

Sermon for 3rd July 2022, Year C, Trinity 3, Proper 9

Preached at Biddenden and Smarden

Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-11,16-20

Our gospel reading today is both inspiring and terrifying in equal measure, especially if you're rather introvert or love the comfort and security of being in your own space surrounded by your own possessions.

Jesus sends out 70 people without purse, bag or sandals, to offer God's blessing and healing to whomever will welcome them. They have no financial backup, no emergency Kendal mint cake in their pocket, no mobile phone with GPS or the ability to summon emergency services just in case, no four-season sleeping bag, not even any walking boots.

In many ways that last bit sounds the hardest. Have you ever walked barefoot any distance? Once, as a teenager on a school trip in France, our guide took us hiking up a hillside. He went barefoot, so I assumed I could too. Big mistake! Most of the path was alternately scalding hot tarmac or razor-sharp gravel. What I hadn't realised was our guide walked barefoot every day and his feet were calloused and hardened to it. My feet were soft, young, indoor feet. I almost had to be carried back down the hill in agony.

Today I am an excessive planner and preparer. I hate not having a backup plan for every situation, perhaps even two or three backup plans. I worry about what I'm going to do if I have a puncture when I should be driving to a funeral at a crematorium. What if my computer hard drive crashes while I'm preparing a sermon? What if my phone is lost or stolen?

Some of you may know the story of when I was a novice nun and one of the senior sisters discovered I kept a laptop in my room; strictly forbidden they said, a grievous sin, and I had to give it up. But they didn't know I also had a Kindle

device with a free internet connection, and I somehow failed to mention it because the idea of being completely cut off from the modern world was too much for me to bear!

Some of us certainly find it hard to place our security and trust in the hospitality, competence, and kindness of others. We want to be in control. Or, we don't want to be a bother, perhaps because we don't really want others to be a bother for us. If we're all self-sufficient, then no one need awkwardly ask anyone else for anything.

In January of 2001 when I'd just turned 30, I was busily building my career in London, doing IT work for an investment bank. And yet I looked enviously at a group of environmental activists who were blogging online about building an eco-community in a woodland near Moretonhampstead in Dartmoor. They were living in rustic dwellings made of hazel and tarpaulins, had very little income and even less heating, but somehow were flourishing by working and meeting together to support each other's needs. I actually went to visit them, and I think they thought I might stay, since to them it was the most natural thing in the world to live like that, and why wouldn't everyone want to do it?

I originally intended to visit for two weeks over my birthday, but I lasted just 3 days in the January snow before I had to accept that I needed to be able to feel my feet again. I retreated to my airconditioned north London apartment with the gym and swimming pool in the basement, chastened by the realisation that despite (or perhaps because of) my wealth, self-sufficiency and resources, I couldn't cope with being vulnerable and so dependent on others.

It would be eight more years before I finally left the London lifestyle behind, and nine before I tried being a nun, but that experience in the freezing Devonian snow triggered the complete change of direction in my life that brings me here today as a priest. It was perhaps my first glimpse of the kingdom of God.

Now, the Gospel of Luke does not reveal whether the 70 disciples were at all nervous about the mission Jesus sent them on, but it does reveal the vulnerability and mutual dependence that is characteristic of God's kingdom. Repeatedly in the gospels we hear how people who only trust to their own resources really do struggle to enter the kingdom. The rich man is less likely to get in than the camel passing through the eye of a needle. The wealthy young man balks when Jesus invites him to give away his wealth and follow him.

It's not the wealth that's the problem; they're not somehow barred from God's kingdom of love just because they've got money. Their problem is their inability to let go of the security money provides so they can receive security and joy from loving relationships instead.

Sell everything you have so that you can buy the field containing the pearl of great price, Jesus declares! Don't be like the landowner who anxiously built more barns to hold all his stuff, rather than build relationships. Instead, Jesus says, be like lambs among wolves; be vulnerable so that everyone can trust that you have no ulterior motive; accept whatever you are offered, humbly, so that others can experience the joy of freely giving, and encountering the kingdom for themselves.

Constantly, Jesus is telling us that we are not to see ourselves as owners and hosts, the ones who have all the good things to give away to other people if only they qualify for our charity. In the kingdom of God, status and security don't come from having resources, but from having humility, authenticity, vulnerability, trust in God, willingness to be rejected, willingness to give and receive love we haven't earned and could never earn, willingness to endure discomfort for the sake of something so profound it utterly transforms our lives.

Jesus always wants us to have the humility of being a guest. In the kingdom of God, everyone is a guest. That's the only way the kingdom can grow. There is

no other way in. The minister is a guest. The churchwardens are guests. Even Jesus is a guest.

At the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus tells the disciples to feed the people, but he has no resources to offer. The food is brought by someone else, a young boy according to John. The boy is the true host here, the only one with the humility not to expect something in return for his gift.

Jesus is teaching his followers that truly loving others can't come from a position of power and wealth, but only from having nothing to offer except kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, vulnerability and love. And if lives are changed as a result, don't be proud as if it's your own achievement, says the Lord, just rejoice in the relationship you have with your God.

So, should we all take off our shoes and walk barefoot to Canterbury, begging bowl in hand? Well, even today there are communities of Franciscans and Carmelites and other brothers and sisters who would consider this a perfectly reasonable response to Jesus, who said "you cannot be my disciple unless you give up all your possessions". Ah, what a challenge this is to our mindset that says, 'first we make ourselves secure, then we will help everyone else'! Jesus says no, it is only in serving others with love that we find true security in the kingdom of God, in the web of beautiful relationships that can only really emerge when we accept that we have nothing at all to give, but find ourselves welcomed and loved with open arms all the same.