

Sermon for St Luketide, West Linton, Oct 16th

'The kingdom of God is near' (Luke 10 v 11b)

As we celebrate the life and works of St Luke, evangelist and 'good physician', this text from his gospel sums up his contribution to the development of Christianity. He gave up healing bodies to become a healer of souls as he devoted his latter years to interpreting the meaning of the life and death of Jesus for a gentile readership. However, we should not lose a sense of perspective as we celebrate: his was not the only interpretation of Jesus life and death in town and it was shaped by social, cultural, political and religious circumstances when he wrote his particular record. Yet some of the things he described have not just retained but grown in significance since Luke put pen to papyrus: today's gospel is foremost among such passages: one might almost say 'it's vintage Jesus'.

We are told that he sent 35 pairs of raw recruits ahead of him with a message of peace and healing, but to take no provisions. That meant relying entirely on others hospitality, facing up the uncertainty thereof and not feeling guilty when hospitality was forthcoming. Moving on to the next community, they were to say 'the kingdom is near you'. But what exactly did that phrase mean? Did it mean that Jesus was in the area and would be dropping in; 'coming to a household near you'; bringing the kingdom even closer? Jesus would have been kept busy if that was the case. There is no hint of Jesus speaking and healing at public gatherings.

What if the kingdom was inherent in the gatherings and exchanges that were to take place in each household? Was the essence of kingdom, followers of Jesus offering families peace and healing; those families offering them food and shelter, sharing what were probably meagre resources, putting their own food security at risk? That kind of kingdom could draw even nearer and grow, after his emissaries left, as families discovered they could also spread peace and healing around their neighbourhoods. Perhaps there was no need for Jesus to be present to seal the deal: the kingdom was already close.

There are similarities here with the healing of the 10 lepers that we heard about last week.

They had bumped into Jesus on the outskirts of town and were healed as they journeyed into Jerusalem to do what Jesus had told them to do. When one, with no Jewish credentials, returned to thank Jesus, he was told that the healing had

been all his own work, 'your faith has made you whole': had the kingdom also come near to him? He was told to 'go his way' in the hope that it would continue to be the Jesus way: if he did, would the kingdom stay near and grow?

In both stories, there are people who 'get the message' but most do not and we can fall into the trap of writing off, even condemning them. Luke may have fallen into that trap by adding a postscript to his tale in v12, tactfully omitted from today's set passage! Here, Jesus is said to condemn unresponsive communities, saying they would be destroyed, like sinful Sodom in Genesis? Saying that his ambassadors should not even bother to take street dust with them as they moved on (v11a) can be interpreted less judgementally: rebuffing kingdomhood was the community's loss; those that had brought it near had nothing to gain from taking away anything they had, even their dust.

In the ten lepers story, the nine who didn't show gratitude to Jesus remained healed, as far as we know; they were not cursed or unhealed. They may have remained in the temple, praising God for being healed by a Jewish rabbi, for all we know. Households that did not welcome Jesus' emissaries in today's gospel may have had good reasons to be hesitant: previously robbed or otherwise abused by strangers they had offered shelter to or young children to protect, perhaps. Eagerness to apportion blame without knowing the circumstances is something we are all prone to do. Jesus knew the trait and the distraction that it brought; perhaps that's why he says 'move on'; 'forget it'; if there is blame, let them discover it for themselves; we have kingdom seeds to scatter elsewhere.

The implications of this gospel for both missioner and missioned today are colossal. The church does little, on the whole, to send people out, instead expecting the missioned to cross church thresholds to sample her versions of 'faith' and 'kingdom'. Clergy are instituted to 'defend the faith', which implies that the mainstream church's faith is both static and perfect, having been so since the 3rd C: 'Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever'; the only thing not to change!

The *faith* of the 10th leper and the *kingdom* brought near by the 35 pairs of followers are both far simpler concepts than those preached by the church's emissaries since the 3rd C.

Faith for the 10th leper came from within him, from a powerful blend of courage and willingness to do what Jesus instructed: he had little else to bring to the table. The kingdom heralded by the 70 was exactly the same because they had been told to leave all material belongings behind: the poor were to counsel the poor, the vulnerable take hospitality from the vulnerable. There was nothing to obstruct the exchange of compassion: this was how the kingdom of God would draw near.

Neither lepers outside nor households inside Luke's communities had heard:

- ✝ of a virgin who had given birth to God's own son;
- ✝ that the suffering and death of that Son was the ultimate sacrifice to save mankind from inherent sin;
- ✝ that the Son would rise from the dead and live forever, as would those who believed he had died for them personally;
- ✝ that a holy spirit, hitherto confined in Jesus, would pour down from heaven and invigorate all believers.

Luke had still to embellish his record of Jesus life in the rest of his gospel and its sequel, Acts, where he expands the concepts of faith and kingdom. Was the faith of the 10th leper INCOMPLETE? Was the kingdom, trailed by the 70, but a shadow of the REAL kingdom? From the position of both missionary and missioned, is it not far simpler, indeed more effective, to impart and receive the more homely ideas of faith and kingdom? The church as a whole and we its members have much to learn from today's and last week's gospels as we try to emulate Luke and engage in mission today.

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