

9.00 Sermon 7th July 2019

Wolves, demons and leprosy encountered; all in a day's work in the Lord's harvest

Readings: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

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I wonder what first came into your mind when you read our theme for today?

I'm sure a lot of you may have thought – What's that all about?

Or maybe you thought – Yes, that just about describes my life at the moment.

Or maybe you thought just the opposite – No, haven't encountered many demons, wolves or lepers lately – certainly not on a daily basis.

Or maybe we have but we just haven't recognised them for what they are.

Let me begin by telling you a story.

A long time ago when I was a student at London University our College Christian Union decided to run a mission week. We organised a speaker - a young Billy Graham look-alike called Roger Forster – and arranged a series of meetings. One meeting in particular stands out for me. It was held at lunchtime in one of the lecture rooms and we were particularly pleased that one of our most hardened and out-spoken critics had agreed to come along. But when it came time to start there was no sign of her – so we started anyway. As Roger was talking, the door, which was behind him on his left-hand side opened, and 'Mary' as I will call her came in. She tiptoed in, trying not to disturb anybody, but when she got just in front of Roger she suddenly spun around violently 3 or 4 times and then fell to the floor seemingly unconscious. Now, we were all well brought up Anglicans or Brethren with a few Baptists thrown in and none of us had seen anything like this before. We were well and truly out of our comfort zone. Fortunately Roger realised what was happening. He prayed quietly but firmly that the evil spirit that had caused this outburst would leave 'Mary' and that she would be restored to her right mind. And that is what happened. Mary quickly recovered and over the next few weeks and months committed herself to Christ and received help and healing for various issues from her past. For the rest of us, witnessing what happened in that lecture room opened our eyes to the possibility that the sort of things we had read about in the Gospels were not just limited to NT times but could happen here and now.

It also brought home to us in a very dramatic way that we are part of the on-going story of the Bible – the story of a loving God working to rescue and redeem a world that has fallen under the spell of the Evil One. When we read the Gospel stories, including the verses from Luke that we are looking at this morning, we are seeing the outworking of this cosmic conflict.

Tom Wright in his comments on today's passage says this: "Jesus' task is therefore not simply to teach people a new way of living; not simply to offer a new depth of spirituality; not simply to enable them to get to heaven after death. Jesus' task is to defeat the Satan, to break his power, to win the decisive victory which will open the way to God's new creation in which evil, and even death itself, will be banished."

Jesus' own comment on the work the 72 have been doing is this: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." He is echoing the prophetic visions of Satan's downfall in Isaiah (Isa 14:4-23) and Ezekiel (Ezek 28:1-19) and anticipating the victory of the cross and the final defeat of evil which we read about in Revelation. Jesus has seen the heavenly reality which corresponded to the earthly victories won by the 72. What they have been engaging in is bringing signs of the freedom that Jesus won for us on the cross, into the lives of the people they met on the way.

Does that excite you? Or are we so engrossed with the practicalities of everyday life or with a succession of church services and meetings that we forget what we're here for and the big picture of which we are a part. Because, like the 72, we too are sent out as workers in the Lord's harvest field.

Let's go back to the passage in Luke 10 and see if there are any parallels with life today that can help us see what that could look like for us.

Jesus is on his final journey to Jerusalem and he is sending messengers on ahead of him. He gives them their instructions and tells them two important things about the situation they are being sent into.

Firstly it is a harvest situation – there are people out there who are ready to hear the message of the good news. Sometimes I think it is easy for us to get discouraged and to think that no-one is interested in spiritual things anymore, particularly Christian things. It is true that church attendance is declining but that is often not the whole story.

In 10 days' time we have the opportunity to find out what is going on in Europe.– 'Christianity in Europe – dead, dying or reviving?' Thursday 18th July 7pm in Church. I think it could be really helpful to find out what their experience has been and whether we can learn from it.

But even here people are more open than we might think. Some people in our Church go down to the Mall and ask God to show them if there is someone they can get into conversation with, maybe to pray with, if they are comfortable with that, and rarely do they get a flat refusal. Jesus tells his disciples to make contact with people of peace – people who are welcoming and open to hearing what his messengers have to say. Let's be on the lookout for people of peace when we are out and about.

But, secondly Jesus tells them that they will be going into a potentially hostile environment - they will be like lambs among wolves. Some communities will not welcome them, and then they must move on. We have to face the fact that not everyone will want to hear what we have to say. But more than that, I think there is no doubt that society as a whole not only finds the Christian message irrelevant and ignores it, but is also becoming increasingly hostile.

You don't have to look far to see examples of Christians being penalised for expressing their beliefs and values. In the UK recently, a Christian magistrate was removed from the judiciary after saying that it was in the best interests of children to have a mother and father. Not very controversial you might think, yet Richard Page was removed from his post as magistrate in 2015 after serving in the role for 15 years. Mr Page appealed his dismissal on the grounds of discrimination and victimisation because of his Christian faith, but the Employment Appeal Tribunal determined that Mr Page had not been removed because of his belief but because of his decision to express it.

Rob James, a Baptist minister and commentator says this:

If I'm honest, Richard Page's case reminds me of the infamous "Thought Police" in George Orwell's remarkably prescient *1984*. The "Thought Police", you might remember, sought out and punished "thoughtcrimes" and "crimethink" - that is, the intellectual actions of those who entertain and hold politically unacceptable thoughts.

