

Luke 10:1-9

1 After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. 2 He told them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. 3 Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. 4 Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road.

5 'When you enter a house, first say, "Peace to this house." 6 If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you. 7 Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house.

8 'When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is offered to you.

9 Heal those there who are ill and tell them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you."

2 Tim 4:9-17

9 Do your best to come to me quickly, 10 for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. 11 Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. 12 I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. 13 When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.

14 Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. 15 You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message.

16 At my first defence, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. 17 But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth.

What is Church for?

Luke 10:1-9; 2 Tim 4:9-17

Here's church in Reading in 1918, from my father's memoir "On Sundays we always went to church and I enjoyed going... I really had very little idea of what it was all about. Adults just seemed to be there weekday and Sunday and they all wanted you to learn something. Their competence and enthusiasm for the job, I discovered quite early, varied considerably. We gathered in groups for Sunday School with our teacher, usually friendly and easy-going... The mysterious experience called prayers we all found irksome. Heads were bowed and eyes were supposed to be closed. Many clandestinely explored the conformity of their neighbours with one eye and waited for the end. The adults set us a good example and maintained the required posture. It occurred to me on one occasion that I might provide an element of surprise for the teacher if I disappeared during the prayer session. I succeeded in leaving the hall without detection. When I reappeared at a suitable lull in the proceedings about twenty minutes later the teacher was very angry indeed, in fact he refused to have me in the class anymore."

I decided I would preach on the Luke passage we just heard because I was thinking about church, and this is really the earliest incarnation of church, the first disciples being given a mission. Jesus gives them authority to drive out demons and heal disease.

So it's straightforward 1. authority to heal 2. preach the good news of the kingdom. The miracles are signs of the kingdom. **If the message isn't received it still remains the same, the kingdom of God is still near.**

This is the embryonic church. Heal. Preach. And Jesus' final command at the end of Matthew, make disciples. That's it, and it largely stayed that way at first, mainly a *movement* which spread the good news of Jesus. Every good thing comes from that start point. The impression we're sometimes given is it was perfect - It wasn't ever perfect - a lot of the New Testament is Paul correcting heresy. Then I looked at the other passage suggested for today in the church lectionary and this is really interesting, written c. 67AD. This is bits of an emotional final page of a letter from Paul in prison, not long before his death, to Timothy, 2 Tim 4:9-17

*Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, **because he loved this world**, has deserted me... Only Luke is with me ... When you come, bring the cloak that I left ...at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.*

*Alexander the metalworker **did me a great deal of harm.***

*The Lord will repay him for what he has done. You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message. At my first defence [in court], **no one came to my support**, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed....*

Those were the sort of problems Paul as a church leader had to deal with. It was a pretty unique situation. Isolation in prison, the need for companionship and encouragement. Dealing with opposition. Practical needs like a cloak. His scrolls, which were probably early versions of the gospels. The pressure of taking the message out was massive on all those like Paul, Luke, and Mark who were constantly travelling long distances, and of course that was often *on foot*.

Now in 2020 we have an entirely different situation. A feeling that Jesus is completely irrelevant to most people. With the virus and all its effects on us and on church which is a bit strange but at least we're here, but there's even greater need for practical and emotional and spiritual support. And this has to involve every one of us. It's a two-way process, we must all support one another, within church and in the wider community. The fact is that whatever people believe about whether there's a God makes absolutely no difference to the fact of his existence. Personally I believe that it's only the message of the Gospel that can really change things, because encountering God in my experience is the one thing which genuinely changes people from the inside out.

So what is church *for*, now? Firstly it's for **spreading the message** to everyone who will listen that they can be forgiven and reconnected with the God who made them, and wants to heal them, and healing is not just about physical disease.

Because we all die eventually, but about transforming us into whole and integrated people and that's an eternal healing. And we have been given authority to heal!

Secondly Church is **for followers of Jesus to gather and worship together, to meet with Him**, to hear His word preached, to pray for each other and to encourage each other. And to refresh and refill us with the Holy Spirit so we can do what God called us to do. That's the rhythm we need to have as a church – meet God in worship, be inspired and recharge in order to go out, just as the 72 went out.

But we have a very different challenge. The mission in this country has changed. We live in an unrecognisable society to the one our parents grew up in. The last actual mission I was involved with was in 2000 in Hastings and very few came but were mostly christians. We're no longer a christian nation. So today it's about **who we are** as disciples. God has placed us where we live, to pray and worship and plant seeds which He will grow. And His kingdom will continue to grow if we're faithful in doing that. We have to start with welcome. Someone asked me what sidespeople do, and I said we should rename it welcomers because that's the crucial part of the job. Historically a sidesperson was the one who took the collection round. My memory in the past is of slightly grumpy people who handed me a hymn book then continued their conversation with someone more interesting. People need to know we're interested in them and accept them as people and not potential converts.

Because God is like that himself. He is interested in people, whoever they are and whatever they think of Him.

In churches we all have our own ideas of what church should be, partly because we've grown up in a consumer culture which gives us what we want when we want it. So maybe 'a service' is not a good word for what we provide on a Sunday. Maybe we expect to get our needs fulfilled at church like with everything else we buy into. That's not why we should come to church, we should come to church expecting to meet with God and be re-energised to go and heal people and tell the good news of the kingdom. Because that's Jesus' way of doing church. We start with welcome and we end with love, because God is love and he desperately wants each person to know Him and to love Him. That love is the source of any community He creates.

The Guardian reported today that last week, the Church of England said its 16,000 churches were running or supporting 35,000 projects before the Covid-19 pandemic, including 8,000 food banks, 4,000 parent-toddler groups, 5,000 lunch clubs or coffee mornings, 2,700 community cafes, 2,400 night shelters and 2,300 breakfast or holiday clubs for children. That's good news. And it's church too. And it's healing as well.

But it's the presence of God that really changes people's hearts, not stuff we do. So when people come into church buildings they come into the presence of God and are changed by meeting with God.

Luke 10: 10 ...when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, 11 "Even the dust of your town we wipe from our feet as a warning to you. Yet be sure of this: the kingdom of God has come near."

**Even when the message isn't received it still remains the same, the kingdom of God is still near. This has to be our message. So go and heal people and tell them the kingdom of God is near. And make disciples from every nation.
Amen**