

14th Sunday of Ordinary Time

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Introduction

Our journey through Luke's Gospel has now taken us away from the ministry in Galilee and on to the long journey towards Jerusalem. Last week we looked this in overview from the perspective of Jesus as he 'is moved by a particular spirit, driven by a singular imagination of what it is he is to do'. This week we have a view from the perspective of the disciples as they receive instructions from Jesus for the task of proclaiming the Kingdom. Once again conflict is foreshadowed – here in comments about *"lambs in the midst of wolves"* and *"authority...over the enemy"*, and in instructions regarding wiping off the dust of a place as an act of protest.

This sending out of the 72 replicates elements which occur as part of the earlier sending out of the 12 (9: 1–6). These reiterated directions and warnings are clearly closely linked to the Lucan theology of mission and their applicability might thus be regarded as being limited to this area. However the Gospel texts have a depth of meaning and a richness of application which extends beyond historical particularities or narrow theological specificities and once again there are some key pointers here that can help us as we consider our ways of attempting to resolve different conflict situations.

Text

Luke 10:1–11, 16–20

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.

He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.

Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.

Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!'

And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you.

Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house.

Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you;

cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'

But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say,

'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.'

"Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!"

He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.

See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you.

Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

Comment

As we noted last week, Luke's account of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem is marked by rising tension and punctuated by misunderstanding, opposition and conflict. It also begins and ends with episodes of rejection: in Samaria at the outset (9:51 ff) and then when he finally arrives in Jerusalem itself (19:39-44). The material between these two rejections is carefully arranged in a chiastic structure around a central point in which Jesus reaffirms his determination to go to Jerusalem even though it is the place where prophets are killed and where he himself will die (13:31-35). Today's Gospel reading is the concluding part of the second unit of this travelogue (9:57 - 10:25) and is mirrored by the penultimate section (18:35 - 19:10), with both passages addressing key aspects of following Jesus [1]. The unit is also part of the larger overall patterning of Luke-Acts and prefigures the later Christian evangelistic missions following Jesus' death. However the teachings enshrined in

the passage also have a wider remit and there are three elements from this Lukan theology of mission which can help us as we consider how to negotiate different conflicts we might encounter.

We find the first of these in verse 4 – though at first sight the instruction to abandon the standard travel provisions of the day (which reiterates that in 9:3) seems rather irresponsible; and the additional charge to *'greet no-one on the road'*, feels at best rather insular and at worst somewhat hostile. However both these instructions are simply underlining what Jesus has already stressed in 9:57–62 *viz.* that when there is an important task to be done (in this case the proclamation of the Kingdom) it is important that focus and energy is directed to that task. In this instance the 72 were to rely on God's provision and use the time and energy which might have been dissipated in worrying about food, clothing, shelter, money etc. to proclaim the Gospel. Furthermore they had a clear remit – to go the towns which Jesus intended to visit – and needed to avoid distractions and potential distractions along the way which could deflect them from this.

The second element – the importance of choosing the right place to start and then building on this in a fruitful way – develops through verses 5–9. In verse 6, the Greek phrase refers to a person who is *huios eirinis* – a 'son of peace'. In the New Testament the word son is sometimes used in this metaphorical way in connection with 'moral' characteristics (e.g Lk 6:18 – 'sons of the light'; I Thess 5: 5 – 'sons of the day'; Ep 2:2 – 'sons of disobedience' etc.)^[2]. In the Hebrew thought world the concept of peace (*sh lôm*) was an extremely rich one ranging over a number of spheres of action at individual, communal and national levels and comprehending many dimensions of physical and emotional experience: in essence it encompassed a full and rich human flourishing within a web of proper relational connection. So the disciples were to seek out those who were – knowingly or unknowingly – already in tune with/embodying a key principle at the heart of the Kingdom. It should be noted though that the 'right person' would not necessarily be someone with whom they would feel completely comfortable: the command in v7 to eat and drink *'whatever they provide'* can be read as an instruction to be prepared to set aside various culturally related dietary laws (which will later be stated more explicitly in Acts 10 and 11) in order to bring the news and reality of the Kingdom to all.

This willingness to tolerate some dissonance or discomfort is also a key part of the second aspect of this principle *viz.* the importance of offering, accepting and honouring hospitality in the pursuit of the task. The disciples are to approach people first and foremost with an attitude of openness and relational hospitality: *'first say, 'Peace to this house!'* (v 5); if they meet with hospitality (by no means a given) they are to accept it, even if that entails some discomfort and self-restraint on their part: *'Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide'* (v7); *'Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you'* (v8); finally they are to honour the hospitality they do receive by sharing the hospitality of the Kingdom: *'cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'* (v9).

The third pointer relates to where our attention should be focussed and comes in the closing four verses. When the disciples return, they are full of joy – an emotion sparked primarily (it seems) by some spectacular healings (v17). However Jesus gently but firmly directs their attention elsewhere. Yes, there are demonstrations of power which will attract notice and comment – demons, snakes, scorpions will all give way to the power of the Gospel invested in them – but these should not be the locus of their satisfaction, or indeed the aim of their endeavours. Their joy should come from being part of the Kingdom, sharing in its work and opening the possibilities of its life to others.

[1] For more on the structure of this section see Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A*

[2] W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (London: Oliphant, 1978), vol. IV, p.47

Response

Any of the above three principles underlying this early missionary project are ones on which we can usefully reflect as we consider our engagement with conflict. You may wish to consider some of the following questions in connection with a conflict which you are trying to resolve or a reconciliation process in which you are involved.

Where are we starting from in our attempts at resolving a situation? What are the characteristics/attitudes which could be a starting point for embarking on the journey of peace-making? How do we go about looking for/recognising the right person/people with whom to try and address any peace-making process?

What is the fundamental spirit in which we approach any peace-making or reconciliatory endeavour? Are we prepared to tolerate some dissonance or discomfort for the sake of opening up better understandings? What do we understand by the notion of hospitality in the context of attempts at conflict resolution and how can we put that into practice ourselves and encourage it in others?

What is our motivation for trying to pursue the paths of resolution and reconciliation in a given situation? What are the outcomes which give us the most satisfaction – and do they shed any light on these motivations? Are there things here which we need to challenge ourselves about? Are there things we need to celebrate and affirm?

Prayer

Jesus,
may we be quick to recognise
accept
and honour hospitality
even when it is offered
where we were not expecting it;

and may we be quick to extend
maintain
and defend the hospitality
which is the hallmark
of your Kingdom.
Amen

