

**Mission Insignificant?  
Luke 10: 1-10 & 17-20**

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*Incorporating words from a sermon by  
Nathan Nettleton, 1995  
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I wasn't due to preach this Sunday, for a number of reasons, but George who was due to preach had not been well and would not have been able to convey a sermon as he'd wanted to. George's intention, which I thought was a wonderful one, was to preach on a Psalm, "any Psalm," he said, "esp. one of those which is difficult and seems to contain all sorts of ugly things...".

He will still do that on another Sunday, and I look forward to that as it could be a helpful way for us to understand how Psalms can be used prayerfully and in worship, for they don't only contain lovely words of praise but also deal with the whole range of human conditions and emotions.

It so happens that I will be preaching on a Psalm this month, in 2 weeks' time (18 July), and next Sunday, my sermon on one of Jesus' well-known parables will be a 5-minute sermon [well, maybe 6-minutes, don't time me too closely ☺].

For today, our Gospel passage is a hard one. As usual, I did not choose it, it is set in our Lectionary of Sunday readings which helps ensure we don't just skip out on the bits we find hard to follow or hard to understand!

I am using quite a few words of another person who wrote on this passage – Nathan Nettleton is his name – and although I have adapted them, I need you to know that these are not all my own words; I wouldn't want to be accused of plagiarism...

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When I watch the TV news or read the front pages of a newspaper, it is usually with the intention of being informed of what is happening around me. But an unfortunate side effect is that it can induce a feeling of helplessness about the pressing problems around us

The Gospel informs us that we are all involved in Christ's mission of renewing the world, of bringing hatred and injustice to an end, and of establishing God's reign of love and peace. But in the face of the real problems of the world we often feel that our efforts are drops in the ocean.

Does what we do really make any difference? In the cosmic struggle between the love of Christ and the tides of evil, are our efforts at faithfulness and mission of any significance at all? Does God see us as important players on the team?

A few details about the reading from Luke are worth noting, they help us to understand what it meant for the people it was first written for, and can therefore help us see what it can mean for us.

Firstly, the number of disciples Jesus appoints and sends out. Some translations say seventy, some say seventy two, because there are variations in the available early manuscripts. And in this case it is a helpful variation because it gives us a clue as to the symbolism of the number. In the book of Genesis, there is a table of nations in Ch 10. In the Hebrew there are 70 nations in it, but in the Greek translation commonly used in the first century, it was given as 72. So for the gospel writer to say that Jesus was sending seventy preachers, the hearers of that time would recognise the image of sending people out to every nation. They wanted to keep the symbolism, so that the message is clear: The scope of the harvest into which Jesus sends the labourers, is worldwide.

Next, the equipment they were or weren't to take with them. No purse, no bag, no sandals, no chatting with friends along the road: the message here is one of urgency, backed up by the imagery of harvest. As farming people know, when the harvest is ready, you get it in quickly. Miss your chance and the crop can be ruined. Jesus is saying, "This is urgent, you've got a task to do, no messing around, no time for trying to sort out your baggage limits, no time for shopping, no time for social chats along the road. Go to it. The Kingdom of God is near now, so now is the time to respond."

Finally, shaking the dust off the feet. The Jews of the first century had a custom that if they went onto foreign land, they would shake the foreign dust off their feet when they returned to Israel. It was a sign of their feelings for the holiness of the land of Israel. Jesus is saying there is a new criteria. Those places whose inhabitants welcome the sign of God's presence among them are sacred places, regardless of whether or not they are in Israel. Those places that reject the message of the presence of God's kingdom and the signs of healing and goodness, are pagan places, and should be told so.

But notice something else. It is the same message for those who respond and for those who don't. To those who welcome you, say, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." To those who refuse to welcome you, say, "Yet know this, the kingdom of God has come near." Why? Because if the kingdom of God has come near, then you stand judged by your own response to it. Neither God nor anyone else needs to add anything. Either you jumped on the bandwagon when it came your way or you didn't. You heard the message of love and acceptance. You saw the signs of healing and welcome. You made your choice when you had your opportunity. The kingdom of God has come near to you. Enough said.

