

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Seventy-Two Others

The first three Gospels contain a mission of the twelve Apostles during the lifetime of our Lord, in which he describes to them their duties and their conditions of service. Luke alone has this special story of seventy-two others, sent out in pairs ahead of Jesus' own arrival. His first sermon was on his chosen text, "The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for the Lord has anointed me, and sent me to bring good news to the poor". Now he recruits numbers of others to be his collaborators, sent out like him, and commissioned like him to be heralds of the news of the Kingdom. If he has sent them, they must tell their hearers that Jesus is coming after them. This already frees them from the pitfall of proclaiming themselves; the heralds of the kingdom point, not to themselves, but to the one who is coming in the future; their demeanour, then, must be consonant with *expectancy*.

Ahead of the Lord

Did Jesus send out these *people once upon a time*, was their mission a temporary reality? Or can we read more into this story, and find a charter for our own mission? Think for a moment of the things he says to these early missionaries: they must go *like lambs among wolves* - thus defenceless before the rough and threatening, and ready to endure enmity from powerful foes. They have no need to worry about luggage, or to waste time on the road. Rather their urgent task is to *arrive in the towns* (Christianity, at the beginning of its history, was an *urban* movement: the evangelisation of the countryside was much later). There they must settle quickly and not be concerned about their accommodation, and get to first base: healing the sick, announcing the closeness of the reign of God. The power of this announcement is almost sacramental: it will be accompanied by signs of its own veracity, bringing peace to those who accept it, judgment to those who refuse it; and these realities will lodge in the lives of the heralds, bringing them peace as they accomplish their task, bringing them rejection when the Gospel is rejected. In this sense they are indeed *going ahead of the Lord*, who will experience the peace of God amid opposition, and who will endure in his body the nails and scourges that expose, and incriminate a godless human race.

The Medium Is The Message

We can often recognise prophets by the way they have become identified with the message they come to proclaim. One thinks of Ghandi, whose tiny and withered frame embodied so much of his message of humility and openness, and whose life - and, most significantly, death - would still embody those things

if he had never spoken a word. In Jesus, we say, *the Word becomes flesh*; in the life of any prophet, struggling to give birth to his God-given message, we can watch *the flesh becoming Word*. For this to happen, we must leave our boats and nets, and accept an alternative way of life, in which the Gospel takes the place of the seamanship, the marketing, the investment and management skills, the business acumen. Jesus chose canny people, and then told them to be lambs among wolves.

Listen To The Orders

Even the Twelve failed to get the point. It is no wonder that Peter hid a sword in his minimal luggage; and surely we all do this in our varied ways. Yes, we recite the Gospel's demands about changing our motives and hearts, but we will preserve, under the bed or in the top of the wardrobe, a small armoury of the forbidden weapons on which we used to rely: self-seeking, ambition, hardness of heart, possessiveness, anger, revenge - in case the Gospel proves unworkable in a tight spot, and we have to turn to less hallowed methods to achieve our ends. And there we betray ourselves: because such methods may achieve *our* ends, but never *Christ's*. The truth is that the Gospel will, infallibly and always, "work" where it is faithfully followed: but it will only work for us as it worked for Jesus, with the same result. This is how we ended up with bishops and abbots wielding huge material power in the Middle Ages; it's also how we disfigured the Church's name with those Renaissance Popes who moulded their behaviour on the tyrants and murderers who governed the city states of Italy, and dealt in poison and hired thuggery. They looked about them, and saw the way the world was, and they decided they would do what they found "necessary" to hold up their heads in the world. Their temptations were great; and are we ourselves any better? It is a question of belief: can we drink the cup that he will drink, or accept the baptism with which he will be baptised? *Dicunt illi Possumus*, they replied: "We can." If we will be anointed with a share in his prophetic mission, and not turn in horror from sharing his Cross, we can be truly sent out with his Word.
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