

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mark 6:7-13

He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

REFLECTION 1:

OTHER CHRISTS

In today's Gospel (Mark 6: 7-13) when Jesus sends the disciples out two by two, he orders them to take nothing for their journey – no bread, no bag and no money in their belts. This 'no bag' restriction reminds me of the instructions for a Ryanair flight – if you exceed the specified weight, one could be charged steeply for the extras! But perhaps Jesus is speaking of a heavier kind of baggage that we need to leave behind if we are going to follow him – and that heavy bag is fear. The fear of feeling unqualified, of not being able to perform, of not knowing what to say or do, fear of being rejected and the humiliation of failure. We must leave that heavy bag of fear and 'fly' free.

To the doorsteps of the people the disciples were to bring God's message, it was not their own opinions they were to air, but God's truth. Like the prophets of old, who championed the freedom of God, they always began with the words, 'Thus says the Lord...' so, whoever receives an effective message, must first receive it from God and Jesus' message was that people must repent. Clearly, that was a disturbing message, because repent, 'metanoia' means to change, to change one's mind and to fit one's actions to that change. One thinks of a minister of the environment urging us to reduce our carbon emissions so as to avert global warming. A change of heart, a change of action and that's bound to hurt because it involves the realisation that the way we were living was wrong. It involves a reversal of life and that is why it is so hard to repent as most of us hate to be disturbed.

But to the people, the disciples also brought the King's mercy, the balm of healing. They brought liberation to poor demon-possessed men and women, the elimination of evil. From the beginning Christianity has sought to bring health of body as well as of soul, not only a hand to lift from moral wreckage, but also a support to lift from physical pain and suffering.

Today's Gospel tells us that the disciples anointed with oil (olive oil). In the world of Jesus' day oil was regarded as a cure-all. The Good Samaritan poured wine and oil onto the wounds of the mugged victim on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The Greek Dr. Galen wrote of oil as 'the best of all for healing diseased bodies'. And now in the hands of the servants of God, the old cures acquire a new virtue – the power of God becoming available in ordinary things like oil and water to enhance the faith of humanity – the love of God coming to us through symbols.

By the call and power of God the disciples did what Jesus had been doing up to this – preaching repentance, casting out evil spirits and curing sick people. From this the disciples would have a foretaste of later spirit-filled days when the mission of Jesus was to become the mission of the Church. The Second Vatican Council has increased our awareness that the entire Church, and that's us, is now missionary and the work of evangelisation is not the special reserve of priests and religious. In this battlefield, the frontline troops are the People of God, the lay faithful.

During the Korean War in the early 1950s a village came under artillery fire that destroyed a Catholic Church, leaving an outside statue of Our Lord on a pedestal in smithereens. A group of American soldiers helped the priest to collect up the fragments and carefully put the statue together again. They found all the pieces except for the hands, so they offered to have a sculptor replace them. But the pastor had another idea, - 'Let's leave it without hands and we'll write on the pedestal, the words, 'FRIEND, LEND ME YOUR HANDS'.

REFLECTION 2:

JOB OR VOCATION?

If you have ever visited a missionary college like St. Patrick's, Kiltegan or St. Columba's near Navan, you would have had a chance of touching the lives of those who have dedicated their lives as priests to make the name of Jesus known to those who may never have heard of him. You would also be acquainted through photographs throughout their buildings that their journeys to far off places in Africa or the Far East were no holidays to sunnier climes. Their venture was born of deep faith and trust.

By sending his disciples, Jesus in today's Gospel involved them in the proclamation of the kingdom. Like the prophet Amos, a simple herdsman in our first reading nothing has prepared these Galilean fishermen for such a mission. But what really matters is not their brilliance of intellect, the allure of their words or noble birth. By getting rid of useless baggage they must let Christ speak in their words and act through their hands. The success of the mission is not guaranteed and the welcome of the crowds could be half-hearted. If doors were closed on them they were to shake the dust of the ground from their feet, as was the custom in the event of rejection in those days. This should not put them off, as what really counts is that Jesus Christ has called them, pressed his seal upon them and sent them forth. In John's Gospel, Jesus proclaimed; 'you have not chosen me, but I have chosen you and have appointed you that you should go and bear fruit.' (John 15:16) The apostle then is one who is sent, it is not he who speaks but Christ in him – to be a constant herald with no real life of one's own, but to be a bearer of the Good News of salvation by being other Christs to those who hunger and thirst, for the bread of life and truth of the word.

Today's Gospel is a fine example of the formation Jesus offers to his own. Jesus' instruction to take nothing, no food or luggage, no money or a change of clothes. This is more than a plea to practical simplicity, but rather a reliance on God's providence. They were to lodge wherever they were welcome. Besides announcing the breaking news of God's kingdom, the disciples were to exorcise, heal the sick and preach repentance. These were precisely the actions Jesus performed as a means of announcing the proximity of the messianic era. Like Jesus, they anointed with oil, a common practice in the ancient world. They actively co-operated with Jesus in his battle against evil in all its forms. The great message for us is this, we may not have a Masters in theology, we may be just ordinary like fisher folk, but each of us has a mission. We are called by Jesus to bring the simple message of the prophet Micah to our fellow men and women, 'this is what the Lord asks of you, only this, to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God.' (Micah 6:8).