

Step out and see what God can do through you

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Pentecost + 4C: 2K5 Ps 30 Gal 6 Lk 10

You never know what kids are going to say next, do you. They can blurt out an unwelcome truth without warning. Here's a delightful example I found on the web.

A couple invited some people to dinner. At the table, Mum turned to their six-year-old daughter and said, 'Would you like to say grace for us?' The girl replied, 'I wouldn't know what to say.' Mum said, 'Just say what you've heard me say.' 'Okay,' said the daughter, and bowed her head. 'Lord, why on earth did we invite all these people to dinner?'

You only want that sort of honesty in your life when you've got nothing to hide.

I tell you this story because we just heard how Jesus sent out several dozen early-stage disciples to be his ambassadors to the Samaritan towns and villages he'd visit on his way to Jerusalem. What on earth might they say to such tetchy people while Jesus isn't watching them!? You remember last week how his inner circle of disciples were so blinded by their own ambition that they just didn't get what Jesus was doing. They were loose cannons liable to misfire at any moment. They wanted to destroy one over-sensitive Samaritan village. So what about these seventy – completely unknown quantities? Jesus sure had a lot of trust in people!

I said last week that this is the turning point in the Gospel.

^{9.51} *When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.* Yes, it's *his* turning point. But there's another turn. Until now, the gospel's been all about

what Jesus did and said. Before, only the twelve had been sent out on mission.^{9.1-6} Everyone else – people *in* the story *and* us, the readers – were onlookers to the acts of Jesus; listeners to his teaching, but not much more involved than that.

But from here on – and this is the *real* turning point – we are called to action as well. From now, things start to snowball. These seventy unnamed followers of Jesus that he appointed and sent out actually represent you and me. Luke means us to sense ourselves among these un-named disciples. Luke means we are to prepare people for Jesus to come into their lives. Now that's a turning point, isn't it! Are you feeling comfortable? Can Jesus really place such confidence in you and me?

We saw it happening last week—messengers sent ahead to make ready for Jesus' coming to a Samaritan village; ill-equipped messengers sent into uncomfortable territory. This is the pattern for the rest of Luke's writing, both the gospel, and his second volume, Acts. Today, with some very important words about 'harvest', Jesus begins by giving his messengers instructions about the preparations they are *not* to make for their mission; like the preparations Jesus told the twelve not to make when they were sent out. ^(9.1-5) Basically, don't be self-reliant.

This is a difficult passage for many Christians today, for at least three reasons. First, the sending of the seventy says Jesus's missionaries or apostles are much more than just the twelve. It says that proclamation of God's peace and God's Kingdom is the responsibility of *all* disciples; not just a select few. This disappoints both those who think of themselves as the select few and those who prefer not to get involved.

Then the seventy are to go in pairs to neighbouring towns. It's an assertive type of outreach program that many Christians find uncomfortable.

And third, the harvest-metaphor (v. 2) picks up on the urgency we first sensed last week; something many Christians no longer feel. For a farmer, harvest-time is the most urgent season of the year. It's like tax time for an accountant, Christmas for a shopkeeper, or exam time for students and teachers. Most of us can survive failure on an ordinary day, but failure in these 'harvest seasons' can be disastrous. It can mean starvation, bankruptcy; the end of a career. Many Christians have trouble believing that failure to proclaim Christ can also have disastrous consequences.

If that's not enough to chew on, when we take this seriously – if we believe that this gospel is speaking to us – then another thing it confronts us with is the challenge to trust God. We're being sent out without any of the paraphernalia we think a person needs to survive on the road. And we're pointedly told that it's a dangerous road; *See I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.*

Even so, says Jesus, don't take things that will make you self-sufficient or secure. Just rely on people's hospitality, and be prepared to be generous in your ministry to them – generous with the things of the Kingdom. But confront them with what they're turning down if they reject you. Most of us have had just such pairs of missionaries visit us at some stage; Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses. We don't tend to like them; we think their faith is naïve, that they're brainwashed fundamentalists. We reject their style and we also reject their message. There's an interesting conversation we need to have about that.

The people that Jesus was sending out had probably lived good, faithful, godly lives up until they met him. The way they'd served God was the commonly accepted one in the place they grew up. They would have appeared normal, mature, good people. But what Jesus was asking them to do was to take on something completely different; to step out and see what God could do through them.

And that's what this gospel challenges us with too. We are mature religious people who have very respectable ways of worshipping and serving God. We are on a path which assumes self-reliance, paying our way – all of those sorts of things. But now this gospel comes along and challenges us to rethink; to re-prioritize.

Remember that first bit about the harvest? Jesus believes it's urgent that people are connected with the Kingdom—belong to it *now*; not at some vague future time. (Remember last week's urgency; Jesus rejecting those who said, *I'll come but...*) The harvest metaphor for the Kingdom says that our proclamation brings people what sunshine, soil and water give to a crop – the source of new life. So the pointy end of the season is always now. Listen to the farmers! We shouldn't just associate urgency with a crisis. The Kingdom that *has come near* is vital throughout life – not just close to harvest time; vital for all God's creatures, just as we experience it for ourselves.

So, when do we start? That's actually not the question; it's where. Amen.