

Homily for The Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)

The gospel today tells the story of the wider group of disciples which Jesus sends out to preach and to heal. This is an important story because it tells us quite a lot about the role of the everyday follower of Christ, the ordinary Christian, rather than the Church's leaders and pastors.

Jesus tells the seventy-two "The harvest is rich but the labourers are few". He sends them out with realistic expectations. They are going out into the world carrying his message, but they must be aware that the task is to some extent beyond them from the start. They cannot achieve everything that needs to be done. This is quite a relief for us. We see so much about us that needs doing, so many people who need help, so many people who need to hear the word of truth, the word of love which is Jesus Christ. We do not know where to begin. In circumstances like that it can be tempting to be dazzled by the size of the task, caught like a rabbit in the headlights we are paralysed into doing nothing. Where on earth would we even start? But all the same, Jesus sends us out. Just start with the people close to you, and do not be disheartened if the task seems overwhelming.

They are to go out like lambs among wolves, carrying no purse, or haversack or sandals, not even turning aside long enough to chat with friends along the road. Surrounded by wolves, there is always a danger of turning into a wolf oneself. As we try to preach the kingdom of God, we will always come up against people who would rather belong to some other kingdom – usually one where they are king themselves. They may snarl and snap at us wolfishly, they may try to misrepresent us, or to undermine our leaders or ridicule our faith. It is tempting to snap back, but then we cease to be sheep and we drive a wedge between ourselves and the shepherd. Thomas Merton understood this very clearly:

[St. John] Chrysostom has some fine things to say about sheep and wolves in the III Nocturn of St. Barnabas' Day. "As long as we remain sheep, we overcome. Even though we may be surrounded by a thousand wolves, we overcome and are victorious. But as soon as we are wolves, we are beaten: for then we lose the support of the Shepherd, who feeds not wolves, but only sheep." (from Homily 34 on St. Matthew)" Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander p44-5.

The task the seventy-two are given is a task of some urgency. They will not need luggage that holds them back, nor can they stop to exchange pleasantries with people that they meet on the way. This is not a lifelong mission they are going on, this is a short preaching tour. They need to know, as do we, when it is right to stop and linger, to take our time with people, and when it is time to present them with a clear and simple choice, to stir them up and challenge them, then move on. They are being sent out to the places that Jesus himself will visit later; this is a preparatory visit that leaves people wondering, so that when Jesus arrives they will be eager to know more. The message that they will take with them is, first of all, a message of peace. That is the first word that they are to speak when they enter anyone's home: 'Peace to this house'. This is peace in its richer sense; this is more than just hoping for an absence of conflict, this is a prayer that in this home all will be as it should be. The very fact that the occupants have welcomed the visitor shows that they are people of openness, people who have not closed their

minds. If peoples minds are open, then so are their hearts, and they are on the way to achieving that peace which is God's will and God's gift, that knowledge that all is as it should be. Too often our lack of peace comes from within ourselves, from our own fears and anxieties, from our own closed hearts and closed minds. The first prayer that the seventy-two have is that people will find peace in its deepest sense. That is a fundamental human need, a fundamental human desire, and it is one that Jesus passionately desires we should have. The seventy-two make people ready to meet the one who is coming, the Prince of Peace.

What are the seventy-two to do in each of the places they visit? They are to heal the sick, and to proclaim that 'the kingdom of God is very near to you'. It is important that we understand that these are not two separate things at all. The two of them are inextricably intertwined. Proclaiming that the kingdom is close to us and providing material help to other people are both inextricably linked. You cannot have one without the other. This is a theme which Pope Benedict picked up in his letter *Deus Caritas Est*. Pope Benedict is a great Apostle of love, and one of the themes that he presents most strongly is the humanizing, life-giving, power of love. This is one of the themes that we might hope to hear him address when he comes to Britain in a few weeks time. Anyway, what he says in *Deus Caritas Est* is that we are called to love not just those who are close to us, but also those we do not know, or those we do know but do not like. If we are people of prayer, people of the sacraments, people rooted in the heart of the Church, we are able to see those people not as we might normally see them, but as Jesus sees them. If we come close to Christ, if we allow his heart to speak to ours (as Cardinal Newman would say) and we allow ourselves to become a new creation through this meeting with the Lord (as S. Paul mentions in his letter to the Galatians), then we can begin to see those around us not as competitors, not as opponents, not as threats, but we can see them as Jesus saw them: no matter how wolf-like some of them may seem, we remain sheep. Pope Benedict says: 'Then I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ...Seeing others with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave.' (DCE n.18)

The seventy-two come back transformed, full of excitement. They are changed people through their meetings with people in the towns and villages round about. They have discovered something very important. They have found out that coming so very close to people has also brought them close to God. As Pope Benedict says: 'Only my readiness to encounter my neighbour and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbour can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me.' (loc cit).

This is actually quite an inspiring gospel passage. It is offered to us to encourage us. If we are to be any sort of followers of Christ we need to love him more, and to love and serve those around us too. If our proclamation of our faith is to carry any conviction, it must be based on these two things. To be a follower of Christ, to be close to his heart in the heart of the Church, is an immense joy and an immense privilege. Perhaps we need to celebrate that a bit more, to be a bit more upbeat about that.