Given all this then, all I can say is "Welcome to our Brave New World, Richard. It looks as if we've turned yet another page in our march towards rampant illiberalism. Rob adds: Thankfully we can't and won't lose. History proves it and the resurrection guarantees it.

I have only chosen one example but it does seem that the Christian voice is increasingly being silenced in the public arena, including social media and the internet. I think we could possibly liken such hostility to the wolves that Jesus referred to.

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So much for wolves, what about the demons that our theme talks about?

Now, for me, encountering demons or evil spirits in the way I described earlier is still unusual, but I know that there are people who are far more attuned to these spiritual forces than I am. Some of you may know Rev Tapita Chin, a Cook Island Maori who is attached to the cathedral. She is someone who regularly hears God speaking to her and often when she is praying for people she may sense the presence of evil spirits and pray accordingly. She has the ability to distinguish spirits that Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians. Paul says that this is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit that are given for our common good. It certainly reads as though the 72 had similar encounters.

But even if that is not our experience we don't have to look far to encounter forces that are attacking, damaging and destroying God's creation and particularly humankind as God's workmanship created in his image.

Last week Micah was talking to us about the conflict between the Kingdom of God and the Empire, originally the Roman Empire, and today we see the same conflict between the followers of Jesus and our current version of the Empire; for the Empire is not so much a nation or state as a state of mind. It is any world-view, belief and value system that sets itself up in opposition to God and encourages ways of living that run counter to the pattern that Jesus gives us for kingdom living.

What would you say were evil forces at work today that we might have to encounter and do battle with as we seek to build God's kingdom here? Violence, oppression and extremism, social and economic injustice, consumerism and greed, various addictive behaviours that can damage and destroy individuals and their families.

Such things are not new. In Revelation 17-18 John has a biting critique of 'Babylon' aka Rome, aka Empire. Among other things he mentions:

self-indulgent extravagance and ostentatious displays of wealth and power; people trafficking and economic exploitation, as well as the oppressive way in which the much vaunted *pax romana* was maintained. And behind it all John sees Satan as the ultimate source of Rome's power. (Rev 13:1-2; 17:3)

We could add leprosy to that mix of evils. In the Bible, leprosy was often used to represent sin just as the leper had to cry out: 'Unclean, unclean'. The good news of Jesus is that sin can be forgiven and we can be freed from the power it has over us. But in today's passage I see leprosy as representing the whole range of sicknesses and disease that the 72 were called on to heal.

Leprosy, in particular, was a disease that was not only incurable in its day but also isolated individuals, separating them from their family and friends and cutting them off from their worshipping community. I'm sure several of you here know about the isolation that prolonged illness can bring and even people in good health can experience the loneliness which is becoming endemic in our society.

One of things that I value in our church community is the way we look after one another but not everyone is so fortunate and we have a real responsibility to care for those in the wider community.

How can we relate this to today? Who or what are constitute present day about lepers and leprosy? What are the isolating forces in our culture.? Who are the outcasts?. How do we foster true inclusiveness and encourage the right sort of inclusivity?

The people living in the towns and villages that Jesus was to pass through would have been experiencing their own wolves, demons and lepers.

But – and praise God that for us as followers of Christ there is always a **but** – into their world come the 72 messengers sent out by Jesus. What did they bring with them and what can we bring to our world today?

First, they brought good news, Jesus is about to be present with them, and with his presence comes hope and the possibility of change – things can be different.

Then, they bring peace: Jesus told them, "When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.'" When he said this, Jesus was not thinking

with a Roman mindset where peace is simply the absence of war or conflict, a peace that was often imposed by military force. Jesus has in mind the much deeper and fuller Jewish concept of 'shalom' – which encompasses not only peace, but also harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquillity. It is all that makes for the flourishing of creation which has been God's intent from the beginning.

How can we be bringers of hope and peace? As we see in these verses from Luke, Jesus' way of fighting evil is to flood the area with God's healing and restoring power through the work of the 72.

I was really encouraged by the latest edition of The Witness. If you haven't read it – do so; it has a picture of Lucy (Summerfield) and the words of her fantastic award winning song. But also it has a whole series of examples of the ways in which individuals and churches in our Diocese are responding to the Five Marks of Mission adopted by the world-wide Anglican Communion. They are: tell, teach, tend, transform, treasure.

Or

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

How are we doing, do you think?

We were talking around some of these issues at our last staff meeting. And we were reminded of Isaiah 52:7:

“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, **“Your God reigns!”**”

It is this fact above all others that John impressed on the persecuted church in Revelation and it also what sustains us in our day to day lives as God's people. We have read the end of the book – and guess what? – the Lamb wins!

So, let us be people of hope; bringers of good news; channels of peace; bringing the presence of God into every situation we encounter. You know, Jeff shared with us an interpretation he had heard that the beautiful feet were the dancing feet of God's joyful people.

How about dancing into next week's encounters with wolves, demons and leprosy. You can always be dancing inside even if your body can't make the moves anymore!

Prayer

Go forth into the world in peace; be of good courage;
hold fast that which is good; render to no one evil for evil;
strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak;
help the afflicted; honour everyone;
love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.
And the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always. Amen.