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Introduction

The reading from Luke 10 comes after the Transfiguration, and in Luke's account is the beginning of Jesus' journey back to Jerusalem. The whole chapter focuses on Evangelism through word (the sending out of the 70), Evangelism through deed (the parable of the Good Samaritan), and the worship of Jesus (Martha and Mary). The 70 are authorised by Jesus – sent out by him for a specific task – to go ahead of him. Did Jesus know the full implication of the resurrection when he said the 70 were being sent out like lambs into the midst of wolves, or was Jesus' mind on the crucifixion and the pain and shame that he knew was coming?

Text

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.' "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me." The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

Comment

Have you ever had the feeling of being chosen to do something of great importance – something where the impact will be felt by others? Maybe you were the person who took the penalty kick that determined the outcome of a game? Maybe you were the person who developed keyhole surgery and performed the first operation? Or maybe you were the person asked to set up a new initiative for a

vulnerable group in your church or in the local community. And the outcome of what you did had an impact on the lives of others.

Jesus is beginning to make his journey back to Jerusalem. 'After this,' being the time after Jesus' ministry that had largely been in Galilee. Jesus gives authority to 70 men who he instructs to do something of great importance, and it was something new – to go ahead of him to the places he will pass through on his way to Jerusalem. Never before had Jesus asked so many people to go ahead of him to prepare the way. John the Baptist had prepared the way for Jesus much earlier in his ministry, and he had sent the 12 disciples out in the previous chapter of Luke's gospel. But this time he selects 70 men. It feels quite organised and they are given specific instructions about what to do and what to say, depending on how they are received by the villages and towns they enter. They are also given specific instructions on what not to take with them.

They return with the most amazing stories – not one pair returns with anything other than good news. They were tasked with healing the sick and bringing peace to the house. Yet the outcome of their interactions with those they met far exceeded this. They report back that 'even the demons submit to us!' They took an authority that Jesus had not specifically given, and it was granted when they needed it.

Jesus is quick to remind the 70 not to take great status from their encounters and experiences, 'do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you', but rejoice that your name is written in heaven. This is about doing the work of God that brings a real impact to those that they met, and also the blessing of their own eternal salvation.

I wonder how the 70 felt after this, after the initial joy and euphoria had waned. The internal conflict of wanting to go out again, of seeking wider recognition for what they had done, of continuing to feel valued by being selected again by Jesus. Despite the fact that Jesus says the harvest is plentiful and the labourers are few – we do not read of the 70 again. What happened to them? Did they go back to their 'day jobs', to their families? The 70 felt elated and joyful when they went back to Jesus. But what was the longer term impact on the 70? What did they do with this experience and gifting? Did they seek status, or did they rejoice in knowing Jesus and what he had done for both them and others?

Remember that the 70 went ahead of Jesus. Today we speak of going out from the Church, discovering where God is already working, and joining God there. And yet here Jesus is inviting not just one or two, but 70 men to go ahead of him. More than this, Jesus is sending the 70 ahead into a place of possible conflict and tension. 'Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves'. Not only were the 70 healing the sick and casting out demons, but they were to be peace-makers... reconcilers. 'Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!'" This is exciting. This paves the way for disciples of Christ to speak out against injustice, to be the voice that others do not want to hear – to influence and change society. To show the way of love and grace where there is hatred and greed. Even when the people rejected the 70, they had brought the Kingdom of God close. Yet Jesus is also realistic. If the person does not share in the peace brought to the house it will 'be returned to them'. The work of reconciliation in God's Kingdom is not always welcomed.

In Luke's previous chapter Jesus gave three reasons why some people are not able to follow him – yet this chapter is not about just following Jesus, but actively going out in his name, to bring God's Kingdom to others. The harvest might be plentiful, and the labourers few, but to be a disciple of Christ is so much more than following – it is to be pro-active in taking the love and the grace of Christ to those in need in the most challenging of situations. Jesus continues to illustrate the importance of this in the next verses of Luke 10 – the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Today's gospel reading is a wonderful reminder that Jesus is not concerned if we are a name that is known in the world, or a great manager, or a great anything as seen through the world's eyes... though all these things are good in themselves. None of this is about status or power. Jesus calls us to be a disciple. It is in this discipleship that we go out and meet with others in our daily lives. It is in this discipleship that our love for Christ grows and overflows to others. It is in this discipleship that we are given the gifts and the authority to speak in the name of Jesus. In the places where tensions run high. In the places of injustice. In the places where God's Kingdom is needed. 'Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.'

Response

The Churches in Cumbria, England, have a vision that every person in the county will have the opportunity to discover more of God and God's purpose for their lives, so that they will discover more of Jesus.* It involves increasingly living ecumenically, working out a new way of being together as a Christian Church, journeying together to take the Good News of Jesus to those who live, work, and holiday within this county. It reminds me of the 70 men in Luke's gospel – going out to the places that Jesus will travel through on his way to Jerusalem.

Decide how you will actively and intentionally take the Good News of Jesus to those who you will meet this week.

- How do you feel about being intentional in speaking about Jesus?

- What response do you expect to receive?

- How will you respond to those who do not want to hear?

How will you respond to those who do want to hear?

Prayer

Let us walk towards the places of injustice
To challenge the systems that divide our land
Let us walk towards those that hate
To bring a message of peace and reconciliation
Let us walk towards those who love
To share in the love of Jesus with others
Let us walk together as the Church of Christ
To bring the love of Christ to all we meet.

Amen.

