

Luke 10:1-11; 16-20

The Gospel passage this morning is probably very familiar to some of you. That's because it was one of the passages that Partnership for Missional Church (PMC) used, so that meetings of PMC but also PCC and Worship Team, and maybe other groups, used it at the beginning of their meetings, every meeting for a year. Each time the questions were: Where is your attention drawn? What do you notice this time? And then, instead of discussing it, we had to listen carefully to someone else's thoughts. It's a good way of 'coming at' scripture, and it was amazing how many different things emerged each time from the same passage. And that's why today's passage is probably very familiar to some of you.

So, this 'dwelling in the word', as it is called, started with PMC and I want to use part of today's sermon to bring us up to date on where we are with that process, and where we are going from here.

We joined the Diocesan initiative called PMC in 2022. It's a three year journey focussing on learning to listen more attentively to others, to build more relationships and partnerships within our community, to develop new habits in expressing our faith, to notice more where God is at work . . . and generally to move towards 'being missional' (rather than 'doing mission'). Year 1 was about 'listening' to explore what our context is really like. Year 2 involved an 'adaptive challenge' which for us was to do with connecting generously with those who are newer to village and community, and we focussed on our relationships with other village groups. We are now well into Year 3, and I'll say more about that at the end.

But back to today's passage which was the one used for 'dwelling in the word' in Year 1 of PMC, and I think there's a particular reason for that. But first, let's get some context. Jesus had already sent out the 12 disciples with pretty much the same brief as He gave to the 70 in our passage. Then, in last week's Gospel just before today's passage, Jesus set His face towards Jerusalem – in other words towards His passion, death and resurrection. He and His disciples, starting from 'up north' and, having to go on a slightly circuitous route to avoid Samaria, were on their way to Jerusalem, a journey of at least 50 miles.

As we see from today's reading, Jesus was joined on that journey by many more than the 12 disciples. And Luke has already told us that they were accompanied by a number of women who provided for them out of their resources (8:1-3). That, in itself, was surprising given the expectations of women in that culture, but reinforces the point that the 'Jesus movement' was as much for women as for men. And so, it's quite possible that the pairs that were sent out included women.

And they were sent to 'every town and place where he himself intended to go'. So, this was not random, but a quite deliberate strategy to prepare the way – something we might learn from. What's also interesting is that their instructions were very specific: 'say, 'Peace to this house'; tell them (whether they accept you or not), that 'the kingdom of God has come near to you', and 'cure the sick who are there'. That's it, and we might note that this was for all of

them to do – no distinction between those who might have felt more comfortable with words and those who weren't, and no sermon to preach!

But what's particularly to note is the vulnerability of the 70. 'I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals', and leave your mobile phones behind! And, crucially, accept the hospitality of those who welcome you.

Now it didn't have to be like that – Jesus could have made it much easier for them. But at least one purpose in Jesus's lambs-among-wolves programme, and perhaps the most important, would have been its effect on the 70 themselves. They had to learn to accept being vulnerable, possibly meeting with hostility, and enduring hardship, isolation, and deprivation. They had to learn to adapt themselves to the needs of any who showed themselves receptive to the message, and to receive their generosity. They had to accept that they were utterly reliant on God for the necessities of life, and trust Him to provide for them. That's why, I think, this passage was used in Year 1 of PMC – to encourage us, among other things, to develop a vulnerability to others.

Now, during our 'adaptive challenge' in Year 2 of PMC – connecting generously with those who are newer to village and community – we probably didn't feel too much like that. But there was a sense in which we were making ourselves vulnerable to others, inviting others to say how they saw us as Church, inviting others to offer us their generosity.

In other words, like the 70 who were sent out, we were and are being called not to be self-reliant, not to think that we have all the answers. While, at the same time, being clear, and perhaps becoming clearer, about who we are as Church and the distinctiveness of our message, about what we specifically contribute to village and community: 'Know this, that the Kingdom of God has come near to you'.

So where does that lead us with PMC as we move towards the end of the planned PMC process and look beyond it? PMC is described as a 'process' rather than a 'project' because its emphasis is on changing our habits, shifting the focus of church life and outlook towards being more outward relating. As we've seen, we are already seeing this shift. PMC also emphasises the importance of taking time to seek where God might be leading St Brandon's, rather than always being *driven* by 'what needs to be done', important though that is. This is why Phase 3 is not working towards a definitive end, but towards incorporating ways of doing things in the future, and ways of being, that will keep us open and outward facing, unapologetic about being the church in Brancepeth parish, and – as the whole church together – looking to God's wisdom as we discern where to direct our focus each year, and then being deliberate about our strategy as we discern it.

This 'focusing' will involve the PMC core team working this year with the PCC on embedding some of the practices and insights from the whole process. And, as we hope to see the appointment of a new priest-in-charge in the not too distant future, it's worth noting that all of this is written up in the Parish Profile, and so we expect them, whoever they may be, to join with us in this process.

But what we learn from today's Gospel reading, is that it's a process which should also involve us in continuing to be vulnerable to those around us, not thinking that we have all the answers, but always being open to those who we meet on the way.

Amen