



4. A Passion for the Harvest

(Luke 10:1-12, 17)

Why is it that the harvest seems to be coming in so many places in the world but just not here? I guess in truth I'd say the reasons are quite complicated why things have declined so much and we can point in different directions.

It's true that there was a decline throughout the twentieth century, but the massive decline occurred after 1960 and accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s

I know that many of you reminisce and say how things were so much better years ago. I can remember myself how so many people went to church even in the late 60s and early 1970s. If you were to go back into the 1950s, it was quite a golden age for the church just after the war and I'm sure we can point to great times such as Billy Graham at Harringay in 1954 or for that matter I can remember him coming in 1966 too.

So who is responsible for the decline? The reasons for the decline are complicated but in a sense we are. Or at least our generation is, because we were there and the responsibility for decline falls on us, however personally responsible we may feel for it. The decline occurred on our watch. As the church now it's our responsibility to deal with this situation too and I believe that it starts with our recognition of that responsibility and our repentance. I'll deal more with that this evening.

As I suggested last week, part of the problem is that people see us as irrelevant. However we feel about how relevant the gospel is to us, if we can't, don't or won't communicate that message, then how will they know?

The main problem that we face today as we consider the world, or at least our corner of it here in Swaffham is that we have the wrong perception. God sees it one way, we see it another. "Norfolk? Nothing happens here. It's the graveyard of preachers. Don't expect much to happen here in rural Norfolk. Nothing has happened in generations except church closures." It has been said:

Those who expects nothing will never be disappointed.

Expect little to happen in Norfolk and little will happen. There is nothing weaker than a demoralised army.

So what is God's expectation for Norfolk? Let's read from Luke chapter 10

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. 3 Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. 4 Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road. 5 "When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' 6 If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. 7 Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house. 8 "When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. 9 Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of

God is near you.' 10 But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, 11 ` Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near.' 12 I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.

16 "He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me." 17 The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name."

For me, this has been one of my most formative passages in recent years. It's about mission and the huge impact that the sending of the 72, or in other translations, 70 (what's two between friends?). Jesus sends these disciples out. Have a look at what He says:

Expectant

The harvest is plentiful

The harvest is plentiful but the workers few. That's my experience as a newcomer to Norfolk. 95% of people, probably more don't go to church and seem apathetic. It's easy to feel that we have been pushed out into a desert - a hard place. But look again because it's all a question of perspective.. The story is told of a British shoe company that wanted to explore possibilities of exporting to West Africa in about the middle of the last century. They sent a salesman out there to explore possibilities. But as he arrived he looked at people's feet, and saw they wore no shoes. Dejectedly he contacted London. 'There are few marketing opportunities here.' The Managing Director seemed concerned because that's not what he'd heard. So he sent out another salesman. As he arrived he looked at people's feet, and saw they wore no shoes. He quickly cabled London. "Send out all available shoes - there's a massive need!"

If only 5% of people regularly attend church then the other 95% don't so they need Jesus! We live in a society where people know little about Christ. Does that make them impermeable, or do we have a generation of people that haven't been put off by the church? We have a whole generation of people that know nothing of Jesus and His life-transforming power. Explain the good news to them and they'll be quite surprised. The harvest is plentiful, but the workers few.

Expectation. What is your expectation of what God is doing or can do in Swaffham and the surrounding areas? What can God do? Look at Brazil, Argentina, Uganda, Ghana, South Africa and the like and see the huge move of the Spirit in these places. That's what God can do. That's not something that's in our past - it's in our future. Perhaps one of our biggest tasks as a church to change our expectation to expect a harvest and not a drought! Have that expectation and pray this: Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.

Streetwise

Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves

Feeling fired up? Good, because now you get the next point. Do you know how tasty lambs are to wolves. No-one has said that reaping the harvest was going to be that simple. Go! And beware you're going to get eaten if you're not careful. We are called as a people to be streetwise. We are called to know the environment in which we are working. If you remember Hill Street Blues, the Sergeant always said after his morning briefing "Hey, be careful out there". Know your town, know your people, know their needs, but also remember that there is plenty out there that will devour us, be that people we are trying to reach or satan who doesn't want us to reach people. One of the biggest problems in the past has been that Christians have come to grief because they

are scratching where it doesn't itch - which is a pity when you're scratching a wolf's backside!

Focused

Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road

Be focused in your task. Don't carry your baggage with you and don't be diverted. We are called to be a missionary people. The last words of Jesus were missionary words - Go. The trouble is that so often we become preoccupied with other things. You don't reach people for Christ by being preoccupied with buildings, by being preoccupied with arguing doctrinal points, being preoccupied with church affairs. Generally being preoccupied with things that maintain our churches. We're preoccupied with our baggage, we pass the time at meetings and fellowship evenings. Worse, we are preoccupied with "worship". And missions? The keenies do that now and again. We are called - commanded - to be Christ's witnesses. All of us. It's funny how we mostly don't obey it. We've been waylaid in the street.

We're called to be witnesses. That's the mission of the church. Do you want to obey Christ? Is it your desire to please Him - then obey His commands.

So here are the disciples they are off into the villages and they become travelling preachers and it was quite normal in those days for visiting preachers to be honoured by having a welcome and accommodation whilst they were in the town or village.

How did they actually reach people?

Friendship

5 "When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' 6 If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you.

