

On the Way

Readings: Genesis 21:9-20 & Mark 6:6b – 13, 30

I wonder if, like me, you find life seems to get busier as you get older. Before John retired a year ago people told us that when you retire you wonder how you found time to go to work! And now we are told we should have a bucket list – 100 things to do before we pass from this world to the next – yet more things to do! Busy, busy, busy!

Mark's Gospel is a bit like that. Jesus always seems to be on the move; it's a bit like a child's story: - and then ... and then ... and then ... and so on. Events get sandwiched together. Do you remember Susan's sermon last week? Jesus was on his way to Jairus' house to heal his daughter when a sick woman touched him and he stopped what he was doing to speak especially to her. Sounds like life today with so many interruptions to our already busy schedules.

But these events are not a meaningless mix, a sort of stream-of-consciousness account of Jesus' life. Mark has a plan in the way he puts things together and his plan, of course, reflects Jesus' plan. So at the beginning of Mark's Gospel we read:

“Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.’” (Mk 1:14-15)

Then a little while later Mark tells us how Jesus chose His twelve disciples:

“Jesus went up the mountain and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.” (Mk 3:13-14)

We have already talked about the fact that this was unusual because a disciple usually chose which rabbi to follow but with Jesus he does the choosing and calling. Now the Twelve have the opportunity to be with Jesus; to hear his teaching, and to watch as he heals the sick, drives out evil spirits and raises Jairus' daughter from the dead. Heady stuff. How do you think the disciples felt? Excited about being part of what was going on; being where the action was? Puzzled; frightened? “Who is this? Even the wind and waves obey him!” they said. (Mk 4:41) Scary stuff. But for the disciples it was about to get a whole lot scarier – because now it was their turn!

In the passage we are looking at this morning, Jesus calls the twelve to him and begins to send them out two by two. In pairs probably for mutual support but also because of the requirement in Jewish law for there to be two witnesses. Let's look at that passage in more detail.

Mark 6:6b-13, 30

After the high point of the raising of Jairus' daughter, Jesus goes back to Nazareth, the town where he grew up but “they took offence at him,” – in other words the tall poppy syndrome kicked in – who does this guy think he is? Isn't he the carpenter,

Mary's son? So Jesus leaves, and travels around teaching in the neighbouring villages.

It is at this point that he involves the Twelve in his ministry. Why? Possibly so that they can cover more ground but also, I think, so that he can begin training them for the future. You see a disciple is a follower but also more than a follower; traditionally they spent time with a rabbi so that they could learn from him until they were qualified to become teachers in their own right. In some ways they were more like an apprentice, one who learns on the job, who watches the master craftsman, who has a go at things under his direction, gradually becoming more skilled until they themselves become a master craftsman or woman.

Vv6b-7 The disciples had heard Jesus teaching, they had watched him at work, now it was time for them to share in his work. But, and it is a big but, watching and hearing, is not enough. Something else is needed. – Jesus gives them authority, his authority, over impure spirits. The disciples are being sent out as Jesus' representatives and they go with his authority.

We never become qualified to become independent of our teacher. We always have to rely on Jesus' authority given to us by the Holy Spirit. Remember in John 15, in his last hours with his disciples Jesus says to them:

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me, you can do nothing." (Jn 15:5)

Then in **vv8-11** Jesus gives them instructions for the journey beginning with what to take.

You know, I'm always amazed when we meet our sons at the airport - they stroll off the plane with only a small backpack! Days, weeks even before we go overseas I have lists, long lists, of the things I need to take including clothes for every possible occasion and weather conditions. Gradually the lists become smaller but still the day before we go away as I look at what I have laid out to pack I know there is no way it will fit in my suitcase. Somehow, by the time we get to the counter at Nelson airport I have managed to squeeze everything in the case and I can still lift it, just!

Jesus instructions, though, are for his disciples to travel light. When they are "on the road" they are to take no food, no daypack, no spare tunic, no moneybelt and no money, not even some loose change (Mark uses the term χαλκόν, kalkon ie small copper coins) However, Mark does allow them to take a staff and to wear sandals.

Why take so little? Well, it means they have to learn to be totally dependent on God's provision. We have already heard in our OT reading how God provided for Hagar and Ishmael after they were turned out of Abraham's camp. The disciples would have grown up hearing stories like this, and of God's provision for his people as they journeyed out of Egypt, now they will have to rely on God's provision for themselves.

