

Sermon 8 July 2018

2 Corinthians 12:2-10 and Mark 6:1-13

Are you someone who enjoys being thrown in the deep end and learning how to survive or do you want to have been to every conceivable training course before you would dare open your mouth and voice an opinion on a subject where you consider others are expert? Do you love to rush into the sea and grapple with the waves or do you think you are being rash if you paddle above your knees? Or do you prefer some sort of middle ground?

Today's gospel tells us that Jesus sent his closest disciples, the twelve, off, in pairs, into the villages having given them authority over unclean spirits. And they went and they called people to repent, they healed many. Where they were not made welcome, they left. Mark gives a sense of urgency, if people won't listen then they miss their chance. The healing that comes with repentance echoes the words of the Old Testament prophets, that the sick will be healed as God's Kingdom draws near.

We don't know what training they had beyond spending time with Jesus before they went and that he had given them power and authority. We don't know if they felt as if they were jumping in the deep end or had been on the appropriate training courses. It feels a bit more deep end.

Bear in mind that chapters 4-8 of Mark's gospel show that the disciples at this stage of Jesus' ministry don't have a clue about who he is or what he has been sent to do. Our reading falls in the middle of Mark recounting first the calming of the storm by Jesus which concludes with him saying, 'have you no faith?' moving through raising Jarius' daughter, the feeding of five thousand with two fish and five loaves, Jesus walking on the water and finishing with the feeding of four thousand. At the end, Jesus is still asking them, 'Do you still not understand?'

Would you send this bunch out to proclaim the kingdom of God?

Most of us would probably tell Jesus that he needed to give them a bit more preparation.

But, whatever training they had or hadn't had, out they went. Jesus didn't stop to ensure that they had a complete grasp of the relevant theology or a good presentation style.

This model shows us that Jesus expected his disciples to be more than followers, to be learners and to learn on the job and to be prepared to continually learn.

We can see from this that we don't have to wait until we are ready before we go as witnesses to God's kingdom. Indeed, once we have gone, there is more learning to be done. It's a life long process and our understanding deepens and changes as we experience more of life. Paula Gooder puts it: 'Learning and proclaiming, following and serving are all integrally linked. Jesus calls us just as we are and send us onwards to a lifetime of service for the kingdom, proclaiming, learning, healing and loving just as the early disciples did. Don't wait until you are ready.....'

Instead we mostly have to just use the gifts and talents God has given us and get on with being God's hands and voice in this world.

It's all part of the great commission that Jesus gave to his disciples following his resurrection. And in the same way that Jesus didn't give the twelve very clear instructions about the 'how' they were to heal, Jesus doesn't give any concrete instructions as to 'how' the good news is to be proclaimed to the whole of creation. The disciples, and we are just given a big job to do! And we are left to work it out for ourselves, perhaps using some imagination, as the early church in Acts had to do.

In a way it all depends what sort of a place we are all each sent out into, what sort of people we meet. And working it out and responding to that call is part of the adventure. What I know is that we learn on the job

each and every day. Because we don't leave the adventure of following Christ behind, locked away inside this building, when we walk out the door. We take it with us.

One way of unpacking the 'how' of the great commission is to look at it a bit like this: Remember what you can about the story of Jesus. (so that involves some Bible knowledge) Work together not alone (that was the model Jesus gave his disciples) Rely on the Holy Spirit and then use your imaginations. Experiment. Take risks. Try Stuff. Go out on a limb. Just go. Follow like disciples (in other words, be learners). See what happens. Make mistakes.

Don't be surprised if you make mistakes, the twelve did. Don't be surprised if you end up learning things you never expected to - that's a gift of the Holy Spirit.

I was talking to someone who is a chaplain at the Cathedral, someone you might expect to be completely cool and together about anything that might happen while on duty. I was told that the thing they feared was being asked to pray for and with a complete stranger, as they didn't like praying out loud and were scared that they might not use the right words. They still worry about it, even though their experience has been, right from the first time on duty, that the words come when they pray, and that the words bring comfort and encouragement to those who have asked for prayer.

So where do you go? Where do you feel God calls you to serve? Who do you meet? How might you share something of God with others? Where might you make a difference, bring blessing, peace and healing? Jesus can't do it all, he needs us to make his ministry happen.

If you know that you are called to a specific task, then do it, don't hold back. Do what you can to make earth more like heaven. And complement your doing by reading God's word. If you would like to try a new way of prayer and bible study combined you might like to try a new website Taketime.org.uk which introduces you to the practice of Ignatian Prayer. It helps you to imagine yourself within a Bible story and listen for Jesus' guidance and direction.

One way to bring the needs of God's world before him is to pray as you walk about your day. If you are with another Christian you can do this together, you will just look like two friends out for a walk and chatting as you go. Think of the houses, buildings, open spaces and people who live, work and play there. You can focus on hospitals or doctor's surgeries and shops and businesses, schools and old people's homes. Ask, how do I see the heart of God for this place? If you can't get out easily, you can use an A-Z and pray about the places marked on it that you know.

The disciples who were sent out will have returned and have told Jesus about what happened.

We too can get into the habit of coming back into church and telling stories of what has happened to us. Stories that might include the mistakes we have made. Stories that might encourage others to use their imaginations and take risks. They can be simply factual, not stories of boasting. Not told in a way of look at me, aren't I wonderful. Paul warns the Corinthians against boasting about great spiritual experiences. Instead we often learn more from the times when things didn't go quite to plan, or where we ask others for help or for inspiration. There are so many people here, going about quietly doing inspirational things, it would be good to be encouraged by them telling their stories of how God's kingdom is being made known here on earth. Maybe Mark will invite you to tell a story in 'This Time Tomorrow'.

The last hymn we will sing this morning, 'Go forth and tell' encourages us to have a concern of heart and mind, a love like God's for all humankind and to go in the strength which Christ supplies'.

May we have courage this week to take the plunge, to jump in the deep end, and be ready to play our part in Jesus' ministry where we live and work.

Sarah Thomas 8 July 2018

