

THE COMMISSIONING OF THE SEVENTY TWO

Acceptance or Rejection; Peace or Division

LUKE 10.1-24

Introduction

More violence this week.

Attaturk Airport. Bangladesh.

More minority people arming themselves to protect themselves against their violent enemies, some of whom claim Jesus as their Messiah and Lord.

More vile abuse in the wake of Brexit.

The litany goes on.

And our western, two dimensional response is, metaphorically, to drop more bombs on someone who must be made to pay. The best way to liberate evil people from their evil is to use bullets and bombs. That will make them nice western democratic liberals.

And this morning we read an obscure passage. Seventy or 72 people running around Galilee and surrounds with an obscure and puzzling message. The instructions seem arcane. And yet...

I am reminded of the film *Amadeus* or Peter Shaffer's play of the same name. Salieri the cynical and tired old court composer says of

Mozart's ability to take ordinary characters and create something magical,

“He has taken ordinary people, ordinary people-barbers and chambermaids-and has made them gods and heroes. I have taken gods and heroes...*and made them ordinary.*”

Context

Jesus was beginning his exodos wanderings with his disciples on the way to Jerusalem. From this point on the cross and resurrection shape the story of the coming the kingdom, God's rule and this intersection is where the magic begins to happen; ordinary people become extraordinary.

But there is yet some way to go.

Earlier Jesus has sent 12 disciples out (9.1-6) with a very similar commission. That commission has its foundations in the call Jesus had received from the Holy Spirit in Luke 4.16-21. So we begin with one-Jesus- and then Jesus takes 12 and begins something magical. Now he calls seventy (two). I'd guess this number might have been all those who had gathered around over the past months and years.

I think that Jesus is following Moses in Nu 11.16,25,26 where Moses appoints 70 elders to assist him in the ministry and mission of the emerging and recalcitrant people of God and amazingly two extra were chosen by the Spirit. Hence 72 70+2

The Romans and their allies would be watching closely. Seventy-two people wandering around the countryside seems very dangerous indeed; a new revolutionary movement? After all, the Romans thought in the bombs and bullets mode too.

What is said and done in this story sets the framework for what follows. This kingdom mission is the book-end to the cross. In the following stories, in rough and tumble of continuous ministry and mission, disciples learn what it means to be disciples of this kingdom under the cross.

The first thing they learn is that disciples carry a message

1. God's purpose for His kingdom will be fulfilled; the kingdom has come near

I know that we struggle with this proclamation of Jesus and the disciples but it was the key to everything that Jesus stood for and that disciples might stand for today.

We will continue to work on this as we travel with Jesus in his wanderings so let me sketch some ideas today that might help us make a start.

Since the late eighteenth century we have come to believe that all that went before was ignorance, superstition and mumbo-jumbo. On that dismissal we built a view that this new epoch was an unending age of progress, defined in many and various ways; political

economic, socially and culturally etc. This is where history is going and we are taking it there. Another name for this is eschatology. Here is the future.

Despite blips on the way like world wars, continuous epochs of terrorism, an obsession with growth that has left a moral vacuum at the heart of many nations and climate change we still believe the story.

That telling of the story has had an effect on Christian teaching. Maybe Jesus could help in post eighteenth century story. Indeed, he is still wanted on board, maybe as a teacher of moral truths or as the figurehead of a compliant religion.

And that is exactly what has happened in different ways. On this reading Jesus teaches us a way of being spiritual in a realm of private spirituality that leads to an escapist heaven where God rests unconcerned with this world. Jesus is reduced to the founder of a religion and we are religious people. Naturally the message of the Gospels is muzzled and over time becomes a puzzle to be solved. We have replaced future of God with the future we construct. Churches have gone along for the ride and become religions.

Whereas what the Gospels say he did and said was,

“The endpoint of history is God’s rule of justice and love, this is where it is meant to be going, and you and I are taking it there, despite all appearances because God will be king”.

Then he goes on to say

“I am launching a new people who know that is where history is going, despite appearances, and who are going to come with me.”

And that is what the mission of the seventy-two is all about. It is about God becoming king.

