

Our passage from Luke this evening is very short, only 8 verses and none of those particularly long. While short it may be, it is packed with meaning. So let me get right to it.

I suspect if I were to ask you what does the twelve mean, you would likely respond, Jesus' disciples. You would be partially wrong. They were disciples, but the twelve were chosen from among a much larger body of disciples to become the Apostles – the special messengers to be focused particularly on carrying the message after the resurrection and ascension that Jesus knows are coming. In Luke, chapter 6 verse 13: *When day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them whom he also named apostles.* You will remember that 12 as a number first became significant in the 12 sons of Jacob who became the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel.

At the beginning of chapter 10 from which our reading comes the first verse: *...the lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.* There are many reasons for the number 70. In Exodus 24, God requires 70 elders of Israel to come near the mountain, but only Moses is to ascend to God. There were 70 ordinary members of the Sanhedrin plus the Presiding Officer usually the Chief Priest. There were 70 translators who worked over several centuries to translate the Hebrew Scripture into Greek; hence it is known as the Septuagint. Jesus told us that we must forgive not 7 times, but seventy times 7. Jesus appointed the 70 because as I said in church on Sunday, Jesus knew his time was short.

He looked to the 70 to extend his reach. In his original commission from the beginning of chapter 10, Jesus used the image of a farmer contemplating the harvest that is plentiful, but the labourers are few. The 70 were commissioned to allow Jesus to bring in as much of the harvest in as possible in the limited time remaining to him. The shadow of the cross was becoming ever darker.

One major difference between the commission Jesus gave them and the result is important. In verse 8 of Chapter 10: *Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’* There is no mention of power over demons. But the 70 return saying to Jesus ...*saying, Lord in your name even the demons submit to us.*

Thus Jesus welcomes the return of the 70: *I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you.*

So the mission of the 70 has been more powerful than even Jesus anticipated. He continues: *Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.* In other words, Jesus gave them the power to do good, but they are anonymous on earth. Their names are known in heaven, so their salvation is assured without many dangers on earth. Their names are written in heaven, but nothing will hurt them on earth unlike the 12 post-resurrection apostles. Only John the son of Zebedee was not executed.

Jesus goes on to warn them of the danger of pride and ego in what they were able to accomplish with the power Jesus gave them. Although Luke records the 70 attributing their success to Jesus name. Salvation is the prize; pride and ego are the curse. Jesus models the behaviour in that he attributes everything to the Father not to himself.

Those of you who were with us last week will recall that I said, “But God and his Son do not choose the obvious” while referring to any number of characters out the Bible including the Apostles. In our passage, Jesus takes up the theme. He thanks God: *“I thank you, Father Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants....* He continues, Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them: *“Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see but did not see it and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”* Once again Jesus does not choose disciples whose learning and status make them obvious candidates.

Interestingly our passage is immediately followed by the parable of the Good Samaritan. I hardly need remind you that it illustrates one who is among the group held most in contempt by Judeans and of whom the least is expected is the stopping to aid and serve a stranger. At the same time a priest and a Levite pass the poor injured traveller on the other side. Again it is not the religious dignitaries who embody selfless service. It is the outcast who shows meaningful compassion. Once again it is an unlikely one who models the behaviour of the Kingdom of Heaven.

So where are we in all this? Are we the likely or the unlikely? What it will take to have us say here I am, send me? If we are among the likely, what will our reaction be when the unlikely receive the call? How much courage do we have? How much comfort must we have? What can we not bear to give up? What is our reaction when faith leads to discomfort. What are the chances we would even hear a call? These are all question we have reason to contemplate in our own times of reflection and prayer. These questions are highly personal. The answers may not come easily nor quickly, and they may change. The answers are neither formulaic nor simple, but discerning them may be our salvation. Remember God never calls anyone without giving them the strength to meet the call. Amen