

Year A, Proper 11, Pentecost 3

Father's Day may not have the same resonance as Mothering Sunday, but it is an important day nevertheless, because, as if we needed reminding, we call God Father – not my Father but our Father. And that's significant because although most of us were lucky enough to have good fathers as role models, not everyone has been so lucky. Either their fathers were distant, or even absent, or perhaps they were present but not attentive, or worse abusive.

But God our Father is not like that. He is always loving, always on our side, always wanting the best for us, always ready to help when we ask. Mind you, that doesn't mean there won't be a few shocks and surprises along the way. Take the Genesis reading, when the angel catches Sarah laughing after he tells Abraham that he's going to become a father for the first time in his 90s. Even her relatively basic knowledge of biology meant she knew that wasn't going to happen. And of course, she laughs again a year or so later when it turns out to be true.

And I wonder if the disciples were laughing under their breath to themselves when Jesus sent them out on their evangelistic mission, telling them to take no money, no overnight bag, no spare clothes, not even a staff. Nor could they accept money, a speaker's fee as it were, to pay their way. Why was that. Because they had received so much from Jesus. You received without payment, give without payment How's that going to work there are bills to pay, families to support you can imagine them saying to themselves. Yet we know that it did, that when they returned they regaled Jesus with stories of all the healings they done, all the miracles they had seen.

The challenge to them, as it is to us, was, quite simply 'Are you ready, willing and able?' For the most part we could legitimately say we are never ready nor able, even if we are willing. The problem is that it is never that simple is it. I don't know about you, but in our family, the

start of the search for people in games of Hide and Seek is 'Coming – ready or not.'

And God's command to us is Go – ready or not. We may not think we are qualified to be God's hands and feet, or feel able to tell people with any confidence that the Kingdom of God is near, or to make God credible in a world that puts more and more credence in my feelings and my truth but all I can tell you is – God begs to differ, and God knows better than you or me.

To the disciples' credit they didn't use their unreadiness to try to get out of going at all – in contrast to Moses who came up with all sorts of reasons why he was unsuitable to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. And this mission was if you like a dry run for Pentecost when the disciples were ready and able as well as willing.

At the moment, when Christianity seems to be on the decline – in the Western world at least – we worry that not only are the labourers, i.e. in us few in number, but so is the potential harvest. That's not true says Jesus, the harvest is plentiful. Which is why Jesus was such a labourer. It wasn't because he thought it was a way of earning the Father's approval, but rather because he saw the need and had compassion. Works do not lead to faith; they grow out of our compassion.

Paul, Peter and James are very clear about it – works on their own does not earn us our salvation, that is the gift of God, and are ultimately unsustainable. Yet faith without works is not enough. That's like standing on the sidelines and leaving the actual work of harvesting to any and everyone else.

The truth is lots of people are looking for God, for a spiritual dimension to their lives, they just don't think the Church offers the answers. And there may be some truth in that. Over the years the Church generally hasn't covered itself in glory in all sorts of ways, so

we need to find other ways of telling people that the Kingdom of God is near.

In Romans, Paul gives his Christian audience guidelines rather than specific rules as a way of coping with the changes and chances of this fleeting world as Compline puts it. Setbacks will occur, but when we reflect on them we can learn from them. We learn from setbacks and build on them. That is how we grow in resilience now in difficult times and build a Christian future. So, suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character which in turn results in hope. As one commentator suggests, salvation may be free, but that doesn't mean it comes cheap.

Yes we are called to profess hope in a world that is hurting beyond belief. But hope is more than blindless optimism. And we have hope because we have a heavenly Father in whom we can put our trust in all circumstances, good and bad. Putting our trust in a faithful and loving God has never been the gateway to an easy life, but it is the gateway to coping with all its downs as well as its ups.