

## Reflection for Sunday 4 July

I've always felt rather sorry for the first disciples. They seem like the fall guys of the gospels, especially St Mark's version. Here we find Jesus sending them out in a way that seems unnecessarily heartless – not even a change of undies. Is this, you might well ask, what Jesus asks of us too?

Let's be honest, there is a bit of a contradiction here. St Mark likes to portray the disciples as being slow on the uptake, unable to see the truth being lived out by Jesus in front of their very eyes and yet the very same dozy dozen is sent out to witness to that truth and to do what Jesus does – to heal and cast out unclean spirits.

This uneasy juxtaposition of ideas (let's put it more charitably) has caused some commentators to wonder if the story is borrowed and brought forward from the life of the early church to Jesus's own day. But I'm not convinced. Right at the start of his gospel, as he's setting the scene, Mark has Jesus challenging four fishermen, the first of his followers, to come and 'fish for people.' And there are, I think, too many other stories of the whole group being sent out by Jesus, for our story to be a deliberate anachronism, placed here by Mark and others to reflect the life of the church to which they were writing.

Having got that out of the way, we need to ask what we can we learn from this story and what force it still carries today.

The first trap to avoid, I think, is of not trying to apply it too literally to our situation. Let's take just two examples. The first is the need to go out in pairs. Two's company, of course, but in New Testament times (Old Testament too), the witness of just one person would be inadmissible in Jewish law. Another witness was needed. And so, out go the disciples, all above board and reliable, two by two.

The second is Jesus's insistence that they won't need any money. Instead, they must throw themselves on the mercy of those they'll meet. If I was told to do that today, I'd waste valuable energy worrying myself sick where my next meal and bed might come from, but in Jesus's day hospitality to strangers was almost a sacred duty. You could travel knowing that you'd be welcomed. The context of the first disciples' mission was quite different from that in which we seek to follow Jesus today. This isn't a call to us to do ministry on the scrounge.

What we can legitimately learnt therefore necessitates us to reflect a little more deeply – and if we do this, I think the lessons are profound.

The first thing to notice and take to heart, I suggest, is that there no time like the present to imitate Jesus. Loving, serving, healing, speaking the truth and offering hope is an urgent business, not something we can afford to put off until the rain stops. It's our first

priority, though it's worth noting that Jesus doesn't spell out in detail here exactly what our mission is. That's something we still have to work out together in each and every new context – though always based on Jesus's clear, core values. Jesus is here more concerned with the how than the what of mission.

And, by the way, please don't get too hung up over the word 'mission'. It's not a technical, theological term, but just reminds us that we are all 'sent out' to live like Jesus.

Secondly and closely linked to the need for urgency in shared mission is the need to travel light.

The first disciples may have carried little with them, but perhaps we have harder choices to make. If we ask ourselves what we really need to do God's will, a lot of the things we hold dear may not seem quite so important as we first suspected. For example, I love (most of) our many church buildings. They are a special gift, but sometimes we spend so much time worrying about them that we haven't the time to do more important and urgent things. That's a simple, troubling and inescapable fact.

Thirdly, the dismissive attitude to the places that break the normal rules of hospitality by declining to welcome those who bring the good news should bring us up short. We can forget shaking off the dust from our feet, but we really do need to accept both that sometimes we will fail in our attempts to do what Jesus seems to ask of us and also, that we just can't do everything. Sometimes we have to move on and stop doing some things that are no longer fruitful.

This means that we may well have to choose to do fewer things but to do them better. This uncomfortable truth, a clear and abiding piece of learning from our gospel story, is very rightly one of the cornerstones of the 'transformation agenda' that our diocese is seeking to follow. It may mean that we have some hard and initially, unpopular decisions to make as we come to terms that we just can't do everything that we'd like to do, or as we used to do.

But all this, of course, is not the end of the story. I was struck by the words of a young couple who had to cancel the big bash they'd planned for their wedding: 'It allowed us,' they said, 'to be present and real with no element of 'putting on a show' for others.' Just as many wedding couples have discovered that harsh restrictions imposed because of the pandemic have had unexpected benefits, so the disciplines this story tries to impose can be hugely liberating as the disciples discovered – and as we can find too.

And also, and as a deeply important footnote to all this, you may be relieved to know that following Jesus is not all about hard work and difficult decisions. His very first words to the disciples when they returned were, 'come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' A lot may be asked of us – but we all deserve holidays too!