

Trinity 2 - Year A

Exodus 19.2-8a; Romans 5.1-8; Matthew 9.35-10.8[9-23]

Sermon: Go out with your 'L'-plates on

At this time of year on a Friday, if the weather is clement (and sometimes when it's not) I am often out in search of the less well-trodden ways... those quieter lanes and footpaths which allow some space for listening to the birds and breathing the air. A few weeks ago this was going well for most of the morning until I needed to cross the River. At the spot where I'd chosen to hop across a long series of stepping stones, my path crossed the Dales Way - one of the great walking superhighways of the Dales.

Amongst the many people out enjoying the countryside were a number of groups heavily laden with packs and already looking a little weary. I remember these little gangs of tired tortoises from my years as a secondary school teacher, so I realised straight away that these must be plucky students out on expedition for their Duke of Edinburgh's Award. They will have spent weeks preparing... poring over maps and devising their route carefully... writing packing lists and checking that everyone had all that they needed for a three-day walk where they have to be completely self-sufficient. It's a level of preparation and provision that's a far cry from that experienced by the disciples in today's gospel passage.

Imagine them sitting with Jesus and nodding earnestly as he says:

'...The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.'

'Yes, Lord! Absolutely right. That's what we'll pray for.'

And then imagine their faces changing when he points to twelve of them and says: 'It's you. You're the ones I'm sending'.

'Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and sickness.'

... and Matthew tells us their names - they are a motley crew.

It seems that from the very beginning Jesus built conflict and the potential for disaster into his inner circle. He chooses impetuous Peter, who acts first and thinks later; cautious Thomas who always needed to work through every single possible outcome before committing himself to action - imagine getting ready for your Duke of Edinburgh's expedition in a group with those two trying to figure out who was going to carry the tent...

He chooses Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, both of whose names suggest strong connections to Jewish freedom-fighters who - like militia or terrorists around the world today fighting what they perceive to be oppression - would have been quite prepared to see off the odd Roman soldier.

He chooses Matthew who had sold out to the occupying Romans by becoming a hated tax-collector. If that were not enough for a pretty strange group dynamic, Jesus adds in two 'sons of thunder' James and John.

One of the remarkable features of this part of the story of Jesus' ministry is not so much that the disciples are sent out to proclaim God's kingdom, but that they are sent out to do it *at this point*.

In **Mark's** account of all that leads up to this sending out, there are a number of scenes in which the disciples demonstrate quite how much they don't understand Jesus... how underprepared they are.

At the end of the story of the stilling of the storm Jesus asks them: 'have you no faith'? The episode of the walking on the water ends with the comment that they didn't understand about the loaves and the fishes, and in Mark 8 from v14 we get to the climax of the whole pre-sending-out section with Jesus asking the disciples:

'Do you still not perceive or understand?
Are your hearts hardened?
Do you have eyes, and fail to see?
Do you have ears, and fail to hear?
And do you not remember?'

The implicit answer to all of these questions being: no, they don't. As far as we know, from what we're told in the gospels, there was no training course... no set of assessment criteria that needed to be met. Of course we can't know for certain how much preparation Jesus gave the disciples before he sent

them out, nor is it any of our business to know, but they do seem, to our eyes, to be woefully unprepared for the road ahead.

So, perhaps one of the key points of this section of the gospel narrative is that Jesus didn't stop to ensure that the disciples had perfect theology or a wonderful presentation style before he sent them. He simply sent them and they went.

That's not to say that this should be used as evidence that we should scrap all theology courses and ministerial training of any kind. Learning is good, I think we'd all agree, but might it be just plausible that we've got the emphasis a bit wrong these days? It's easy to assume that what we do today is **learn** then **do**... we become equipped in ways which we understand and can quantify and *then* we go out and share the Good News. But this is not the model we see in Matthew this morning.

The word disciple means literally, not 'a follower' as many assume, but a 'learner'. The disciples were called to a lifetime of learning and while they were learning, before they had even understood some of the fundamental things that they needed to grasp (like who Jesus was and what he had come to do), Jesus sent them out in service of the kingdom.

This seems to suggest two very important things:

1. you don't have to wait to be ready before you go,
2. and once you have gone there is still plenty more learning to do.

Learning and proclaiming, following and serving are all integrally linked.

So, in these first few weeks of the part of the Church year we call Ordinary Time, it's important to lean into our ordinariness and give space to the news that God has placed in us and sees in us an extraordinariness that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is growing all the time... if we let it. Jesus calls us just as we are and sends us onwards and outwards to a lifetime of service for the kingdom, proclaiming, learning, healing and loving, just as the early disciples did.

So, let's try, at all costs, to avoid any sense that we should wait until we're ready. The time is now... 'go' says Jesus... there is plenty of time to live into the rest.

... and as we gather around our Lord's table at the Eucharist, we look at the people around us and realise that, just like those first disciples, we are not being sent out alone. Each of us, confused and unready as we are, is part of something truly extraordinary that has the power to change the world if we only have the courage to go. It's the idea bound up in the Greek word *koinonia*... 'participation in the Spirit'... allowing ourselves literally to be in-spired (breathed into) by the Spirit and to open ourselves up to the new life that God offers.

Later, when we pray together after Communion, let's hold onto the words we say to God and carry them with us out of this place and into our lives in the week ahead. Unready and unworthy as we may feel... ordinary as we are, Lord:

Send us out in the power of your Spirit
to live and work to your praise and glory.

Amen.