The rule of God. And it begins in peace.

2. Peace

Jesus contemporaries were for most part not wanting peace. They did not want peace with the Samaritans for instance, or with the feared and hated Romans. What they wanted was bullets and bombs. Last week we read the story of James and John wanting to call down fire on the heads of the Samaritans. See how far the disciples had to go?

For Jesus fighting evil with evil, the way of violence, was disastrous and destructive of all that God wanted for human beings. The kingdom was about living in the astonishing grace and powerful love of Israel’s God redeeming the world now.

That is why the disciples had to go and find a 'child of peace', stay there and bring the kingdom peace from there. God's life giving love and mercy could then flow in healing.

3. Healing

We have seen the healing power of the kingdom already in this Gospel and it is part of displaying where the rule of God is heading in human history-the healing of the peoples.

Well, what will be the outcome?

There is no guarantee of success

1. There is no guarantee of success; they do not welcome you

The message had two sides. I have described one but the other is that refusing the message, not welcoming the messengers of peace and healing would mean courting the disaster of going the opposite way from God himself. And that would mean throwing oneself into the hands of the pagan power of Rome. And that meant only one thing; destruction. Turn from God's way of peace and put yourselves into the tender hands of Rome.

To some of their hearers they must have sounded like traitors. But they were not offering people a newer and gentler religion for their souls' quietness. They were offering a last chance to turn from ruin and accept God's way of peace and healing.

Hence the difficult sayings of judgment on the unrepentant cities. They had already chosen the way of death, refused peace and healing.

So the disciples must persevere, move on if necessary continually seeking the children of peace.

What kind of people did they need to be?

The heart

1. Prayer is essential; ask the Lord of the harvest

Jesus has yet to teach the disciples to pray and that will form part of the extensive teaching that he will give his disciples from now on. And we can now see why.

In this task of bringing of bringing the rule of God, of peace and healing into the world where fighting evil with overwhelming evil is the solution to all problems the disciples view that the world is heading in another direction is both counter-intuitive and traitorous.

2. Each disciple must participate actively; go on your way

Then this is everyone's task. We are neither a religion nor a welfare agency, our prescribed role in the west since the late eighteenth century. We are not the mortar in the bricks of late modernity, adding strength and stability to its vision.

In Jesus God has ushered in a new world order within which a new way of life was both possible and mandatory. To live that is our daily goal and to present an alternative vision of God's kingship is our task.

3. Go with singularity of purpose; greet no one on the road

Now, given the counter-intuitive nature of the message and our desire for comfort it is all too easy to become distracted. Greeting no-one on the road is the command to singularity of purpose.

4. Meet danger and rejection with sincerity and vulnerability; I am sending you out like lambs.

The great shepherd of the sheep is not wrapping his lambs up in cotton wool. They will face anger and danger. They may be regarded as traitors and subversives.

The real battle engaged: the return of the seventy

"I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning." (18)

There is so much in this short passage about the return of the disciples that deserves our serious attention: Much about Jesus, much about the Father and the Spirit.

When disciples live like disciples the master of deceit and division falls. When disciples follow the way of the cross blessing for the whole world is there for all to see.

But the real blessing lies in seeing the kingdom come, the longing of ages past. It lies not in power but in relationship with God and God's rule that brings peace and healing.

We disciples follow a Master who does not simply offer us a new way of life, a new depth of spirituality, a new route to a comfortable heaven. We follow a Master whose task was to bring down evil, the satan, break its power, win the decisive victory that will open the way to God's new creation where evil and death have no place.

Conclusion

Back to Mozart.

“He has taken ordinary people, ordinary people-barbers and chambermaids-and has made them gods and heroes. I have taken gods and heroes...*and made them ordinary.*”

The eighteenth century has made us ordinary, pale religious reflections in its obscure confusing mirror of progress and horror.

Our Master sends us and equips us-chambermaids and barbers-to be citizens and ambassadors of a kingdom we know is true and everyone else wishes it was. Our Master has destroyed everything that stands in the way of its coming.

“Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”