

1st Sunday after Trinity

Now I know that Angela and I always seem to be going on about telling others about God, Jesus, The Good News, church etc. there are many good reasons for this and today's readings are one of the main reasons why. It's not about 'bums on pews' nor is it about 'collection plate takings' (though Cyril may have something to say about that) nor do we get assessed on 'conversions to the cause'; it is because we are told to – by Jesus – and I am not about to start ignoring him.

As you should know by now I am not someone to do something just because it is written down; I need to know what is behind it, I need to ask the questions and I have always encouraged you to do the same thing. Now let's assume for a while that Jesus knows what he is talking about – (anyone want to argue that point?) – and that if he tells us to do something that there is probably a very good reason for him to do so and, if you are a trouble causer like me, and need some background information as to why Jesus telling us to do something, then looking at these readings may well give you some pointers. Let's see what these readings reveal?

Let's start with the Old Testament reading. The children of Israel have escaped their enslavers and reached the mountain where Moses first encountered God (Sinai is likely another name for Horeb) and where they would soon receive the Ten Commandments. Here God reminds Moses and Israel what he has done for them and tells them their destiny; **you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.** Nice eh! The whole nation were to be holy priests! Sadly, as always happens, they heard the 'You are special' bit but completely ignored the 'This comes with a responsibility' bit. Sheesh, who'd have thought, human beings not listening!

God had told them that '**The whole earth is mine**' before he mentioned the business of being priestly and holy and surely if you are being priests then you are doing so **ON BEHALF OF OTHERS!** Does it not follow then that the children of Israel were meant to be the priests for the rest of the world? They were meant to be the ones to tend the rest of humanity; shame that they got stuck on the whole 'chosen people' thing and forgot what they were chosen for!

Which brings us to the New Testament and today's Gospel from Matthew. Now Matthew wrote his Gospel for us all but with a particular emphasis on his Jewish readers. To that end he would phrase things in a way that would resonate with those who were raised and knew the Jewish scriptures. This requires us to tune our own reading glasses and see just what he was getting at.

Jesus has been teaching his new disciples for a short while and they have seen and heard all that he has been doing in the countryside and towns. They have heard the Good News of God's love and seen what God's kingdom is intended to bring – healing, wholeness of life and soul. They have seen Jesus reach out to the lost and the fallen and heard him challenge the false piety of some of the religious groups. Now comes the next step.

Jesus knows that the people are in need of leadership and guidance, he describes them as 'like sheep without a shepherd'. It is a well to point out here that the idea of the people being sheep and the priests being the shepherds is a very old one going back hundreds of years before Jesus himself. What Jesus is saying here is that the established priesthood have let the people down and left them helpless in the face of what the world throws at them. How can people be expected to know about a God that cares about even the lowest of the low if the ones who are supposed to be telling them are more concerned about their own personal piety?

There is much to do, a harvest of people to bring in, and so he sets about sending out the first of the labourers, the twelve disciples. Those twelve have specific instructions: As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near."

Now is a good time to remind you of the significance of the number 12 in Jewish understanding. Twelve is the number of tribes of Israel, it is the whole country, it is an inclusive number, leaving no one out. The twelve disciples represent the first in a new Israel, The Church, but one that still has the same purpose - **you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.**

Some of the readers amongst you will be saying something like – 'aha! Wait a minute, didn't Jesus just send the twelve to the Jewish people though, gave them specific instructions not to go anywhere else?' – well yes he did, because that is where his church was to grow from; God has never forgotten his promise even if the children of Israel had forgotten their part in return. God's message was always meant to begin here **but it was never meant to stay there!**

We are the torch bearers of God's message in this place and in this generation. The generations of Christians before us have been faithful in their role to a greater and lesser degree but they have never failed in their responsibility in passing that torch on. Someone or perhaps a number of someones have, at some point, told you about God's love – well now it is our turn.

We are God's priestly kingdom and holy nation – one that spans countries, borders, genders and race and yes, even our slightly different ways of worshipping; and we are here to bring that message to **the whole earth.** The disciples began with people they had things in common with before they took that message to the ends of their known world. We too can do the same thing – witness to God's love in the world to those you have something in common with. Not because you have to, not because I am telling you to, not even (though it is a good enough reason for me these days) because Jesus is telling us to, but because it is what the world needs and it is what the people we care about need whether they realise it or not.

They are still sheep without shepherds and the harvest still needs workers to bring it in and we are still sent out into the world.