The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. The message of the gospel is that things can be made new. But where are the messengers? Many people are feeling that they are struggling to stay afloat and keep their heads up. The message of the gospel is that you can be saved. But where are the messengers? Many people feel trapped in cycles of evil and abuse that humiliate and degrade them. The message of the gospel is that you can be set free. But where are the messengers? Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.

Here we need to address a common misconception. A common response to that is to say we need more ordained clergy, we need to attract and train more people for the pastoral ministry. But I want to argue that that is wrong.

Pastors are not supposed to be the messengers of the gospel to the world. I am not the labourer you should be praying into the harvest. If we spend too much of our time out there ministering among non-Christian people, we are neglecting our calling, wasting our time and failing to do our jobs.

The task is too big and too important to be left to a few ordained or full-time church workers. It's your job. You are called by Jesus Christ to be his labourers out there in the harvest field. You are called to gossip the message of God's love and goodness among those who need to hear it. You don't need any particular expertise or training to be able to love other people and show to others the welcome and acceptance and mercy that God has shown you. You don't need a degree to be able to talk about what God means to you.

You are the people that Christ is sending out, to share the peace of Christ, to eat and drink with people, to respond in mercy to sickness and brokenness, and to talk about the nearness of God and of God's reign in the world. That is Christ's commission to the whole church. In that sense, you are all "ministers" – the New Testament words for minister and priest are never used of church leaders, they are used to describe the whole people of God. "You are a royal priesthood", it says. You will minister in my name to the ends of the earth.

So why do I say I am not supposed to be doing that? It is because I have been called by God and by the church and set apart to do something else. We have been called to nurture and equip you so that you can reach out and make an impact on the world around us. "Equipping the saints" is how Paul phrases it when writing to the Ephesians - teaching, preaching, encouraging, pastoring, guiding, so that you might grow into the fullness of Christ and embrace the mission to which Christ has called you all.

Because it's your job to take to the field, I would be failing in my job if I spent too much time out there, and you'd be failing in yours if you spend too much time in here. No one should feel obliged to support things in the church just because we do them. If a church activity is not going to help you grow in your relationship with Christ, in your ability to represent Christ in the real world, then for Christ's sake don't come to it. Get on with your life and mission. If you are the sales manager for a company, you don't go to the training sessions for the warehouse staff just because they're on. You go to the training sessions for the sales staff and when the sessions are on for the warehouse staff you get on with your job. You are the ministers of Christ, the light of the world, a sign of the kingdom.

To end, and fully quoting Nathan Nettleton:

I want to put up a board in the church one day with a sign at the top that says "The ministers of this church," and put everybody's photo on it with a brief caption identifying their ministries:

Person 1 - helps in youth centre, ministers among frail elderly people helping with household chores.

Person 2 - helps run rehabilitation group for people with head injuries, raises two children, works with Amnesty International.

Person 3 - leads worship services, works for justice through a law firm, coaches junior soccer team.

Now I reckon that a lot of the times that we want to retreat back into the church it is because we can't see any significance in what we manage to do in the world. We feel so inadequate as ministers of Christ, because the harvest is so large and our little patch seems a very little return for a lot of effort.

But what does Jesus say when we report back. "I was watching Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightening." What, all we did was...

It might all seem very mundane when you're one of the seventy sent out with no sandals to say "Peace to this house." But Jesus can see the whole game plan. Jesus sees the demonic structures that begin to topple and fall as we do our little bit of chipping away at the bottom.

The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. The kingdom of God has come near, and you might not be able to see the full significance of your little part of it, but through you and many others God's tide of love and truth is pushing back the currents of corruption and brutality and lives devoid of a sense of the love or presence of God. Your little drop in the ocean might not seem like much, but when the tide turns, every drop is in it together and nothing can stand in your way.