



3rd July 2022
Luke 10.1-11

Partnership in Mission

Alfred Ellis, that Edwardian lawyer and solicitor to the Baptist Union, had a sense of vision once he'd moved to Amersham on the Hill. He gathered together some other 'friends of Jesus' whose home was also here, and together in 1907 the planted Amersham Free Church.

It was a very deliberate act, and ultimately it was one born of the idea that Ellis and his fellow founders were continuing the mission commissioned by Jesus at the Ascension: to go into all the world in his name and with his love.

Today's Lectionary passage from Luke, read to us earlier describes the Mission of the 72 – it's rather like the previous Mission of the 12 – a time for these disciples of Jesus to live and share faith. A time to put some of what they had learnt from Jesus into practice.

Now, in Genesis 10 the Gentile nations of the world are poetically listed as 72 so just maybe this was Luke's way of saying this Mission by the 72 disciples represents an inclusive sharing of the gospel – just as Matthew in his Great Commission talks of going out into all the world, so Luke uses 72 as coded language for much the same idea.

No one is outside the love of God because everyone is made in his image and has that spark of spirituality about them that longs for meaning, searches for truth, revels in faithfulness and finds identity in loving relationships – that God spark or particle that defines us and gives us the dignity of being human yet touched by the divine.

Go – says Jesus to these 72, go in pairs, go to the places I would love to go to, go to live and be alongside people, go as commissioned servants of mine and share the gospel message with others.

Jesus had been doing that since his baptism – they had seen the way he lived, the compassion he showed to the disadvantaged, they had heard his provocative

parable stories – and now Jesus entrusts them to put into practice what they had learnt and witnessed from him.

Now surely one of the significant aspects of today's reading is the idea that they were to take nothing with them as they went into new villages and townships. It was, in a way, nothing more than the well accepted tradition of the 'poor rabbis'. The one who just came as himself – no bribes to give out, no goodies to entice people in, no grand claims – just yourself in all your frailty and vulnerability - yet also – and perhaps most importantly – with all your integrity.

This is how Bill Loader, the Australian commentator puts it: *They were to come only with who they were and await a local response.*

I love that thought and even find it wonderfully liberating.

You could sometimes be forgiven as you read the bible that mission always seems to be overly dramatic and you might even come to the conclusion it's just not for you – yet here the essence of the mission of the 72 seems to be simply this: go and be yourselves. Let people see you as you are – see your love, your sincerity, your compassion, your integrity – live in this way and make a positive difference and be a blessing to the communities you visit.

In a way that's all Jesus is asking them to do. But, of course, it's a very great deal.

Now we'd want to say in a sermon on this passage that there were hospitality customs in those far off days that might seem a little odd to us today.

Middle Eastern houses often had an open forecourt with an open table – a place always set aside to entertain the traveller. There was the expectation that you could just turn up at mealtimes, walk in and be welcomed.

So, the strategy was simple – go and be a guest at someone else's house – eat bread together and in doing so become companions – and in the table talk at these meals share your ideals about life and faith. If your host expresses an interest stay a little longer – if not leave.

And those verses about shaking the dust from your feet as you leave are perhaps just an idiomatic way of saying you had not been made welcome – because a good host would have made sure your feet were washed and free of dust even before you ate together.

This mission of the 72 is about living openly and with integrity in a community and using that community's customs to share your faith in a positive and constructive way. It's exactly the opposite of hiding your light under a bushel.

Who we are – individually and collectively matters when it comes to mission.

I grew up in a church with a Bible Class leader who just seemed to love us all into the Kingdom of God. This man shared his faith, his family and his home with us. Nothing was ever too much trouble for him and he could never do enough for us. Because of this 'role modelling' I believe we caught a glimpse of the God who so inspired him.

Who we are matters.

When it comes to mission - who we are matters – because it communicates our vision of the gospel.

I love our monitors here at AFC – I love the fact that if you are a newcomer here and you sit in front of them for five minutes you'll probably learn about upcoming services and our Mission giving projects. At a time of anxiety or national disaster you'll probably see a prayer projected alongside a flickering candle. In short these monitors celebrate who we are at AFC and the compassionate and supportive journey we aspire to walk together – actually they are a great 'mission' tool, a sort of 'shop window' profiling, to hundreds of people from our user groups who are in the building every week, the gospel we believe in.

In all of this we are in some mysterious and privileged way 'partnering' God in the mission that is already his. We haven't by ourselves invented compassion and service – it's the very nature of God and he calls us, summons us, invites and commissions us to jump in and share with him in that risky business of love that has always and everywhere been both his mission and his nature.

Just go and be yourselves, says Jesus, be the loving, forgiving and compassionate disciples I have taught you to be – live out that message in the 'doing' of faith and partner with me and anyone who will join us in this mission to celebrate, recognise and embrace God's living presence among us.

There are times, of course, for the prophet to come to town – Jesus did that – and we give thanks for modern day orators who lead in an upfront way like Martin Luther King or Desmond Tutu.

But then there is the sort of mission exemplified by Mother Theresa and her Sisters of Charity of simply going out into the streets and nursing the sick, the mission of Duncan Dyason of getting Street Children into School, the project of Work Aid sending out tools so people can live their lives with a productive dignity,

the mission of Open The Book of giving a polished acted out bible story at a school assembly.

And then there are those times when we open the building in a spirit of hospitality to our community, whether that's LunchBreak, Tea at Three or Fun at One.

You don't need gimmicks and fireworks when it comes to mission – just be yourself – with a faithful heart that's willing to sit down with people as we share bread and become genuine companions – to meet each other half way – to be honest about why God, faith and love are important to you.

The other month we had a holiday in The Peak District. It brought back memories for me of a College Mission we held there, as part of our training, in the early autumn of 1986.

We had a team of about a dozen theological students and we spent a week there doing all sorts of whacky presentations. The extroverts on the team loved it. Yet, after a week there it was clear our presence had not really cut through and made much of a difference.

And then I recall, I think it was at the Baptist church in Wirksworth, just on the edge of the Peaks, attending a Coffee Morning and speaking to the church folk there. I was introduced to about three people who had all joined the church in the last couple of years and their stories had a common thread. They had been friends with these lovely, caring and sincere church goers. They had been touched by the integrity they had encountered in the church community and eventually they had joined it.

I remember coming away from that Coffee Morning up in the Derbyshire Peaks, at Wirksworth and the penny dropped. We were not going to make the difference, we'd been drafted in from South London and soon we'd leave. These church members were the best evangelists, not us. These were the people quietly, yet sincerely, living out their faith, and at least three people at that Coffee Morning were a testimony to how effective that can be.

Today we've been recalling this sending out of the 72, a sending out of people who went to talk and share with other people a message of love and hope that had changed them and one, they felt, they could commend to others.

May that sense that we are joining God in this 'Partnership in Mission' inspire us today in the name of our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen