

4 July 2010

Sunday 14C

Sermon notes:

Luke 10.1-11,16-20

Rev Dr Craig Thompson

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*[Edited transcript from recording]*

All of us here this morning are well aware of the situation of the mainstream Church in modern Western societies. The time has long since passed when we can blame that situation upon Sunday shopping or Sunday sports.

As time has gone on we have begun to see that there are much deeper things going on in the Church and in our society. Our sermon isn't really the place to do a whole lot of analysis about what has happened for the Church over the last few decades especially. But we might indeed ask the question; "Is the Church on account of these changes in danger"? This is a question of course about the Church, and not a question about our church, our congregation, or denomination. The answer we might get from the text this morning is no. But the reason is perhaps a startled one. The Church is not in danger, because God needs the Church. In our reading this morning we heard Jesus sending out 70 of his disciples, we are told, to places where he intended to go. Now that might suggest to us that what Jesus is doing, is sending the disciples out in order to arrange for preparations for his arrival. To find out where he might stay, to let people know that he is in fact coming, to work out maybe even where the best crowds might actually be; the best prospects for mission and ministry. And yet there is a much stronger sense given of the intention or purpose of this mission of the disciples. Whether they find themselves in a city where they are welcome or a city that actually rejects them, Jesus tells them to proclaim, "The Kingdom of God has drawn near to you". Now this proclamation echoes what Jesus himself pronounced when he began his ministry right back at the start of the Gospels. Jesus goes into the countryside, announces that the Kingdom of God has drawn near, and calls the people to believe. Now the Kingdom of God is not a space, not a political realm in the way in which we normally speak of kingdom, and a lot of books these days, even some bibles, translate the expression 'Kingdom of God', into 'Reign of God'. This makes much clearer that God reigns over people, or communities in a way a bit different to how a king reigns. God may reign in my life so that I become somehow the presence of God, the Kingdom of God, and that is certainly what is said of Jesus in the Gospels; that he is the one

who gives his life over to God, and so he is himself a presence of the Kingdom of God. But this is something new, which the disciples speak of themselves. Jesus hasn't come to the towns; they themselves have come to the towns and speak then of the drawing near of God's Kingdom. Jesus makes this even stronger a little further through the text when he tells them, "Whoever listens to you, listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me, and of course whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me". We have here a very strong statement of the importance of the Church. These stories of course were told not by reporters on the spot who were just letting us know the things that happened, the things that Jesus said. They are told to us by a gospel writer, who many years after the event decided that this is something my readers now need to hear. Jesus sends out his friends not just as his representatives, but as those who re-present him, those who themselves become for the world what Jesus himself wasn't. This is very dangerous stuff, for we know very well that the Church is far from a perfect community. We know very well that sometimes people have rightly refused to hear and rejected things the church has said and done. We know the church is quite capable of hubris, of believing that whatever it says or does is necessarily the word or the action of God. And yet for all of that, it remains the case that God has chosen to work in the world through such communities of faith. This is in fact simply the outworking of the gospel of the incarnation. If we say in John that the word becomes flesh, what we are saying there is that what we might call perfect about God is able to join itself to what is imperfect, and that imperfection is reflected by that word flesh, a very loaded one in the New Testament. As God is capable of working through the body of Jesus of Nazareth, so he is also and willing to work through that body of Christ which is the community of Jesus' believers. One further indication of this comes at the start of our reading where Jesus notes that there is an abundant harvest to be brought in, speaking here of the people who need to hear the gospel, but he says there are not yet enough workers. What is a response to this? A response is that we are to pray for more workers. How extraordinary it is that God might hinge the future of the gospel upon the unreliable prayers of His unreliable prayers; us. God attaches extraordinary importance to the friends of Jesus. We ought not to let that go to our heads; very easy to do, but we ought to take it to heart as a liberating word because we are imperfect, and for this to work God has to be working through us and not simply we ourselves. We do have much work to do; we do have a responsibility to speak and to act the Gospel, and yet we ought not to worry how it will work out. As it happens things went very well for the 70 Jesus sent out. Jesus says he saw Satan fall from heaven, but he goes on to say, "don't celebrate simply that the spirits

were subject to your power". Or to cast it in terms of our modern anxieties, don't celebrate or hanker after just the large offerings or the full worship halls, or the abundant people for the rosters. These are the things which distract us from what really matters. Celebrate Jesus says, that your names are written down in heaven. That is material enough for God to make use of you. We are here because God has brought us together and God will use us to his good purposes. May we embrace this with faith that we might be free of our churchly anxieties and focus on things which really matter. By the grace of God. Amen.