

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 7th July 2019.

May my words and the thoughts of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord. Amen.

How many of us really enjoy a challenge? For me, challenges become more and more difficult to deal with the older I get. I don't know if any of you feel the same. There is something about things that are familiar, things that are within our own 'comfort zone' which encourage a sense of security and make them less daunting. If we are not willing to venture outside our comfort zone, though, we will not experience the vulnerability that helps us grow.

Today's gospel reading is about accepting challenges. The disciples have been with Jesus for some time. His leadership will have inspired them, and his presence comforted them. Now they were to become vulnerable and step out on their own. I don't expect the seventy-two we've just heard about wouldn't have known anything about 'comfort zones', but they may well have had another phrase meaning much the same. Whether they did or not, though, they were willing to go off and do what Jesus asked of them.

What would our response be if we had been included in those seventy-two who were selected and sent out, especially for those who were not one of the 12 disciples? I'm not sure that I would have been very keen, because of the responsibility involved. To avoid being noticed, I think I would probably have tried to edge my way to the back of the crowd and hope Jesus didn't notice me. Perhaps it is almost like trying to hide in the kitchen rather than being among the people at a gathering or party and making conversation with other guests.

Those being sent out are sent out in twos and not individually on their own which, no doubt, must have made it a little easier for them, and there is a sense of urgency. The 72 are told to 'suss out' the situation for Jesus - he wants them to test the ground for mission. He is on his way to Jerusalem and won't be going through those villages and towns again, so he needs to know how he will be welcomed when he arrives. If there isn't a welcome in a particular place, then Jesus will avoid it and go to a different place instead, somewhere where his message will be accepted, and his ministry welcomed.

The men being sent out are given detailed instructions. It is always useful to know what we might need when we go off, isn't it? It just

might be necessary to take a specific piece of clothing or equipment. The instructions for the 72, though, must have seemed somewhat bleak. Jesus tells them they are not to take anything with them, and they are not to start talking to anyone they meet on the way. This is a local mission to the villages along the lake shore - places where they are already well known, so perhaps it was less important for them to take things with them. If they didn't take a purse there would be less likelihood of being robbed. They didn't need to take sandals because they weren't going very far. Sandals were only needed when someone was going on a long journey. Being told not to speak to anyone on the way may well have been a more difficult instruction to follow, especially if they met people they knew. Stopping to have a chat though, would delay them and taken up valuable time they didn't have if they were to achieve all Jesus was hoping they would.

In the East hospitality is an important aspect of their culture and is something travellers would have expected. When they enter a house, Jesus tells his disciples to offer the traditional greeting: 'Peace to this house'. If hospitality is offered, their peace will remain on the house, if not it would return to them and they were to move on. If the peace they offer is accepted, they stay with that household and they are to eat whatever is offered. Jesus tells them that they aren't to move on to another house even if they don't like what they are given. They are not to get bogged down with the ritual cleanness of food. The 72 are to move on only after they have done what he wants them to do: 'heal those who are ill and tell them 'The kingdom of God has come near to you'. Interestingly, Jesus tells them that, even when they aren't welcomed, they are still to warn those people: 'the kingdom of God has come near'.

As he sends them out, Jesus tells the seventy-two 'to ask the Lord of the harvest' - in other words they are to pray. This highlights the importance of prayer for those being sent out. It also tells us how important it is for us to pray. The 72 are told that the workers are few but the harvest is plentiful. That was, perhaps, to be an encouragement to them - there are lots of people who are wanting to hear Jesus' message, so they will be well received. Perhaps these words are also highlighting the importance of what the 72 are going to do. Jesus knows that his time is running out and by helping him, they will increase the number of labourers so more people will have the opportunity of hearing about Jesus and being healed. Jesus is also

saying that, not only is the Lord in charge of the harvest, he is also in charge of sending the labourers out. What is more, it is only the authentic labourers, the ones who have been specifically sent by the Lord, who will be able to do the job properly and reap the harvest. Nothing will be gathered in if it is done by self-appointed labourers who go out as entrepreneurs with their own agendas, using, and depending on, their own skills.

Prayer helps clarify who is in charge and under whose authority the work is done. Being prayerful and having a sense of being 'under commission' are important because 'the mission is tough'. Jesus tells them 'I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.' The 72 are being put in a position of vulnerability. Everything may go well for them but, as Jesus has experienced many times, they may meet opposition. We don't know how much training those seventy-two had. It may well have been only what they have seen Jesus doing as they have travelled with him and his disciples and this will put them in a position of vulnerability whatever happens.

Being told not to take anything – purse, bag or sandals – with them, must have made the commission even more daunting for them. Jesus knew that he was always vulnerable when he was travelling, but he also knew that he was protected by his Father. With this knowledge he knows that those seventy-two will also be protected. He tells them that even though they may think they are going out in apparent weakness, especially as they aren't to take anything with them, they are, in fact, going out in power. Their power is their message to tell those they will be staying with about Jesus. They are to talk about the nearness of God's kingdom which, when it breaks through, will defeat the darkness and bring light to all who become part of that kingdom. Even in Jesus' time, though, there were many who didn't want to hear news of the nearness of God's Kingdom and his reign on earth. This obviously made Jesus' task difficult and it would, potentially, make their task difficult. Those 72 were to remember, though, that, even if they did find it difficult, they were about to play a vitally important role for Jesus.

Another reason for not taking anything with them may have been because 'things' could well be a hindrance to them. They needed to rely totally on God and on the hospitality offered by the people in whose homes they would be staying. If they had 'things' with them, they might easily be tempted to rely on those provisions and not on God. The seventy-two are also given power to 'heal the sick', and they are to

announce peace on every house they enter, if the head of the house is willing to accept it. By proclaiming peace on every house they enter, they are preparing the way for Jesus who wants as many as possible to hear the message of God's Kingdom while there is still time. God's peace, that inner calm and stillness, is a wonderful gift, but even in those days it wasn't a message that everyone wanted to accept, as verse 16 reminds us – 'whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me; but whoever rejects me rejects him who sent me.' Those who wouldn't welcome or listen to the seventy-two, wouldn't just be ignoring their message, they would also be ignoring and rejecting Jesus' message and that message is God's message.

When the seventy-two return they are full of it – 'Lord, even demons submit to us in your name'. It must all have been very exciting and rewarding for them. No doubt, any who had felt daunted by the initial challenge may well have wondered why they had felt that way about the mission - it had all seemed to go very well. I find that also happens to me sometimes and perhaps it does for some of you too. I often get quite anxious about doing something, only to find, the task isn't as difficult as I imagined it might be, especially when I have remembered to ask Jesus for guidance and courage. Jesus reminds the seventy-two that, yes, he has given them authority, but they aren't to 'rejoice that the spirits submit to you but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.' In other words, what they have done hasn't been done to their glory but to the praise and glory of God. They have been instruments and, as such, they have been used, and given power, by God, and all the credit must go to Him. This reminds us that, when we do things for Jesus, we need to beware of pride and remember that if our names are written in heaven it is because we have a relationship with God, not because of what we have done, and that each of us always remains 'a child of God'. Yes, it may well seem daunting to us when we are asked to go out and tell others of the good news of Jesus, but we can always rest assured that we are never on our own. When Jesus sent the 72 out, he sent them out in twos, and he sends us out in twos also, because, we always have Jesus with us. Praying before we set out helps us know that we are not alone. We are invited to ask the Holy Spirit to work in us and fill us with God's love. If we do that, those we talk, or minister, to will see Jesus Christ in us and it will be him ministering to them through us. We must remember always to be dependent on Jesus and never on ourselves.