When we lived in UK we came across a guy called Harry Greenwood. Harry and his wife lived by faith; they did not own a car so if Harry had a preaching engagement somewhere he would often go outside and wait by the roadside believing God would send someone along to give him a lift – and He always did! Once when in another city Harry was hungry and found the smell coming from a nearby restaurant

tantalizing. He felt God was saying to him that he should go in and have a meal. The only problem was Harry had no money! Nevertheless he was convinced that God was telling him to have that meal. So, he went in and chose a seat as far away from the cashier as possible. As he studied the menu Harry figured that he might as well spend the evening washing dishes for a steak as for a hamburger; so he ordered the steak. At the end of the meal Harry still had no money and he went up to the cashier wondering what on earth he was going to say. The cashier looked at Harry and recognized him: "You're Harry Greenwood. God has told me that I am to pay for your meal!" Wow! Now I am not saying we should all live like that. Even the passage we are looking at represents a specific sending out, at a specific time, for which God made specific provision.

We also need to remember that at that time when a stranger entered a village he didn't look around for somewhere to stay, instead it was the religious duty of one of the villagers to offer board and lodging. I'm not sure that would work too well today, standing around in the middle of Richmond waiting to be invited home. However it did work then and it is the background to Jesus' instruction in v10.

V10 Jesus says when his disciples enter a house, that is when they are invited to stay with someone, they stay there until it is time to leave. Why does he say that? Well, you can imagine the ruffled feathers and upset feelings within a small community if the disciples decided to take up a better offer and move somewhere more upmarket. It would be insulting the poorer family and boosting the prestige of the better off. Doesn't promote harmony or kingdom values does it?

V11 But Jesus also had to prepare his disciples to face rejection – after all he had faced something similar in Nazareth. Again they are given specific instructions – they are to "shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them." This is almost certainly a reference to a common Jewish practice. According to Rabbinic law the dust of a Gentile area was defiled so before Jews could re-enter Jewish territory they must shake off every particle of unclean 'gentile' dust. A sort of religious biosecurity measure. So this was a symbolic gesture in effect saying – this is a witness or testimony, sort of providing evidence, that you are placing yourselves outside the territory of God's people. It is not a condemnation so much as a warning. Remember Jesus said that whoever rejects his disciples rejects him and that whoever rejects him also rejects the One who sent him – God himself. (Lk 10:16)

V12-13, 30: So, Jesus has called his disciples to him and begun sending them out. He has given them his authority and specific instructions for their mission. And in v12 we read "And they went out." They were obedient; however inadequate they felt, they went. Susan has talked to us about the end of Matthew's Gospel where the Greek says "Going, or as you go, make disciples." The focus is on the main verb – make disciples – but there has to be a going first; a bit like 'take and eat' – we have to take before we can eat; we have to make a move if we want to reach out to people.

As they went around the villages the disciples took Jesus' message with them. They preached that people should 'repent.' Now, if you look up repent in a dictionary, even a good dictionary, it will probably say something like "to feel regret," and that is very often how we use it – in the sense of feeling sorry for our sins, but repentance isn't a

feeling word, though it does involve our feelings, it's more of a thinking or action word. It's asking us to change our mindset, our way of thinking, our attitudes, and that should lead us to change the way we behave.

In the gospels we repeatedly find Jesus challenging the accepted attitudes, towards the poor and powerless, those on the margins of society, in particular. Jesus calls it the Kingdom of God coming near. The driving out of demons and the healing of the sick are all part of it. And Mark tells us that the disciples had a very effective ministry for many demons were driven out and many people were healed. I'm sure they were all bursting to tell their stories when it came time to report back to Jesus.

Fantastic – but **what does it mean for us at Holy Trinity** 2000 years later.

Well, Jesus is still calling people to himself and I'm sure most, if not all, of us have responded to that call. We are here, in part, because we want to be close to him, to worship him, to hear his word and to meet with him in Communion when that is part of our service. But, like the disciples, Jesus chose us not only to be with him but to be sent out by him; to be part of his mission. Last year we talked quite a lot about what it meant to be a missional church, part of the *missio dei* the mission of God. We had a whole series of sermons on “The Mission of God's People,” (those sermons are still up on the website, by the way) and our Strategic Plan has a section on reaching out to those outside the church.

