

Reflection for 1st Sunday after Trinity (14th June)

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Readings: Exodus 19:2-8a, Romans 5:1-8, Matthew 9:35-10:23

My experience of the coronavirus lockdown so far has tended to make me lethargic, especially since I'm still adapting to life after taking early retirement in February. It has been much less onerous for me than for many, but still my plans have been forced to change (originally I had expected to be on the shores of the Caspian Sea at this time, in Baku watching Wales play in the Euro2020 football tournament) and my routine has been disrupted, and with so much free time I too easily slip into the mind-set of thinking "there is no need to do this or that right now, I've got all week/month".

In complete contrast, in this week's readings we see that our God can certainly not be described as "lethargic"; rather, He proactively goes out of His way to save and heal.

In the Exodus reading He reminds the Israelites of how He brought them out of slavery in Egypt - a course of events that God Himself initiated when He first called to Moses from out of the burning bush.

St Paul makes clear in his letter to the Romans just how unwarranted was the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross: while we might hesitate or decline to die in the place of someone we know to be more helpful and loving than us, Jesus, Himself without sin, out of love for us let Himself be put to death so that we, who sin too often, could have a way back to the Father's Kingdom.

Finally, in Matthew's Gospel Jesus ceaselessly goes from town to town, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom and healing people. His experience of seeing so many who are "like sheep without a shepherd" does not lead Him to despair at the size of the task, but rather fills Him with even greater compassion, and to take further action, sending out His twelve chosen disciples to themselves proclaim and heal. Luke's Gospel, which also recounts the sending out of the Twelve, adds that seventy-two more disciples were sent out on a later occasion. And we are told that many were healed.

Because God does not want to be the only one healing and bringing people to His Kingdom - He wants His followers to share in this activity. Not because He is lazy, or has other things to do, or because the task is beyond Him (He could certainly do it much better Himself!) but, I think, because it benefits us to do so; it helps us to practise being the people that God wants us to be, and that He is leading us to become.

When God told the Israelites that they would be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation they could have been a shining light of justice, mercy and love in a dark and cruel world. But although they all pledged to obey God and keep the covenant, and there were times

when they held to that pledge (for instance, during the reigns of David and of Solomon), too frequently they fell short or intentionally chose a different path, and the books of the prophets are full of unheeded appeals to act kindly and justly towards the poor, widows and orphans, and the foreigners living among them.

After He rose from the dead Jesus explicitly told His disciples to proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom, once they had received the Holy Spirit; and unlike the earlier sending out, which was only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel", they were now to be Jesus's witnesses "to the ends of the Earth" (Acts ch 1 v8). Although the book of Acts shows that the Apostles had a particular role in that, it is also clear that "ordinary" believers were fully involved, and so it remains to this day.

Being Jesus's witnesses west of the river in Exeter during the current coronavirus emergency is an important and relevant task - and it is *our* task (shared with the other local churches, of course). Although it is sensible to let our excellent health service deal with the physical healing, it is heartening to see wide support for the Community Larder and other local initiatives which have boosted our appreciation of personal interactions. Lockdown restrictions in our movements (and perhaps our incomes) mean some of us might be limited in what we can practically do, but there are still helpful actions we can take, like phoning someone who is isolated. And we should not be afraid to proclaim the Kingdom using words alongside our deeds by being open about our faith, and the place it has in our lives and actions.

Jesus told His disciples to pray for more labourers for the Lord's harvest. When we do that, perhaps we should be ready, and excited, if we ourselves turn out to be the answer to that prayer. We should not be lethargic, and we certainly should not be daunted - God will not ask us for more than we are able to give and, as Jesus promised His disciples, we have the Holy Spirit to help us.