

Sermon 3 July 2022

Luke 10:1-9

In our Gospel passage we hear Jesus sending out seventy people to minister to the people. This is seventy people over and above the twelve disciples who already have been charged with carrying out his ministry. I find this to be an extremely interesting and apposite passage. If this is not a call to all of us to go forth and minister to the needy, I don't know what is. There are a few points I want to make.

Firstly, Jesus makes the point that there is a great need to be met but there are not enough people meeting that need. *'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few.'* That speaks directly to us today. Two thousand years later things haven't changed. There is a huge need in our society today. Two things stand out in my mind – the growing disparity between the haves and the have-nots, and the prevalence of problems associated with mental health.

So what can we do about this? Do we have a role to play? You bet we do. There is the story of a woman who some years ago wrote an advice column for a newspaper. Her readership grew to the point where her column appeared in well over 100 newspapers. An interviewer asked her, 'What is the question that you are asked most frequently by your readers?'

She answered that it was a very simple question: 'What's the matter with me? Why am I feeling so down and lonely?' The interviewer then asked her what the solution to the problem was. Her answer was, 'Get involved! Do something for other people. And the people who need help are all about you. Everywhere you look, you see them.' That surely reflects just what Jesus was saying all those years ago.

This, of course, highlights a point we have made on more than one occasion. It is reaching out and offering a helping hand to those in need that we find fulfilment and meaning in our lives. There is the story of the woman who was feeling very sorry for herself. She had suffered a loss in her life and she was feeling very down. She went to see someone who was considered to be a very wise and compassionate person and sought his counsel. He told her to take a year off and travel, but not to see the sights but to seek out people who were suffering. She was to spend a little time with them, listen to them and just be kind. After a year she returned. Her wise friend asked her how she felt. She replied that she hadn't felt so good for a long time and she had found a new meaning in her life. We also will find a new meaning in our lives when we seek out and offer nurture to those in need.

It reminds me of an anecdote I shared with you a few years ago. At King's College we ran a community service programme under the umbrella of the Chapel and many students were involved. A Year 12 girl approached me well into the year and asked if she could sign up. She apologised for not having done so earlier but she was very involved with sport and music, and time was at a premium. I rostered her on for the following week to visit a retirement home, along with several other students.

On her return from the visit the next week, I happened to be outside the Chapel where the taxi was dropping off the students. She came up to me, her face all smiles and said, 'Rev, that's the best thing I have done this year.' This is from a girl who was representing the college in hockey and was also in the orchestra. That in itself was very rewarding but in the end what gave her the most reward, what gave her a real sense of fulfilment was being able to bring a touch of sunshine into the life of someone who was feeling lonely. Our true sense of achievement and fulfilment comes from, not what we do for ourselves but what we do for others.

And the point is this, we don't have to look very far in order to find someone who is hurting. We can all do our little bit to alleviate that hurt. That's precisely what Jesus means when he calls us 'to love our neighbour.' And here's the thing, we also stand to benefit from that outreach. Jesus understood this so very well. And so did Paul. He makes this so very clear in his letter to the Galatians, which we heard from in our first reading. Interestingly, he also uses the analogy of a harvest. I quote, '*So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time. So then whenever we have the opportunity, let us work for the good of all.*'

Let me share with you a very well-known story, a story perhaps written for younger readers but a story with a pertinent message for us all. It is written by Oscar Wilde and is called 'The Happy Prince.'

High above a city stands an ornate statue of the Happy Prince, recently deceased. He oversees the city and is pained by the suffering of his people. One night, a swallow who had not gone to Egypt with his flock for the winter arrives in the city and rests on the statue of the Happy Prince. He notices that the Prince is crying and the Prince explains that during his lifetime he had lived in the palace where misery was not really an issue, and therefore he had never experienced sorrow. Now, though, he can see the suffering of his people. He then asks the swallow to distribute gemstones and gold leaf from his body to various people in need, a task the swallow immediately undertakes. There is a lovely moment when the swallow, on returning from one of his errands, says to the Prince, 'It is strange. It is very cold but I feel quite warm.' The Prince replies, 'That, my friend, is because you have done a good deed.' And the swallow pondered on this.

The swallow loves the Prince and decides to stay, despite the Prince urging him to join his friends in sunny Egypt. The winter cold bites and eventually the little swallow dies. The Prince's lead heart breaks. When the town mayor finds the statue in such a decrepit state, he decides to take it down, melt it down and make an ornate statue of himself. However, they were unable to melt the lead heart so it was discarded on to the city rubbish dump, along with the dead swallow.

God told one of his angels to bring him the two most precious things in the city. The angel brought him the lead heart and the dead swallow. 'You have rightly chosen,' said God, 'for in my garden of paradise the Happy Prince and the little swallow shall sing for evermore.'

Devotion to the wellbeing of others is devotion to God's call. May we find our reward in answering that call.

Let me finish with a quote from an anonymous source: 'Being good is commendable, but only when it is combined with doing good is it useful.'

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