

The Joy of the Lord's Messengers

Sermon · 24 July 2022

If you rewind and walk back through your life, you will be surprised to recall how many times you rushed back home to give your family some glad tidings. When I read the title of today's theme for meditation, the first thought that struck me was about my school days. When the school football team won the inter-school tournament, and the moment the last winning goal went in, someone or the other would be cycling back to school to break the good news to the students and teachers anxiously waiting to hear about it.

Incidentally, when we think of the followers of Jesus, we think of the twelve apostles, but there were more. Today's passage from the Gospel according to Luke speaks of the seventy whom Jesus sent out on His mission. This was a kind of "internship," a training time while Jesus was still with them. The mission was the same as Christ's own ministry: to "heal the sick that are therein, and say unto them, The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you" (Luke 10:9), sent "before his face into every city and place, whither he himself would come" (Luke 10:1). On their return, Luke tells us, "the seventy returned again with joy, saying, Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name" (Luke 10:17).

Let us go back to the day Jesus was born into this world. The angels proclaimed the Good News. When they did that, the heavens broke into euphoria and the shepherds could hear the heavenly music of joy. This great joy that the angels proclaimed so long ago changed everything about life, and it can still transform our lives today. During the Christmas season much is said about this great joy that was proclaimed to the shepherds. However, this great joy includes infinitely more than what is usually spoken about. People only speak about Jesus' birth and that He came to forgive us our sins.

The greater joy that the messengers of God, the angels, brought for us is that we can be transformed into the image of Jesus, and be transported from glory to glory (2 Corinthians 3:18). We can be transformed from having a carnal mind to receiving the mind of Christ, filled with love and goodness. Before, our mind was one with our sinful and impure nature; now our mind is one with the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust (2 Peter 1:4). Sin may produce pleasure, but being of the mind of Jesus produces an eternal, unshakable joy in being redeemed from all these sins and walking in the new life and virtues of Christ. It is this joyous message we want to hear; it is this joyous message we need to proclaim to the world, as messengers of Jesus Christ.

The glad tidings that we need to bring to others are that we can be set free entirely from the slavery of sin, and that we can serve God fully liberated and with joy and thankfulness in sincere fellowship with the host of saints — I mean other believers — who are also being cleansed and purified and made ready for Christ's imminent return!

"The harvest truly is great" is as true today as it was in Jesus' time (Luke 10:2). Sadly, if we put out a questionnaire asking about religious affiliation in a group of people today, those who opt for "none" are on the rise. Church attendance is down, and church from home seems to be the new norm. One of the characteristics of today's so-called "postmodernism" is that people come up with their own religious views, tweaked to suit their circumstances with much disregard for the Scriptures. As messengers of Christ, it is our religious mission to correct them and bring them the joy of the Good News.

As is typical of many people today, there is a narrative often retold about a young nurse whom the sociologist Robert N. Bellah, in *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985), gave the pseudonym "Sheila." Sheila said, "I believe in God. But I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way." She called her own faith "Sheilaism" — "just my own little voice." As she put it, "It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself ... I think God would want us to take care of each other."

"Sheilaism" is shorthand for that kind of religiosity, a rather do-it-yourself, well-meaning mish-mash of religious views, often drawn from the strands of many religions. Those are some of the people to whom Jesus is sending us out today. Jesus warned the seventy to expect resistance and rejection, and it is the same today. More Christians face persecution for their faith today, in raw

numbers, than has been recorded at any earlier point, according to persecution-monitoring bodies such as Open Doors; whether this can fairly be called more than at any other time in human history, including the Roman persecutions of the first century, is difficult to establish with certainty, given the world's much larger population today and the limits of the historical record. If not persecution, we might meet "Sheilatism" or other mixed-up views. Or we might meet with indifference from many in our increasingly secular society. I remember a friend who quit going to church, saying, "I don't need all that anymore."

Notice how Jesus tells the seventy He sent out what they should do and what to expect. He did not say anything about measuring their success. If people don't accept your message, He says, shake the dust off your feet and move on. We don't have the yardstick to measure. We are to leave it to Jesus, and trust Him enough to know that He will measure righteously. However, in our present-day congregations, it is difficult to avoid measuring our success in a worldly manner. We live with membership numbers, giving levels, budgets, annual reports, and so on. I am not accusing the Secretaries, Treasurers, Presidents and conveners, present and past — I myself was one of them and did exactly all that they do now. The point I am making is that it is very easy to measure our work by these figures and statistics, and that is how many people will measure our ministry, but that is contrary to what Christ would want us to do.

No wonder those who compiled the lectionary decided to keep verses 12 to 16 out of today's Gospel reading. The teachings of the omitted verses concern judgment and punishment — matters the compilers may have thought were not our immediate business. Verse 16 echoes this (Luke 10:16). The ministry and the message we bring are indeed the ministry and message Jesus was doing. What we do and say is about Him and from Him. Did you hear a note of surprise in the report the seventy brought back to Jesus? It was because they did not know or expect what would happen. We too would joyfully encounter surprises if we conduct our ministry the way Jesus wants us to. However, we are not to rejoice about our success in our various ministries, but to rejoice "that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20), that is, that we are part of this Kingdom of God which we proclaim.

Finally, I must say that we must often remind ourselves that we are carrying out the ministry of Jesus, for Jesus — the ministry He has given us to carry on joyfully. You see:

Christ has no body on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which the love and compassion of Christ looks out to the world.

Yours are the feet with which He goes about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which He blesses and heals others.