

2nd Sunday after Trinity, Sunday 18th June

Exodus 19:2-8a, Romans 5:1-8 and Matthew 9:35-10:8

Father Christopher

When reading and interpreting scripture in sermons there are those who like to know the historical background and context, and there are those who think that just makes it all a bit boring and academic.

It won't surprise you to know that I am in the first camp – for me learning more about the context in which our scriptures were written down always brings them alive. And this is particularly the case with today's gospel: the sending out of the twelve disciples, and the naming of them. This, as with so much scripture, has rather faded in impact through familiarity. Part of the impact of this passage would have come through its irony. All trace of that has gone now, from English ears, but the context of this passage is the familiarity which readers would have had with Greek and Roman lists of heroes, often named in pairs as the disciples are here.

Classical heroes were also given grand descriptions: '*Hector, breaker of horses*', '*Agamemnon, son of Atreus*', and, sounding quite like a Marvel comic hero: '*much-travelled Odysseus, the man of many ways*.' You can hear a twentieth century take on this genre in Russell Crowe's much-parodied words at the start of *Gladiator*: *My name is Maximus Decimus Meridius, commander of the Armies of the North, General of the Felix Legions and loyal servant to the true emperor, Marcus Aurelius. Father to a murdered son. Husband to a murdered wife. And I will have my vengeance, in this life or the next.*

With our disciples however, we are given very ordinary, simple Jewish names: James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; and even Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. They are given super-hero-like powers: '*authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness*', and yet they are ordinary, sinful people, like you or me.

This is no accident.

The author builds us up to expect heroes to enter stage-left: Jesus goes about all the cities and villages, teaching, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing the sick, but on His own. He tells the disciples that the labourers are few – just Him to be precise - and tells them to '*pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest*.' Who could possibly do the same work as Jesus? Matthew sets up the dramatic tension, as we wonder how this prayer will be answered. And then, immediately after having told them to pray for labourers, He answers the prayer Himself, by summoning his twelve disciples by name, and giving them the authority to do what He has been doing. For Him though, not the great semi-divine heroes of the classical world from which they all came, but those to whom He was speaking themselves. Just as we who are hearing today are called to continue that mission. It is impossible to over-state how radical this was.

Before Jesus, religion and power were intimately connected – and one might argue that they would become so again as Christianity became the religion of the empire in the fourth century.

We know about the relationship between Jewish kings and the Temple – which was after all built by Solomon. But it is easy to forget that the Roman Empire also depended on its inextricable ties with religion. You only have to visit the Forum to realise that, filled as it is with temples, but particularly the Temple of Vesta, where the vestal virgins guarded the flame which symbolised Rome's safety and prosperity. This is why Jesus's cleansing of the Temple, as He expelled the money-changers, and His saying '*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's*' were so radical.

Before, all worldly power came from religion, and worldly success was a sign of the approval of the gods. Jesus, shockingly, breaks that connection. In the old world, what are you to make of your life if you are poor, lacking any worldly status or prospects? Well, not a lot – it might even be God's will for you. And in the new world, which Jesus ushers in?

Now you are the very one to whom the Son of God entrusts His mission.

You are justified simply by your faith in Him, and can even boast in your sufferings which previously meant disgrace. And you can have that precious commodity which you previously had no right to, or basis for: hope. Because '*God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*' Instead of the demi-Gods of the ancient world, the ordinary are given the Holy Spirit to live extraordinary lives – not in feats of strength, but in serving those who are weak. And in the ordinariness of the names Simon, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James, Thaddaeus (well, maybe not that one for us), Simon and Judas (nor that one..), we might as well hear Alex, Guy, Ran, Christina, Pat, Ivell, Ed, Mark, Cara, Simon, Olive, Martina.

We do not give of our plenty, as the Romans might have understood it. Instead, we know our lack, that we have nothing of our own strength or power. '*You received without payment; give without payment.*' '*Of your own do we give you*', as we put it in the prayer before the Eucharist. This attitude, this approach, this reality: of the ordinary - coming with nothing - called to do the extraordinary, called to join in with Christ's work in transforming the world, cannot but change the world if we believe it, if own it, if we live it. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: Christianity is not a philosophy – it is not an abstract set of values or propositions.

The work that we do as Christians – the work of Jesus, is not about attaining spiritual perfection, though we may hope for that. It is about teaching, proclaiming the kingdom, and curing every disease and sickness – improving people's lives. '*I came that they might have life, life in all its fullness.*' That is why, incidentally, after Matins we will be asking for your views on how we can reach beyond St Mary Abbots to use our money as well as our other resources to change the world.

We all have different things to offer, but listen to Jesus's words again: '*The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few.*' This work of changing the world is of course endless, but instead of being dispiriting, that means there are endless ways for us to make a difference. Do ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into the harvest. But be ready for the response the disciples got: that He might well be sending you.

Amen