



A sermon preached at St Andrew's Parish Church, Headington

By Claire Browes

Reading: Galatians 6.1-6; Luke 10.1-11, 16-20

The readings from the NT this morning give us two images: one internal and one external – by that I mean one about the relations within the church community and one about the relations with those beyond it. The reading from Galatians is one which – along with several other passages from Paul's letters always seem particularly pointed when read at morning or evening prayer in college. [For those who I have not yet had the chance to meet] I am an ordinand training for ministry at Ripon College Cuddesdon: it is a theological college on the top of a hill in the countryside just outside of Oxford.

We are roughly 50 students plus partners, children, staff and until recently – and I've trying to count this accurately -20 dogs, 8 cats, 6 chickens, 4 degu, 1 tortoise and George and Spikey Mike - the two sheep. We all live together in a very small village. Life in college can sometimes be a model of generous, loving community, but at other times it is not – particularly as terms go on and we get more and more tired and eating, worshipping and learning together becomes a bit more of a challenge and cracks begin to show. It is usually at that moment we get one of these readings – Paul exhorting us to bear one another's burdens and treat each other with gentleness. Reactions range from wry smiles to, 'well that's easy for Paul to say, he never had to live in Cuddesdon!'

While most scholars agree that Galatians was written by Paul there is a disagreement about whether this passage is addressing specific problems within the community or not. Paul's letter is addressed in chapter one to the churches in Galatia. This may mean that the text was written to the Galatians – and that the exhortations in this passage are based on events occurring within **that** community. If we assume that to be the case we would likely infer then that the community was facing some pretty serious problems....

but others argue that it was not a letter written specifically to Galatia but rather it was a generic letter – or circular – sent to multiple churches just changing the addressee as required.

[We can be sure that] Paul was not writing to Cuddesdon but his words sound very relevant. Paul was not writing to the modern church but his words sound very relevant. Paul was not writing to us specifically. But whatever the problems he had in mind when he wrote the letter, we know our own and his advice and criticism can ring true. It challenges us to reflect on

what relations in the whole Church are like today. Do we bear each other's burdens and treat each other with gentleness? All of this really is detail of how to live out the demand central to the of life Christian communities: to love our neighbours.

The Gospel reading this morning draws our attention away from the internal life of the church and turns it towards those outside – to our neighbours in the wider community: how do we love them? Jesus commissions seventy of his followers to leave. To go out to the towns and villages. He gives them a few instructions. First, they are to go without sandals or purses: they must travel empty-handed. This was potentially dangerous – he was asking them to be vulnerable, taking just themselves. And their vulnerability reflected his as he had now set out on his final journey towards Jerusalem.

Secondly, there message was to be of peace. He does not instruct them to say anything else, but 'Peace to this house'.

And then it is about what they do: they are to share food and drink – accept hospitality, spend time in people's company. This may have involved even breaking boundaries – eating with those whose rituals around food may have been different to theirs.

And finally, they are told to 'cure the sick'.

So back to the college on the hill in Cuddesdon – while we are often fixated on the detailed workings of community life, we must not forget that we are not there to stay. Last weekend, the majority of my year group – those who were training for two rather than three years - was ordained deacon: we leave, we are commissioned, we are sent out.

But the number of people Jesus sent in our reading is key – seventy (or 72... depending on the manuscripts) both are symbolic numbers used in the OT- 70 is the number of nations listed in Genesis 10. That is to say that it is a number used to represent all people rather than a select few. So, the followers being sent out here are representative of all Jesus' followers. It is not just those training in theological colleges who are sent out – it is all of us.

While we must pay attention to internal workings of the church – we must not stay just amongst ourselves but take that step out. The shared life of the Church prepares us for this. Today, as every time, this service will prepare us, through scripture, prayer, through our conversations this morning with each other, with our encounter with God through the sharing of bread and wine. And at the end of our spiritual nourishment in the Eucharist this morning we will be sent out: 'To go in peace to love and serve the Lord'. Jesus calls each of us to go out in all our own vulnerability and with all of our uncertainty to speak words of peace, to eat and drink and share our lives with others and to cure the sick – to help others. And it is the task of the church, national and local, it is **our** task to work out what this might that look like today. Prayer? Practical help? Offers of service? What might it look like for you? What does it look like for St Andrews? What else could it look like?

While this demand may sound daunting, potentially even unmanageable. We must take heart because this passage suggests that is not all up to us – firstly we do not do it all alone, he sent

them out in pairs – in teams. Again, we must think about what this might look like for us. Who might we work with? Are there things already happening we should join in with? These questions are relevant for both individuals and local churches as well as the Church nationally. Secondly, we do not need to be worried about measuring success. If those we serve do not appear to respond positively it does not matter. We are to move on and try again. But more than that, we cannot really know if a response was positive or not: something **did** occur, something **did** change and we do not know its potential effects. He says: ‘Yet know this, the kingdom of God has, come, near.’

Our actions of love and message of peace – our being in a place, is enough to bring the God’s kingdom near – right here. And furthermore, at the start of the passage we were told that Jesus would come after: ‘[he] sent them on ahead of him in pairs, to every town and place where **he himself** intended to go’. Jesus was going to follow. We may be preparing the ground but Jesus does the transforming.

But although we need not worry about how it is received but we **must do the stepping out**. With the support and the nourishment we gain from life within the Church community, we must go and continually serve others, and proclaim peace and then Kingdom of God will, come, near.

In the name of God: creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

Sermon preached on Sunday 07 July 2019