Sermon for 14th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Galatians 6:1-10; Luke 10:1-12

There’s one implication of the Gospel that many Methodists have not been very good at recently, especially in western societies, and that is evangelism. For some the very word conjures up dreadful images of very earnest brothers and sisters stopping people on the streets to ask if they are saved. But bad practice should not be used as a cop-out for engaging in the challenge to spread the Gospel. Someone had to bring the Gospel to your part of the world, why should you take the comfortable road of turning the Body of Christ into a couch potato?

Good News is for sharing. There are many ways that can be done. Find one that suits you and your part of the world.

Luke 10:1-12 has a number of things to teach us even today about evangelism.

Firstly, the Gospel is for everyone. The manuscripts differ as to whether it was a mission of 72 or of 70 because the Hebrew OT had 70 and the Greek OT had 72 as the number of all the nations on the earth. Whatever the true number of nations and peoples, the principle is clear: Jesus Christ is for all people, whatever their race.

God is inclusive of all and we must resist those who suggest that evangelism is somehow wrong, who want to deride all evangelism as “proselytising”. The Gospel is no more European than it is African or Asian. Those who carry the Gospel inevitably wrap it in their own cultural clothing, but peel that away, and the same Gospel remains for all.

Provided the Gospel is shared with integrity, humility and due respect for the beliefs of others, we must share the Good News because we believe that Jesus Christ is the source of life in all its wonderful fullness. “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

The Church is called to be “catholic” – in the proper sense of that word and those Christians who bear the name “Catholic” must never give up on their obligation to make the Church as truly “catholic” or “universal” as it can be. Christian Unity may look less urgent from the position of size that the Roman Catholic world has traditionally known, but the fact that the Roman Catholic Church **can** live without the Methodists and all the others does not mean that it **should be content to do so.**

Secondly, Mission is done in partnership. Jesus sent them out two by two. Just as we are born one at a time, yet we are never alone, for we have at least our mother; so too, whoever is born into the kingdom is never alone again.

Ministers are particularly prone to succumbing to ‘lone martyr syndrome’; resist it at all cost! But it affects more than clergy; lay people catch it too, as can wives, mothers, bosses and CEO’s – indeed practically anyone. The trouble with ‘lone martyr syndrome’ is that the individual who has it, isn’t the only one to suffer – all those around suffer from it too as they are pushed out and their contribution ignored.

Galatians 6:2 & 5 may seem to contradict each other: verse 2 says, “Carry each other’s burden”, whilst verse 5 says, “carry your own load.” But really, these are the two faces of the same coin. Knowing that you are in a team can lead some to leave it all to others while they just coast along for the ride. “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Gal 6:9).

Thirdly, Mission is urgent. There is a breathless quality to Jesus’ instructions in Luke 10. The harvest is ripe, the workers are few, so don’t waste time with the customary long oriental greetings (“Do not greet anyone on the road” v4), don’t waste time on those who are obviously not interested, don’t worry about the food laws and other social barriers or conventions, don’t waste time moving from house to house in search of better lodging, or even in an attempt to share the burden among the congregation.

“The kingdom of God is near” is the heart of the message. This could mean that the kingdom is near in the sense of distance: it is near because Jesus is here. Or it could mean the kingdom is near in terms of time: the new world is about to dawn as Jesus draws closer to Jerusalem and his death and resurrection. Or it could be near in both senses. The kingdom is near whenever the ones Jesus has sent are present.

The kingdom is no less near today than when they first believed. The urgency of the task remains – although few of our churches would suggest we really believe this to be the case.

Why is it so urgent, we might ask? The answer has to be that the kingdom, if it exists at all, is a matter of life and death. Those of us who have chosen to follow Christ simply have to believe that something significant hangs on that decision.

For the evangelical, there is no question. Without Jesus there is no true life, there is no salvation from sin, everything is at stake. Yet also for the most liberally inclined among us, there is at the very least a better quality of life available for the asking to those who choose the Christian way and a more just society a tangible possibility.

We sell Christ short if we reduce him to nothing more than a lifestyle choice and turn our churches into private clubs. Sharing the Gospel is part and parcel of believing the Gospel.

Fourthly, Mission works. Now we all know Mission used to work in our earlier history and we all know of places where Mission still works, but for those of us living in secular western societies, it is more a statement of faith, rather than of personal experience, that Mission works.

We are all familiar with the parables of growth Jesus told. We have known from Sunday school the stories of the seeds falling in the good soil, the tiny mustard seed that becomes a tree, the leaven that raises the whole lump of dough, the lamp on the stand that illuminates the whole house and so on. Too few western Christians have had experience of how this works in reality.

In Luke’s account, it is not long before the evangelists return to Jesus with joyful reports of their success (Luke 10:17). All of us in the Church today are here because Mission works. For me it is a result of the work of John and Charles Wesley and those who followed them in the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century. But wherever we are, and whoever brought the Gospel to our part of the world, it is proof that Mission works.

That is not the same as saying, Mission works everywhere and at all times. Clearly that is not our experience and never has been. There have always been places, as Jesus warned the first evangelists, where the only sensible thing to do is to wipe the dust from your feet and move on.

When Jesus says it will be worse for that town that rejects the Gospel than it was for Sodom (Luke 10:12), it reads like a threat of terrible retribution. Clearly, Jesus did not intend it as a threat, since he has already refused James and John permission to call down fire on the heads of unresponsive towns in Luke 9:55. According to rabbinic sayings, “the people of Sodom shall not rise again;” Luke is pointing out that those who reject Christ shall not rise again. This is a warning rather than a threat.

Modern secular materialism may prove to be one of those places and one of those times when the metaphorical dust needs to be wiped from the feet of Christ’s messengers. But anyone with a sense of history, anyone with half an eye on the geopolitical tensions around the world, anyone with any awareness of the demands a burgeoning population is putting on our environment, anyone who has faced the growing desperation of the dispossessed and the left-behind, will know that there are a number of very different world views and political systems just waiting in the wings to have their go.

Christian Mission has survived many such upheavals in the past. We must wait to see what the challenges and the opportunities of the future will be.

Lastly, Mission is costly. Mission is about changing the world and the way people live in it. We should not be surprised when we face hostility from those who like the way things are, thank you very much. “I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.”

Yet the instruction to carry no purse or spare sandals prevents the evangelists from hiding away in fear or from acting like a conquering army. They are dependent on people responding for their very survival.

So the evangelist is vulnerable, powerless and at the mercy of those to whom he goes, dependent upon their kind reception. This makes the disciples of Jesus no better than their teacher, for Jesus himself took the same risk when he “came to his own, but they did not receive him, but to all you did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God” (John 1:11-12).

The followers of Christ follow Christ – and that is a costly thing to do.

Fortunately, it is not only costly, but also fruitful, fulfilling, exciting and transforming. Mission is the life of kingdom of God, not an optional extra.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard – June 2015**