seventy, to grasp life with joy in Christ; to seize the opportunities in our generation; and to do this with verve and commitment and excitement and joy.

A final link for us with the seventy of old, and Jesus' instruction to them, is found in his sending them out two by two. Like them, none of us acts alone in carrying out the mission and ministries of the Body of Christ. There is no 'I' but only 'we'. This is far too important to be left to the clergy. We are all in this together, as we hear Jesus' charge to us as the seventy of this generation.