

Sunday July 11, 2021

## 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

### Parishioner Reflection

*By: Edel Reid*

Today's Gospel from the 6th chapter of St. Mark, is a straightforward account of Jesus giving simple, albeit detailed, instructions to his closest disciples (the twelve apostles) as to how they should carry out His Mission and spread the Good News; instructions that appear to be highly culture- and time-specific. We might be tempted to think that these instructions were for the apostles exclusively; but does all this talk about a 'staff', 'sandals', 'dust', and 'demons' have relevance to us today? Might these practical instructions given by Jesus to his closest friends be adapted and prove invaluable in our own lives in very concrete ways? As with everything Jesus ever said, since He is both God and Man and knew all things, past, present and future, His words in the gospel were meant for then and for all time.

By way of background, we are at an interesting point in Jesus' ministry when He sends the twelve out on their inaugural evangelical mission. Jesus had spent a lot of time travelling with his apostles - preaching, performing cures, and driving out demons. It was going well until he arrived in Nazareth and there he hit a roadblock. His mission in Nazareth was, as one scholar has described it, an abject "failure". Of course Jesus knew it would be. Jesus made sure that this fact didn't escape his apostles; in fact he emphasized the lack of faith in his hometown in verses just prior to this passage. The rejection didn't deter Jesus; he didn't insist anyone listen or believe, but he did continue "among the villages, teaching", thereby showing the apostles by His example what to do in the face of apparent failure.

Knowing human nature as well as he did, Jesus sends the apostles out "two by two". The word apostle comes from the Greek word "apóstolos" which means "one who is sent off". We can all think of very obvious advantages to being in a twosome, in terms of psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical support for each other, etc. Two heads are better than one! But then there are less obvious lessons – for instance, as one scholar pointed out – unity. This twosome demonstrates a unity that should be apparent in the ranks of those who carry Jesus' message out to the world. Some commentators even reflect on this and on the powerful witness of married couples in the lives of our parishes. John's gospel says: "As the Father

sent me, so I'm sending you". There's a continuum there, a unity, a chain of unbroken authority. Let's ask ourselves: are we unified in faith when we bring our message of hope to our neighbour? Are we united in Christ? Are we united in our Holy and Apostolic Church? Or are we striking out on our own, doing our own thing, making it all about us?

Jesus gave the twelve "authority over unclean spirits" so they could prove to their audience the authenticity of the message they were preaching. This authority was not the result of some wellspring of faith in the apostles themselves, it came directly from Jesus. Here maybe ask ourselves: What are my specific demons? How can I allow the authority of Jesus to come into my head and heart each day to drive them away. Is there someone else who is an instrument in God's hands that can help me? Am I an instrument that can help a neighbour with their demons?

The instruction to take a staff - walking stick – has contemporary implications too. Staffs were more prevalent in Jesus' day simply because the terrain was uneven and hilly, and the staff was something to lean on. So, let's ask: what exactly do we lean on when we're going about our daily activities? Is it the teachings of Jesus or are we employing another crutch?

I read recently that the instruction to take "no food, no sack, no money", today might be "take no Tim's coffee (in your travel mug), no cell phone, no debit card!" Saints Aquinas, Augustine, and Bede have all written about the symbolism of these items. The sack represents the concerns and worries of the world, food represents "earthly delights" and money in the belt represents "wisdom kept hidden". Is Jesus telling us here to let go of all our baggage, to travel light, be less sophisticated, and – rather than worry about all the physical and financial resources necessary to carry out our mission – trust completely in Divine Providence?

"Whatever place does not welcome you or listen to you, leave there and shake the dust off your feet...". This is a very powerful message. In researching for this reflection, I discovered the origin of this custom and what it would have meant in Jesus' time to his audience. When a Jewish person was travelling from a pagan land back to the Holy Land, just prior to entering the Holy Land, he would shake his sandals out in order to remove all the dust in them that may have collected when he walked on the pagan roads. This was a physical manifestation of a spiritual gesture – the dust from the pagan land was regarded as "impure or unclean", and observant Jews did not want to have anything impure come into contact with the Holy Land to contaminate it. Such was the deep divide between the Jews and pagans or gentiles. The apostles on their mission were not to waste their time preaching to people who did not want to hear the message; in fact, they were to "move on" in a very obvious

and symbolic way. They were to distance themselves from those who were not receptive to the teachings of Jesus. Here, ask ourselves, do we contaminate our faith by wasting our time arguing with people about our faith? Do we spend time trying to impress upon others how much we know, in an effort to brow beat them into coming around to the faith?

In conclusion, the lifestyle and disposition of the evangelist or missionary is key to the success of the mission. Jesus' instructions are simple and practical. We can take it that the apostles followed Jesus' advice to a tee, and as a result "They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them". Our mission is simple too; follow Jesus' advice and we will succeed despite temporary set-backs. Don't spend valuable time arguing with people and trying to persuade them of the truth of the gospel, because there may be someone down the road who is in more need of your time. As Fr. Frank gently reminded us in his sermon recently, "the liturgy is caught, not taught". One doesn't necessarily have to talk about one's faith: just live it; help others afflicted with their demons; tend the sick in our society.

Most of us won't live our lives writ large on the world's evangelical stage as many of the saints did. However, the advice of St. Francis of Assisi to "preach the gospel at all times, use words if necessary", or the exhortation of St. Theresa of Calcutta "don't worry about doing great things; do small things with great love" should give us a clue as to how we can carry out our own unique, consequential, and powerful mission. Let's put one foot in front of the other with confidence – we are never walking alone if we unite ourselves to Jesus' message.

Sources used for this reflection include: Dr. Brant Pitre, Msgr. J. Cla Dias, St. Thomas Aquinas, Abbot Duquesne, St. Bede, The Word Among Us, SacredSpace.ie, Fr. F. V. McDevitt.