

A Sermon / Reflection for the Commemoration of Luke the Evangelist 18.10.20

I'd like to relate this morning's Gospel Passage, on the subject of 'ministering', to the present and future needs of the Church in Wales – and our need to do things differently in the future to bring about the Kingdom of God.

Our Gospel passage describes how Jesus sends out his followers, in pairs, to carry out His work in the wider world. Either 70, or 72 people (depending on your translation), are sent out - which must have represented a very large percentage of the core group of Jesus' followers at the time. Very few were not involved in some way or other. Even the sick would have been praying for those involved in various ventures.

In Jesus' ministry, *all* are called, and *all* have a role to play in their shared ministry. As far as Jesus is concerned, there's no concept of 11 players on the pitch and 30,000 just watching – everyone is called to do something, depending on their abilities. Equally, though, and this is important, no one is left on their own, or out of their depth. The followers of Jesus, in today's account, work as pairs, or as small teams, complementing one another's skills, and making up for one another's weaknesses –which we all have. In many ways, this echoes Bishop June's recent comments on Ministry Areas, which she nicely summed up as, "Even Jesus worked as part of a team!"

Archbishop Barry, when introducing Ministry Areas, 8 long years ago, foretold that they would necessarily bring to an end the archaic practices of 'lone ranger' priests, often struggling on their own, whilst tens if not hundreds of lay people looked on. I know you've all heard that message – he said it in St Dochdwy's on the 150th anniversary, and at St Augustine's when we hosted a Confirmation. In other words, the Archbishop was calling for more teamwork, and more lay-ordained partnerships in doing things.

In our parish, we have been a Ministry Area now for over a year, and the sky has not fallen in! Who'd have thought it! Next year, we have the opportunity to work with our partners in All Saints Parish, in a new and exciting form – sharing in ministry, supporting one another, developing teamwork, all in a new and vibrant way.

Now, contrasting with the vibrant approach you'd expect a team leader to adopt, when enthusing the members of their team, in today's account, Jesus takes an unusual approach. You would think, wouldn't you, that he would excite, or inspire his colleagues, encourage them, and send them on their way with hearts ablaze! And that may indeed have been the case, but it is not recorded. What is recorded is *Jesus saying, "The harvest is plentiful. But the labourers are few"*.

Not much of motivational speech, is it?! It's a bit like saying, "There's a heck of a lot of hard work, people, and hardly anyone around to do it!" Personally, I don't think this sentence was said, at all, in front of the people to be sent off. I think it more likely, that he was commenting to the people who were left behind, that there is so much that he would like them to do.

Well, the disciples go off - and return - full of passion - amazed at what they have been able to do, freed up in their new roles. They surprise themselves. And come back, wanting to do even more, and demonstrating to the people left behind - who

had lowered expectations, perhaps courtesy of Jesus (!) - that they *could* indeed do *it after all!*

Moses was someone who was deeply uncertain of his abilities. He wanted to run away when given a challenge. He felt himself unable to even speak to a crowd, let alone lead a nation. But God supported him, and it worked out brilliantly. That was because Moses trusted in God. Now talking about Moses, interestingly, he persuaded 70 people, the same number as in today's Gospel account – not a coincidence -to go off and do God's work, when he realised that he couldn't be in two places at once - and that the people were placing unrealistic expectations upon him.

In Numbers chapter 11, Moses, a lone-ranger worker for God, if ever there was one, learns to include others. He starts to get others to work with him, as part of a team, and trains them out of their ridiculous expectations, that he, and those that succeeded him, would do absolutely everything for them. This echoes the reason why Ministry Areas are being created of course: they are new ways of working, sharing the tasks of ministry, according to ability and training, with less dumping of tasks onto the shoulders of a few ordained or lay people. And this greater involvement of lay people - and a greater percentage of them becoming involved in things- is key, for the future of the Church in Wales.

Working in teams is key for the wellbeing of parishes, and for their own development. Greater lay leadership and participation is essential, not only because it is a good idea, and leads to spiritual and numerical growth, but because it will stem the flood of priests retiring on the grounds of ill health. These expensively-trained assets, to look at it in one frame of mind, should not be lost to the church, if we can find ways of preventing this from happening.

This is especially relevant when you consider that there are a massive number of priests retiring in the next few years. Peter Cox's generation, for example, born in the mid-1950s and early 60s, when churchgoing on a Sunday was still the norm, are retiring now and in the next few years, and because there were fewer churchgoers in the late 60s and from then on, there will be fewer priests in the pipeline too to lead the church of the future.

There's a natural limit to how many churches that can be served by one priest, if people's practices on the ground don't change. If we don't change how we do things on the ground, then the only alternative would be to have fewer churches to serve, in the future. And no one wants that. Therefore all parishes in the wider church need to adapt, to survive. And so we return to Moses and his discussion with God in the Book that Christians call 'Numbers'. God replies, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel...they shall bear the burden of the people along with you, so that you will not bear it all by yourself."

It seems then that God advocates greater team work, as **His** model for ministry too. Mission and ministry is therefore something that we all need to undertake, jointly, together, as the Body of Christ in this place, not just as a means of adapting and surviving in the future, but because God wills it for the health and development of His church. Amen.