



15TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR B

In the name of the Father +, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we are thinking about the Church's mission: the great work that all Christians are called to do by virtue of their baptism. We hear a great deal about mission in today's Church, but what is it really about, what does it mean? The word 'mission' comes from the Latin word meaning 'sent', and we can understand why that it is applied to the work of the Church in the light of this morning's Gospel reading: S. Mark's account of Jesus' sending out of the twelve to spread the Good News. The word 'Mass', which describes the act of worship in which we are engaged, also has the same roots as the word 'mission'. In the Mass we are fed with Christ's body and blood, not so that we can remain where we are, but so that we can be empowered in Christ and through Christ to go out from our worship and bring the Lord that we have worshipped and received to the world.

Because that, too, is precisely what Jesus intended the twelve to do when he sent them out on their mission: they were to share the Good News, to preach repentance, to cast out devils and to heal the sick, which they did, and which the Church continues to do to this day. But he gave them some precise directions as to what they should and shouldn't take with them. Let's look at those for a moment, to see why he prescribed them. Jesus told the disciples to take nothing with them except a staff: this was a symbol of protection (think of the twenty-third psalm) and of authority (think of the bishop's crozier). They were not to take a haversack, because that was what travelling soothsayers had, and they were not to be confused with them. They were to wear sandals: perhaps this is an echo of the way in which the people of Israel prepared to leave Egypt, with sandals on their feet and a staff in their hand, as they prepared to go on their journey to the Promised Land. They were to stay in houses where they were made welcome, and make that their missionary base. In the earliest days of the Church, this is how Christian missionaries spread the gospel: they stayed in the houses of believers, whose acts of charity towards missionaries was part of their discipleship. So this puts Jesus' instructions into context: the disciples were to travel light; they were not to be weighed down with worldly possessions, because the spread of the Gospel was more important. They were to be ready to move on when the time was right, because of the immediacy of the Gospel message and the necessity of spreading it as quickly as possible.

The Greek word that S. Mark uses for 'journey' can also mean 'discipleship', so Jesus is instructing the twelve not only to follow his instructions only for this first mission on which they are being sent, but also to apply that to the rest of their lives as disciples of the Lord. This too, of course, has implications for us: we are not to be weighed down by the worries of this world, and by worldly wealth and possessions if and when they hamper the spread of the Gospel message; we are to realise the necessity of the immediacy with which the Gospel must be proclaimed; we, too, are engaged in the same mission as the twelve were, and we, by the baptism that we share, are being continually sent out into the mission field to spread the Gospel message wherever we may go. What Jesus said to the twelve applies to us.

We live in a very different context to those first disciples, and to the early Church. We live in a country, and a world, that, for the most part, has tried Christianity, decided it didn't like it and cast it away. We are fortunate that, in this country, we have the freedom to worship freely, and to spread our faith, but there is increasing hostility to the Christian Gospel, and to Christians themselves. We live in a multi-cultural, multi-faith society in which it seems perfectly acceptable to make fun of Christians, or priests or the Pope, when any supposed slight or insult against other faiths or lifestyles results in national outcry and unreserved apology. This is the context into which we are being sent out: a country and a people that is at best indifferent, and at worst hostile to our message. It is a pretty bleak picture. But this must not deter us: we have a mission, we have a task, we have a commission from the Lord himself to continue his work by spreading his Gospel message. We heard in last week's Gospel reading that people wouldn't listen to Jesus himself, so how much less will they listen to us. This must not stop us: like the prophets of the Old Testament, who were placed in the midst of a people who did not want to listen to their message, we are placed in the midst of a people who do not want to hear what we have to say. But we must not give up; we cannot, for Christ's sake and the spread of his Gospel, retreat into a holy huddle and be inward looking. Mission, is by its very nature outward looking. We are sent out, filled with the grace that we are given in the Sacraments to engage in the work that Christ has called us to do.

When Amos came to prophesy, he was told that the people 'want no more prophesying in Bethel'. Perhaps the people of Tottenham are saying, 'We want no more prophesying in Tottenham'; perhaps the people of this nation are saying, 'We want no more prophesying in Great Britain'. That does not matter. Whether they want to hear the message of the Gospel or not, we are to preach it in season and out of season. To do any less would be to fail in our task as Christian disciples, for this is the primary function of our calling: to make new disciples for Christ. It's not always easy, but that is why we must pray constantly for the grace of the Holy Spirit to help us in our task. The Gospel message is the only thing that can bring our world and our society out of the hole that it is digging for itself; it the only thing that can bring salvation.

Are you willing to take up your part in this great commission? I assume you are by the very fact that you have been baptised and confirmed and are sitting here in church today. We cannot be a people who are inward looking, and are only concerned with what happens at S. Paul's. We need to look beyond this Christian community and engage in the work of the wider Church, in the mission of the Church, as we are sent out from this place to continue the work of our baptismal calling. It is an immense task and a daunting one, but through the power of prayer and the Holy Spirit, we will succeed. Keep on praying, even if you feel there is nothing else you can do: the Church needs those who are constant in prayer for its missionary effort. We may not feel that we are called to be missionaries, but that is the task of each of us, in whatever small way we can live that out.

Please think and pray very hard about the mission of this Church and your own mission as a Christian disciple. We are all being sent out from this place today to proclaim Christ's message of repentance, forgiveness and love. Listen to the words of S. Paul: 'Now you too, in him, have heard the message of the truth and the good news of your salvation, and have belied it: and you too have been stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit'. Use those gifts that the Holy Spirit has given you for the work of the Gospel; don't keep the message to yourself – you cannot be a Christian on your own; live the Gospel with all your heart mind soul and strength; and at the end of this Mass, go out from this place, filled with the love and power of Christ, and share that with the world.

Amen.