

LUKE 10:1-11,16-20
ST JOHN'S, 7.7.19, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

You may remember that last year we were talking quite a lot about Leading Your Church into Growth, and praying the prayer on these bookmarks. We need to keep on praying, as we seek to grow, as the prayer says, 'in numbers, in spiritual commitment, and in service to our local community'. In many ways, the story of Jesus sending out the 72 speaks into our concern for our local community. The one thing which every single person on this planet needs, above everything else, is to hear the good news of God's kingdom, so they can respond to it as they see fit. So as we think about this story now, let's think about how it might apply to our relationship with our neighbourhood, as Jesus' disciples in Rhosnesni today.

This story comes shortly after Jesus had *set his face to go to Jerusalem* (9:51). The time had come for Jesus' final journey to the city. He knew that when he got there, he would be arrested and executed.

On his way, Jesus wanted to visit as many towns and villages as possible, to tell the people the good news about the kingdom of God, and give them the opportunity to respond to it. But first, he sent out these 72 disciples to prepare the people for his own visit. It obviously wasn't going to be a leisurely journey!

THE MISSION OF THE SEVENTY-TWO

The disciples' job was to prepare people, in a spiritual sense, for the time when Jesus would come and visit them. Jesus was claiming to be Messiah, God's Son, King. The Jewish people were waiting for him; but he wasn't the kind of Messiah they were expecting. The Gentiles probably weren't even expecting him. When Jesus arrived in each of these villages and towns, the people of that place would have the opportunity to accept him or to reject him. But they'd have to make their decision fast. He wouldn't be staying long. And so, Jesus sent his disciples ahead of him, to tell people about him, to show them the evidence, and give them the chance to consider it before Jesus himself arrived. That way, they wouldn't be rushed into the most important decision of their lives.

So, Jesus wanted to give people time to make up their minds. But there were a lot of places he wanted to visit; so there was no time for the disciples to hang around. They needed to make the most of the time they did have. So they were to *greet no-one on the road* (v 4); that means not wasting time in the elaborate rituals of greeting which can take so long in that part of the world. And once they arrived in a town, they weren't to *go from house to house* (v 7), because that could become a social round, and keep them in a town for much longer than they really needed to stay.

THE CONTENT OF THEIR MESSAGE

Whatever response the disciples received from the people in the towns they visited, the content of their message was to be the same: *The kingdom of God has come near* (vv 9,11).

We need to understand what Jesus meant when he said, *The kingdom of God has come near*. 'The kingdom of God' means God's rule in action. The Jews of Jesus' time were looking forward to a time when God would show his power as King over all the nations. When Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God, he taught people that it had already come, in him. They could see that this was true because Jesus had authority over evil: he healed the sick, cast out demons, and so on. The kingdom of God, as Jesus explained it, wasn't the political kingdom which people were expecting. It was, and is, God's rule in action, in people's hearts and minds and lives. That's what we have to remember when we read Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God.

As Jesus' disciples, and then Jesus himself, visited each of these towns on their preaching tour, they faced the people with a decision. They could listen to the message about God's kingdom and accept it. Or they could reject the message along with the messengers. In both cases, the disciples are to tell the people that *the kingdom of God has come near*. The towns which choose to accept the message will see the fruit of God's kingdom - sick people healed, demons driven out, people's lives changed. But those which choose to reject the message and the messengers will receive only a warning of judgment. We heard in our reading that to reject the disciples and their message amounts to

rejecting Jesus, and so to rejecting God himself. But some verses were left out of the reading. We didn't hear Jesus' warning that *it will be more bearable on [judgement] day for Sodom than for the towns whose people choose to reject his message*. (The LORD destroyed Sodom by raining burning sulphur on it, because the people there chose to reject him, Genesis 19). The disciples were to convey their warning to those who rejected them by wiping off the dust from their feet against them. This was a symbol which would have told those people that the disciples considered them not to be members of God's people.

And so, these 72 disciples were given the task of preparing all these towns for Jesus' own visit. We don't know what happened when Jesus himself turned up, but we do know that the people in each of these towns had a vital decision to make, and we know that this was probably their one and only opportunity to decide whether they were for Christ or against him.

CONCLUSION

There's much more that we could say about the instructions Jesus gave to the 72 disciples who were to carry out this mission. But I think it's more important to think about how urgent it is still that Jesus' disciples go out to tell other people about him.

In some ways, we're in a very different situation. Jesus is no longer visiting towns and villages in the same way that he did on his way to Jerusalem. It's unlikely, especially in this country, that the whole

population of a particular town will have one collective opportunity when they have to decide whether to accept or reject Jesus' claims on their lives.

In other ways, nothing much has changed. People still need to be given the evidence for who Jesus is, and to have the time to consider it properly before they decide what to do about it. They also need to understand that this is the most important choice they'll ever make; they need to understand that they must make a clear decision - they can't sit on the fence; and they need to understand that they need to make their choice as soon as they honestly can. And it's still the job of Jesus' followers to bring people to the point of making a decision, one way or another. It's still an urgent task: none of us know when anyone's going to die, and it'll be too late for them; and none of us know when Jesus is going to return, and it'll be too late for everyone who hasn't yet decided. As Jesus' followers today, *we're* all called to tell people the truth about Jesus Christ. It's our responsibility to make sure we do that, clearly, honestly and fully. If that's something which scares you, then have a word with Steve and arrange to join his upcoming courses, which will be about how to spot and take opportunities, and how to answer those difficult questions which people might ask. Prepare yourself, so you can give your families and friends the information they need about Jesus. What they do with that information is up to them. But it's a serious business: the decision each of us makes about Jesus in this life will have consequences for us throughout all eternity.

If we know that our names are written in heaven, we have a great responsibility to our family, friends and neighbours. As Jesus' followers here in Rhosnesni and Borrás, we have a particular responsibility to the people who live and work here. We're called to pray for these people, and we're called to make sure that they have the opportunity to make an informed decision as to whether they are going to accept Jesus or reject him.

And if we know that our names are written in heaven, we have a great cause to rejoice, because we can be certain that we will spend eternity with our Lord.