

## Sermon - Jesus' co-mission

Based on: 2 Kings 5.1-14; and Luke 10.1-12, 17-24

### Devotees

- I'm now living in my home in The Basin, and there's a Hindu Temple nearby.
- The Sri Vakrathunda Vinayagar Temple is built on the land previously occupied by St Mary's Anglican Church.
- That faith community is celebrating the temple's thirtieth anniversary, and I recently attended an Indian dance performance as part of that celebration, held at Yarra Valley Grammar - an Anglican school.
- The programme booklet included a history of the faith community and how the temple came to be established.
- One of the words used in their story caught my attention.
- Members of that faith community are referred to as *devotees* - that is, those who are devoted to their faith, or who participate in acts of devotion to the Hindu gods.

### Parishioners

- It made me reflect on how we regard ourselves, and what word we might use to describe ourselves in terms of our faith.
- We might call ourselves *Christians*: members of the Christian faith.
- Or as *Anglicans*: members of a particular brand of the Christian faith.
- Or as *parishioners* - which are members of an organisational unit of the Anglican church, which is the parish.
- None of these words describe what we do as Christians, like the word *devotee* does.
- Instead they describe membership - what we belong to.
- There are two words used in the gospel accounts that describe the first followers of Christ: *disciple* and *apostle*.

### Disciples

- Disciple means someone who follows the teachings or practices of another, in order to learn from them.
- Disciples are called either directly, or respond to the idea of being called to follow and learn.
- Sometimes we use the label to refer only to the twelve named men that Jesus symbolically chose to represent the twelve tribes of Israel.
- However, Scriptures describe disciples other than these.
- The prophet Isaiah had disciples (cf Isaiah 8.16), and John the Baptist had disciples.
- On Paul's missionary journeys he describes encountering disciples in towns where he had never been before (cf Acts 19.1), people who had felt called to follow the teachings and practices of Jesus long after his death and resurrection.
- And, of course, today's Gospel passage refers to seventy others - meaning other than the twelve.
- I try to make a point of referring to each of us as disciples.
- It is a reasonable expectation I have that each of us is called to follow in the way of Jesus, to keep learning from him, and to keep striving to engage with God and others in the way that he modelled for us.
- The words *Christian*, *Anglican*, and *parishioner*, imply a static membership, whereas the word *disciple* implies active participation.

### Apostles

- If we think of a disciple as someone who is called to follow, then an apostle is someone who is sent to call others.
- The letter to the Hebrews describes Jesus himself as '*apostle and high priest*' (Hebrews 3.1).
- Jesus refers to God the Father as the one who sent him thirty-three times in John's gospel.
- Early on in Luke's gospel, Jesus says: '*I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.*' (Luke 4.43)

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### The great commission

- And in each of the four Gospel accounts, Jesus commissions his disciples to call others into discipleship.
- Matthew's Gospel ends with what is referred to as the great commission:  
*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28.19-20)*
- Just to note here that the activity of making disciples does not imply coercion, threatening, or obliging people to become disciples of Jesus.
- Jesus never compelled people to follow him: it was always an invitation.
- Likewise, as disciples who follow his way, we also are not to compel, but to invite.
- Continuing to look at the other descriptions of commissioning apostles, early on in Mark's Gospel we read:  
*Jesus went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. (Mark 3.13-15)*
- In Luke's Gospel it is initially stated:  
*Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. (Luke 9.1-2)*
- and then in the next chapter we have today's Gospel reading:  
*After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him (Luke 10.1)*
- John's Gospel has a number of references to the disciples being sent as apostles.
- Speaking to the disciples Jesus says:  
*For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. ... Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.' (John 13.15-17, 20)*
- Further on Jesus prays to the Father:  
*As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.  
I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word (John 17.18, 20)*
- And then on the day of resurrection:  
*The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' (John 20.20-21)*

### Co-mission

- One way of understanding the word commission is as co-mission.
- That is, Jesus calls us to join *with* him in his mission.
- As disciples of Jesus we keep learning how to follow in his way of sharing God's Kingdom with others, and thus continue the mission he was sent to undertake.
- And in today's Gospel passage, Jesus provides some basic instruction as to how to participate with him.
- Firstly, we are not to depend on our own strength and ability:  
*Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide. (Luke 10.4, 7)*
- Jesus tells them that God will provide for them through the generosity of others.
- My understanding in this is that we need to stay humble, and recognise that whatever we achieve from a missional perspective, is done through God's power rather than our own.
- Secondly, we are to undertake it with others - mission is not a solo activity:  
*He ... sent them on ahead of him in pairs (Luke 10.1)*

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- Thirdly, we are to engage with people on their terms, not on our own terms:  
*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." (Luke 10.8-9)*
- The last aspect worth noting here is that Jesus reveals what our focus needs to be on:  
*I have given you authority ... over all the power of the enemy ... Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. (Luke 10.19-20)*
- Here Jesus affirms us in confronting evil - those things that distract and separate people from God - but highlights that even while this confrontation is necessary, that it is vital to ensure the priority is not on evil, but on participating in the heavenly kingdom.
- Even as we attend to situations that bring darkness, we need to keep rejoicing in the light.

### The servant girl and the king

- Some of these aspects actually play out in today's Old Testament story about Naaman's healing.
- The attitude of the Israelite servant girl is contrasted with that of the king of Israel.
- She witnesses to God's power to heal through the prophet Elisha.
- Curiously, Naaman believes her - or maybe he's reached the point where he'll try anything: the point is that he responds to her witness of God manifesting healing through his prophet.
- The king of Israel receives Naaman's letter of introduction from the king of Aram and thinks that *he* is being requested to bring about Naaman's healing in his own power, until Elisha intervenes.
- The instruction from Jesus tells us to have the servant girl's attitude rather than the king's attitude.

### Introduction to the mission at St John's

- By way of conclusion I want to say that today's Gospel reading specifically introduces us to the sermon series for July.
- The focus is on the overall Mission Action Plan for St John's.
- Two years ago the parish council signed us up to participate in the Diocesan Parish Renewal Program.
- As part of that we established a Mission Action Team made up of a group of parishioners to participate in a series of workshops to help the parish develop a missional attitude and approach - along the lines that I have highlighted from the Gospel reading.
- Of course, the Covid lockdowns meant that it took two years to be led through only the first half of the program.
- Nevertheless, earlier this year the team was finally able to develop the first part of the new Mission Action Plan for the parish.
- Over the next few Sundays I will be exploring what it is for our parish to have a missional mindset, and the bigger context of our Mission Action Plan.
- Today's sermon serves as an introduction - reminding us that Jesus keeps inviting his disciples through the generations to respond to his commission - to join with him in his mission of bringing the kingdom of God near to our wider community.
- So as we keep responding to Jesus' call to each of us to be *disciples*, and to learn from his teaching and practises, may we also learn what it is to be *apostles*, to be sent to faithfully witness to God's love and peace in every circumstance of life.
- May we do this in his name, amen.