

*Jesus appointed seventy, and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go*

I am going to talk

- first about the sending out of those seventy
- then about the message they were to bring to the towns and villages they visited
- and then about our own mission and the message we are to proclaim.

What is stressed first about their mission is its **urgency**. The harvest is ripe – if it is not gathered in **now** it will be lost. And there are only a few labourers to gather it in.

The urgency of their mission determines its style. They must not carry even the lightest baggage - they are to leave behind anything that would weigh them down. They must greet no one on the road – no wasting time on the niceties of oriental wayside etiquette. When they come into a town their initial attitude is to be open and positive to whoever they meet – whatever house they enter, they are first to say: *Peace to this house*. They are to accept any welcome which is offered them, and any offer of hospitality from whoever it may come. They must not be scrupulous about the ritual cleanliness of the food they are offered – such regulations are unimportant when set against the crucial urgency of their mission.

So much for the style of their mission; now for their message. They are to bring healing to the sick. And they are to say to the people of the towns they enter: *The kingdom of God has come near to you*.

*The kingdom of God* is the phrase that in the first three gospels characterizes Jesus' teaching. *The kingdom of God* means *the ruling power of God*, but beyond this, its meaning is quite complex and elusive. Jesus never define what he means by it, but rather uses images and stories to suggest different aspects of its meaning.

*The kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up and then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field*. The kingdom is not immediately visible, but it is there, and if anyone discovers it, it brings deep joy and becomes the very meaning of his or her life.

Unlike a buried treasure, the kingdom is not static. *The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep and rise, night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear*. The kingdom is a process of growth which in God's time will inevitably come to ripeness.

The kingdom of God involves a reversal, and a subversion, of the values by which the kings of this world rule and by which their subjects live.

*It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God*.

*Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*.

*Many who are first will be last, and the last first*.

So we begin to get a picture of the kingdom as an alternative reality, a totally different way of seeing things and of living. A joyful a celebratory way of life which is simple and obvious, which is there the whole time - available to everyone, but which is not seen by the rich, the powerful, the self-interested. In God's power, God's kingdom will eventually be established fully, but it is already present in the words and deeds of Jesus. With his coming the poor hear the good news, the blind see, the prisoners are released. All are called to the wedding feast.

This is what Jesus commanded those seventy to proclaim in every town they entered. Their proclamation of the kingdom, by word, by healing of the sick, by the bestowal of heavenly peace, presented the hearers with a challenge. Whether people liked it or not, whether people believed it or not, the kingdom of God was inexorably present – a reign of peace and joy to those who would accept it, a sentence of doom to those who were too blinkered to see it, or too self-centredly fearful to embrace it. It demanded an urgent response lest the opportunity be missed.

The same applies today. The kingdom of God is still there, a simple, joyful, demanding, alternative way of life. The challenge is still there, a choice is still demanded. You can reject fear, meanness, self-interest, stop worrying about yourself and your material security, and live the life of the kingdom now – a life of peace, joy, forgiveness, sharing, openness to others - the life of God's generosity now and for eternity. Or you can cling to what you know, refuse the risk, close down on the possibilities, and be lost.

We, the church, are like the seventy, called to proclaim the message of the kingdom to those around us. Can we learn from their mission anything about ours?

- They were told to carry no luggage with them, nothing which could slow them down or hinder them from the task for which they were sent out. Are there things we carry with us which hinder us from the task of proclaiming the kingdom? Attitudes, possessions, things in our history which weigh us down?
- They were told not to waste time in polite social exchanges on the way. Do we spend the time we have been entrusted with on inessentials?
- They were to ignore the niceties of religious practice in the interests of the mission – are we at times too concerned with our tradition, the details of our worship?
- They were to be open to all people of good will, lodging with them and accepting their hospitality without regard to background or social position – are we ready to work with all who respond to the vision of God's kingdom?
- They were to communicate the kingdom by healing the sick and by bringing a blessing of peace. are we a community where the sick and the needy find healing and wholeness – a community which can be seen as expressing God's love and peace?

We must honestly ask ourselves these questions. If in any of these areas we fall short of these, we must seek God's forgiveness. We must work to become a community which is focussed on the task of proclaiming, through our words and our deeds to those around us that *The kingdom of God has come near.*