

## REFLECTIONS/SERMON TRINITY 1 WEEK 11 YEAR A 14 JUNE 2020

Jesus said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.”

We are now beginning the long stretch of the church’s year between Trinity Sunday and Advent Sunday. The seasons of Lent and Easter, closely related to events in Jesus’ life, are behind us. For several months we shall be thinking more generally about the Christian way, and this is the year when we read through a large part of S. Matthew’s gospel. Today’s passage is fairly early in the gospel, though Jesus is already widely recognised as a teacher and healer. The verse I quoted a moment ago, about sending labourers into the harvest, is the prelude to the twelve disciples being named and sent out. It may be that the twelve belonged to a larger circle of people following Jesus, but now he calls them out and gives them authority. They are to proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven is at hand and they are to work miracles of healing. They are even to raise the dead.

We could think of the differences between the situation of Jesus’ first followers and our situation today, or we could think of the similarities. The harvest is still plentiful: people look for meaning and purpose as much today as they ever have done. Perhaps they don’t look to the church as much as they used to, though when some communal tragedy occurs it is often a religious building that provides a space for reflection. But Jesus didn’t tell the twelve to expect people to come to them: he sent them out. We have to take care that we are not too inward-looking, pre-occupied with church matters, rather than living the Christian faith day to day so that others may encounter something of the gospel and be led to explore the riches of the Christian tradition. An outward-looking church will be confident in its faith and practice, but open to the contributions of newcomers, and open to different ways of being church. Our monthly Family Fun – messy church – which includes activities, teaching and worship – has regular participants and is church for them. And in the pandemic lockdown we are all having to find out how to be involved in church.

Jesus tells his disciples to ask the Lord for labourers. This puts prayer at the heart of our efforts to reach out. It may seem strange to ask God for something that presumably he already wants. Maybe the prayer is for our sake, aligning our desires with God’s will. I suspect what we need is the compassion felt by Jesus for the crowds, who were like sheep without a shepherd. Do we love our neighbours so that we want them to receive the kingdom that has come?

There was a well-received presentation on personal evangelism at a Diocesan Synod a few years ago. The words ‘personal evangelism’ may make us squirm, but what was suggested was not at all threatening. The suggestion was that each church member should think of five people they know who don’t come to church, and do four things. They should pray for them, have something to say to them (maybe just “I go to church”), have something to give them (maybe a parish magazine), and something to invite them to (maybe a service or a concert). And that’s it. Now all of those four things apart from prayer are not possible at present. Let’s not forget them, and in the meantime use other means of reaching people, whether that’s a phone call or Facebook. The experience of the three people who led the presentation was that if a church believes it can grow, it will grow. Where is our joyful confidence – a confidence in God, rather than ourselves?

Some might say that Jesus’ command to proclaim the good news was given to the twelve apostles, and it is the clergy who are the successors to the apostles, so it is they who should carry out the church’s mission. I think the truth is that we all, laity and clergy, have a part to play. The clergy have a leading rôle (which I think works best as an enabling rôle), but it is all of us who have the contacts. Let’s work together to bring the harvest in!