

St Luke (Luke 10.1–9)

Collect

God of the gathering storm,
calling us to announce
the nearness of your rule:
we praise you for the good news of Luke, for stories of searching love
and grace found in the foreigner;
of women of strength and rebellion
and men called from the margins;
may we be bearers of that word
to a world hungry for you;
through Jesus Christ, who feasted with sinners. Amen. Steven Shakespeare

Sermon

We live in uncertain times, operating in a complex context we could never have imagined a year ago. The news is full of escalating cases of coronavirus and deaths, and feelings of anxiety, fear, loss and grief are always present either in ourselves or in those we talk to. Yet amidst this, the mission of the church continues to evolve and opportunities to share the presence of the kingdom of God are increasing instead of being locked down.

Today, as a church, we celebrate the feast day of St Luke, the life of Luke the Evangelist. In traditional Christian iconography, Luke's symbol is an ox, a creature known for strength, reliability, and service to mankind. Luke is believed to be one of the seventy described in the Gospel today. Through Luke, as our collect describes, we hear stories of searching love and grace found in the foreigner; of women of strength and rebellion, and men called from the margins. In a letter to the Colossians, Paul referred to his companion Luke as "the beloved physician", a doctor who focuses on promoting, maintaining or restoring health.

So how are Luke's stories a word of life for us today?

The Gospel today is about Jesus sending out his followers into mission. At St. Mark's, we are exploring together what it means for us to be a mission-shaped church and to share the Gospel with the wider community in both word and deed. We are asking questions and trying to consider what our overarching strategy and vision looks like, to clarify our aims and objectives and to plan how we deliver them. An important part of our mission, is to seek to communicate with and represent the views of our diverse congregation especially taking into account the impact of coronavirus, of changes in the staff team, as well as of a developing partnership between St John's Ranmoor, St Mary's and ourselves.

Some people would consider these activities to be very inward looking and are asking questions about what has happened to the outward looking mission. As part of the Diocese of Sheffield, we have been called to grow a sustainable network of Christ-like, lively and diverse Christian communities in every place which are effective in making disciples and in seeking to transform our society and God's world.

How can we make the most of every opportunity for welcome, pastoral care and dare I say it, evangelism, in our current context, and how do we connect with those outside of the church family?

Next week, we hold an Annual Parochial Church Meeting (APCM). It's your opportunity get involved, to have an influence on what goes on in the mission, life and work of the church. The Annual report was distributed back in April and if you go back and reread it, you will see examples of dedicated, creative and passionate people working together in the mission of God. Broomhall Girls Group, Environment Group, Home donations, International donations, Lunch and Friendship club, Soup run feature alongside fabric and finance, flower arranging, hospitality, mission partnerships, music, working with children and families and young adults, to name but a few. It's not just the clergy, you, the laity of the church, are being recognised and valued for your contribution towards the life, mission and ministry of St Mark's. I won't pre-empt what Sue might say next week, but thank you.

Luke recounts how Jesus wants his team to undertake what appears to be a huge task, to reach every town and place where he himself intended to go. He begins by appointing other earnest and eager disciples to join him in the task. You'd hope Jesus would then share his vision with those he's gathered and motivate and encourage them before they set out. But no, Jesus's message is blunt, recognising the challenges and demands that will be placed on those who have responded to the call to serve God. "The harvest is plentiful. But the labourers are few" There's a lot of hard work to do, but hardly any of you to do it," he would be telling the team gathered today. Would that encourage and motivate you to join in?

And as if that wasn't bad enough, he compounds the problem further: "Go on your way! I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves", and "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals." The task doesn't sound very inviting, does it? Go out into this dangerous world where others might harm you, and don't take anything with you to help you on the way. He is making it clear that mission involves risk and has a cost.

It reminds me a bit of Pat's recent announcement, that being part of PCC and contributing to the mission of St Mark's is quite a challenge at the moment. Jesus sees beyond the initial challenges and draws on foundations that will help us move forward, and I'd encourage us to do the same.

Jesus talks about seventy people being sent out. This reminds us of the story written in Numbers 11, of Moses in the wilderness in which we are told Moses was tired and overworked and the people of Israel were expecting way too much of him. Moses complains to God saying "I am not able to carry all these people alone, for they are too heavy for me!" God responds, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel...they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself."

Mission is not the sole responsibility of the leader whether that be Moses, Jesus, Sue or any one of us. It's something we should undertake in partnership, as the body of Christ. That partnership might be with another individual such as undertaking to cook apple pie that the children delivered to people at harvest, as a small group such as the choir resourcing music for worship, with a group of churches such as the work to explore how we can support people with dementia and their carers, or with other organisations such as Assist or Christian Aid. The call to mission is essentially a call to partnership work for the Kingdom of God and we all have a part to play in that. Here at St Mark's we need to continue to develop lay ministry and help each other to develop gifts and skills that mean the load is shared.

As I began this sermon, I mentioned Luke's symbol is an ox, a creature known for strength, reliability, and service to mankind. Oxen are hard workers in the back ground, persistent, undertaking their work steadily and step by step, unlikely to get sidetracked as they work in pairs, carrying the yoke to get the task done. As a church, we need to be focused on the task that faces us in the present moment. It's easy for us to get sidetracked and forget why we are on the journey in the first place. Our mission is to remove barriers that prevent others experiencing the kingdom of God now. This will involve us stepping outside our comfort zone in order to find new and creative ways to reach out with the Gospel.

Before March the majority of us could meet freely, travel, gather with friends. Now this has changed and relationships we took for granted are more difficult to continue. We are in a recovery phase as St Mark's has re-opened, but not to it's full extent. The benefits of worship on Zoom have opened doors to people who could not access St Mark's previously and we are finding new ways to come alongside friends and neighbours. Much of this mission is activity based, rooted in simple acts of kindness. No longer can we pop in for a cup of tea or a meal together but we are able to share space on the telephone or Zoom together and to encourage one another in our lives. Our own lunch club is a wonderful model of how this works, regular telephone calls and the magazine "let's connect". Back in March they did not envisage it would still be continuing 6 months later but it's become established and sustainable and maintains the connection between church and community.

But we can't be complacent. We also need to reach out to those who were not part of the St Mark's community pre COVID and to start to reimagine what we want the future to look like. Things have changed and will continue to change. Not moving from house to house is sound advice these days, but it also speaks to me of being rooted in the ethos of St Mark's, that is being living, thinking, loving, faithful people of God as we proclaim the kingdom of a God is near. In the diocesan weekly ad clerum this week, one of the Bishop's wrote; "If I can place myself in this gospel I may find that I am one of those "seventy others." I am a follower of Jesus. I listen and look as I enter the challenge of this gospel scene. And, I am sent out. I carry with me no resources, only a clear vision, my unique interior gifts and an open heart."

As we go out, let us open our hearts and ask how we can share our gifts to be bearers of the love of God. Amen