



Reaping or sleeping?

Luke 10:1-12 & 16-20

The story is told of a shoe salesman who was sent to West Africa in the early years of the twentieth century to see what the prospect of business was. He was disappointed when he saw the throngs of people wandering around without shoes. He cabled back not to bother as there was no market. The company just couldn't believe it and sent their top salesman. He looked around and was thrilled and cabled back "seen as much stock as possible - massive market potential!"

Two salesmen, one market. One was a glass half empty man who could only see the problems, the other was a glass half full man who could see the potential of the situation. This evening's message is about seeing and realising the potential for harvest in the place God has put us in.

Originally I was going to give you a sermon on this passage. But as I prepared it, it grew like Topsy. So what you're going to end up with this evening, is my first point! The rest is a great scripture you can study at your leisure. So here's the verses I'm going to look at: *10:1 After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. 2 He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*

We have lived in Norfolk for five years in a market town where the main local industry is agriculture. At this time you can't avoid the tractors and combine harvesters as they block the A47 and jam up the local lanes. It's late summer.

Recently we have had the benefit of the lovely local smells. One big estate has decided to muck spread all its fields near town. There's been no rain so we have had the experience of the lovely smells of chicken manure wafting over town both day and night - and they say that air pollution in towns is awful.

Actually you get to recognise the difference between country smells - chicken manure is quite distinctive to pig manure. That said, most of our local farming is arable so we see how the fields change to mark the season.

And there's a cycle to the seasons. The farmers are preparing the ground right now (which is why they are muck spreading) to plant winter wheat later this month to give it time to germinate and gain some growth before winter sets in. This means it will get maximum growth early next year which will maximise the yield next year.

Why do I tell you all this? For this reason. God has ordered creation so that everything has its time. You sow the seed, you encourage the growth and then you reap the harvest. You can't reap where you haven't sown. You shouldn't neglect your crop whilst it's growing. And you won't get the yield unless you reap it.

Simple really. Jesus refers to the cycles of creation a lot in His parables - because it reflects on the basic principles of life. And bringing people to Christ recognises that cycle - seed needs to be sown, the crop encouraged and then reaped. They need to have seeds of life planted, they need to grow before the spiritual harvest comes.

Jesus sends out these 72 (seventy in some versions) to gather a spiritual harvest. He had commissioned the twelve to do in an earlier chapter. Right at the foundation of the commission was being expectant for the harvest.

An Expectant People

William Carey once said Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God.

And the first thing Jesus said before sending them is "there's a plentiful harvest". What plentiful harvest you ask when we consider our own land? When we look at the Church census figures it always seems depressing. Here's a few for you:

1979 5.4 million 12%

1989 4.7 million 10%

1998 3.7 million 7.5%

2005 3.2 million 6.3%

Depressing isn't it. These are figures just for attendance once a fortnight. Just in the last 7 years, people have been leaving church at a rate of about 2500 per week - apart from those who have died. Why? Christian Research gives the following reasons:

1. Drastic loss of young people in the 1990s
2. Increase in Sunday Trading
3. Attraction of alternative activities
4. Changing patterns of family & family life
5. Lack of relevance of church to life

The fifth reason perhaps covers the reasons 1-4. People just don't see that what we have is of any relevance of importance to them. Their time would be better spent getting up late and going to a car boot sale or spend time with the family. What has Christian faith got to offer them?

But that's not the story in the rest of the world. The church is growing rapidly in many parts of the world. Forget the rampant growth of extreme Islam - it's the Christian faith is the one that's growing and making a difference. And that's what you'd expect of a powerful God and an expectant church that is determined to do great things for God.

Remember our opening readings and song. we magnified a God who is powerful. And the church in this land needs to rediscover the power and glory of a God in this generation here in Britain.

But the picture is not all gloom because in London things are happening – particularly in churches made up of people from some of the lands we have just considered. And Jesus said - the harvest is plentiful - the workers few.

What are your expectations? Someone once said "He who expects nothing is never disappointed".

"Expect great things from God - do great things for God."

So what should our expectations for Birchington be? To expect great things from God. That's one thing but what's the other part of Carey's quote – attempt great things. There's a doing bit – Jesus commands us to go into the harvest field. He said Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Jesus calls His disciples to go and calls on them to ask God for more.

I come from a background that is very evangelical. I have always been a member of churches that have shared evangelical belief. Most evangelicals pride themselves in how sound they are in doctrine. But in the last 30 years, the only sound we have been is sound asleep – and the enemy has taken ground from us. There's a hymn by Graham Kendrick which I don't think you know called Your mercy flows. One of the verses reflects this thought

*As we have slept, this nation has been taken
By every sin ever known to man;
So at its gates, though burnt by fire and broken,
In Jesus' name we come to take our stand.*

We found out earlier that the world has changed. Society has changed. We need to find out how to sow in a world where people know nothing of Jesus, where they don't think church is relevant, where they won't come into our buildings, where the children prefer to do other things on a Sunday. We need to learn anew how to reach out with the unchanging gospel.

I said earlier that everything has its cycle: sowing, nurture reaping. The harvest is still there to be reaped. Other people are doing it. We need to learn how to sow ,nurture and reap the gospel in new ways. Information abounds. Luke 10 gives you the principles. All we have to do is GO. And be expectant.

And we as we go forward in faith, trusting God. And what happened to the 72 when they went expectantly in obedience to Jesus – they came back amazed and rejoicing at what God had done in their lives.

"Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name."

Let's be encouraged and be expectant. Reaping not sleeping.

Prayer.

Birchington Baptist Church 16/9/2007