But we need to be asking ourselves: what should I be doing as part of that mission?

Well, let's look at what we can learn from our passage.

V6b As far as we know the disciples were sent to the villages in Galilee, probably an area that they knew quite well for many of them were Galileans. Maybe they had friends or relatives in the villages. Those of you that have lived in this area for any length of time may have a whole host of contacts and maybe that is your Galilee.

By the way, by focusing on the local area I am certainly not saying we should neglect mission elsewhere. We are called to be witnesses for Jesus in our equivalent of “Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

But Jesus' instructions are for when they are literally “on the road,” or on the journey. There are many reasons why we might be on the road. Sometimes we are forced into it, as Hagar was; and in Acts 8 the Jerusalem believers fled persecution and were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. But everywhere they went they were “gossiping the gospel” as Michael Green puts it. Here, in Mark, Jesus has sent his disciples out to a particular area. We need to be listening to hear where Jesus wants us to be working with him in reaching out to others, maybe people at work, or school, on our own doorstep.

In V7a Jesus sent his disciples out in twos. This is not something we are called to do on our own. We can ask other people to come alongside and help us, in particular to pray for us, or we could be one of the pray-ers. Even Paul felt the need to ask the Christians in Colossae to pray that God would open doors for their message and that he might proclaim it clearly. (Col 4:3-4) Or maybe we can be part of a team effort: Lunch on the Hill has behind the scenes people, cooking, organizing, clearing up, as

well as up-fronters. Some of us have done the course that Owen ran on giftings, maybe we could ask God to show us how we can use those in outreach.

Then to equip his disciples Jesus gave them authority over impure spirits, In the same way he has given us his Holy Spirit to equip and empower us. I don't want to sound scary but evil is real. If we are going to take it on, we need spiritual protection, the armour of God, (Eph 6:10-18) for as Paul reminds us our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. This is not something we tackle in our own strength.

In the parallel passage in Matthew, Matthew 10, Jesus' instructions are much longer and include more warnings of persecution but also more encouragement. Don't worry about what to say or how to say it, Jesus says. - That is exactly what most of us worry about isn't it? "At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." (Matt 10:19-20) Once again the Spirit is the enabler.

But I want to bring it down to a very practical note.

On Friday night I had a dream. Now I don't dream very often and when I do my dreams don't usually make much sense, but I dreamt I was at a meeting in a church hall. All the chairs were set out in a semi-circle and there was a whiteboard off to one side. John was there, and also our younger son Ben, with their guitars. The meeting began with some singing but as it went on I became aware that I was supposed to be the speaker. To say I felt panicked would be an understatement! I had not prepared anything! What was I going to do? I had a brief reprieve because they began to pray. Then I heard God say to me: "**Tell them what you know.**"

And that is what we are all called to do – to be a witness to Jesus is to tell other people what we know about him; what we have experienced and believe to be true at the very depths of our being.

That's all. You know we often feel we are inadequate, not ready; but neither were the first disciples. So far they had not understood Jesus' teaching (4:10); not trusted that he cared about them (4:38) they had no faith in his power to deliver them; and were unaware of his spiritual perception. (5:31) Yet Jesus sent them out with His authority and they achieved great things.

For, despite all their shortcomings, Jesus had been training his disciples. They had listened to his teaching and watched him at work. Working with someone is a great way to learn but some of us have not had that opportunity. However here's something to think about. In October we have a couple coming to Holy Trinity for about 3 weeks from a UK based group called Resource. Archdeacon Kevin Roberts and his wife Anne are keen to help us learn more about things like new ideas for mission, praying with people, and practical ways of moving with the Spirit. There is some information about them on the noticeboard at the back and I'm sure we will hear more as we move nearer the time.

However, as Donald English says:

“No amount of hearing, teaching, or observing miracles or even being with Jesus is enough. [They] We, must risk ourselves in dependence on the gospel and the power that accompanies it.”

Jesus wants to send us out; it is up to us to go.

And every week we commit ourselves to do exactly that. Our service leader tells us to “GO and serve the Lord, go in peace,” and we reply: “Amen, we go in the name of Christ.”

Let’s think about those words this week and every week as we leave this building.

Isaiah said “Here am I, send me.” (Isa 6:8). Let’s take a few minutes to think about what that means for us, this week and the weeks ahead.

Amen.