We want to reach people in our towns and villages? Good. How do we do that? Hold meetings? Door to door? Open airs? They are good and all have their place. But we saw last week that most people become Christians because a friend or family member introduced them to Christ? The next members of your church are the people you live next door to, the ones you work with, close members of your family, people you meet socially.

Or people that come to things at your church - mother & toddler, children's clubs, youth work, and the like. What I find remarkable is that so often churches provide these "services" but have forgotten why.

But look at this verse. The disciples went to them. They met the people where they are and in their need. Friendship is the basic principle of all witnessing. And most of you already have those friends - people who live next door and or who you meet socially.

5 "When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' 6 If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you.

Let's be people that pray peace on people's houses. Perhaps that's where you should start with your neighbours - by praying peace on their houses and that you will have opportunities to speak peace to them. If you've ever been involved in a Lighthouse of Prayer program you would have probably started here. Prayer is the most important element because it's the Holy Spirit that converts people - so pray peace on those

people you know. The journey that most people make towards accepting Jesus starts with someone who started praying for them.

If you care about those who are without Christ, then you'll start to pray. pray seriously, pray urgently - have a passion for them as Christ had a passion for you. It's the foundation of the disciple's mission in Luke 10. - pray peace on their houses.

⇒ *Getting alongside*

7 Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house. 8 "When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you.

This point answers that question why. as we make friends, we come alongside. In the olden days, what we did was get people into our churches and then preached at them. I guess most of us still do. That's a good reason for most people to give it a miss. As we make friends, we come alongside them as friends. There's no concept of preaching in these verses I just read. The disciple was to get to know and accept the friendship of people they were with.

Too often non- Christians are "targets". Let's see them as God sees them - desiring our friendship because we are us. Let's make genuine friendships and accept people as our friends. Too often, the only people Christians get close to are other Christians because we don't desire the company and friendships of non-Christians. Yet God desires their company, doesn't He?

If we want to see the harvest reaped, I believe we need to get out of our exclusiveness and get alongside people in friendship and love and that love must be genuine as Christ's love always was for us. Let me say that most people spot insincerity a mile off - so let your love be genuine.

⇒ *Meeting felt needs*

9 Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ' The kingdom of God is near you.'

Matthew adds drive out demons to this. The disciples met felt needs. In fact, people's attitudes are different when they see the presence and power of God in their lives. A good start point is always pray for people (preferably with their knowledge) and if we can help we should - which we would do anyway out of friendship. Do you want to witness effectively? Then do as a friend does and meet their felt needs.

It does not need any complex scheme to show friendship. It could just be helping people with little things - many of you do anyway. It could be helping with bigger things and giving support. Pray for their healing maybe.

We live in a world where people look after number one. A mark of genuine friendship and love is just by showing people help, sympathy, care, acceptance. That opens a door to meeting their real need - Jesus.

⇒ *Proclaiming the Kingdom*

As we meet them in their needs we are able to share Christ with them. They healed the sick and then shared the message of the Kingdom. It's a basic principle of evangelism. It's why over the years that churches have social outreach. Unfortunately the problem is that sometimes those programs take a life of their own. We meet people's felt needs but we do't share their real need. The bottom line is, that we are here to proclaim the kingdom to meet the people's real need

Failure in the witness of churches comes because they short circuit the Luke 10 process. You can't do anything without prayer. Then try evangelism without friendship. The secret of all good evangelism is to show genuine friendship to people, whether that was in the sort of thing we did last week or whether it's door to door or whatever. That becomes even more potent when you try to share Jesus with a close friend.

Try making friends without ever praying for them as in Luke 10. You'll never get anywhere with them sharing Christ. We've short-circuited Luke 10.

We start with prayer, we open up our hearts in friendship which means addressing their felt needs as friends do and then meeting their real needs - sharing Jesus. In all this we let the Holy Spirit do His work. We are the conduit through which the wind of the Holy Spirit blows.

⇒ *Having God's perspective*

10 But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, 11 'Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near.' 12 I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.

16 "He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me."

How long do you persevere with people who are difficult or with situations that are difficult? The message to the disciples were clear, if you're not welcome, walk on and shake the dust of your feet and leave people with a warning. God's perspective is that when people reject Christ, they reject Him, not us.

Another piece of perspective we need to recover apart from our expectations is that sometimes we need to be prepared to move from our normal constituency to where the harvest actually is. We need to be prepared to see new ways by which we can harvest to crop.

Let's see this with God's perspective. There is a massive ripe crop in our towns and villages - people moving and re-evaluating life, people in crises who need a deliverer, people who are sick and need a healer, families in turmoil that need a peacemaker, lonely people that need a friend, older people who to be brought hope, people who are weak or have failed and need an encourager or people caught in addiction who need a deliverer.

And Jesus fits the bill - and they are waiting for that touch of the Holy Spirit. The only thing is that someone needs to bring them that message of hope, forgiveness, salvation, freedom. And that's you and me. And what are we doing? There is a massive crop out there to be harvested and by the grace of God it is ready to be brought in. Let's look afresh at the gifts God has given us to see how we can harvest more of the crop.

That's the challenge. The people there in our families and our neighbourhoods waiting to be prayed for, waiting to be loved, waiting for our friendship - waiting for Jesus. Now it's over to us to commit ourselves afresh.