

Sermon: sheep, wolves, snakes, scorpions

Luke 10:1-20

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The church has turned to green again. We call this the 'normal' season. No special feasts for a few months, but just a focus on our normal Christian life. How to serve God in daily life

That should be our everyday question.

To please people is hard. But most of us do as much as we can to please the people around us. I heard a wise story this week about this.

An old father and his son went to the market with their donkey. The old man sat on the donkey, the son walked behind him. So people were upset and said, why does this bad old man sit while he lets his son walk?

So the father got off and let his son sit on the donkey. The next group of people was upset: look at that son, he lets his father walk!

So the son and the father decided to walk behind the donkey. And then people shouted at them, are you crazy, you have a donkey to sit on, why should both of you walk!

Whatever you do, you can never please all people. And we keep trying.

But as Christians, our primary goal should be to please God, so let people talk...

In 2 Cor 5:9 Paul says, "So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him."

How do we please him? I hope you forgive me that I cannot say all that can be said about this matter in these 15 minutes now, I will concentrate on some aspects that we learn from our Gospel reading of today.

1 Content of the message

Jesus sends 70 disciples out into the land to prepare for his visit to those villages and cities. So 70 people go, in pairs of two, all over the land.

The number seventy was to the Jews a very symbolic number. It was, for instance, the number of elders who were chosen to help Moses with the task of leading and directing the people in the wilderness. Does Jesus purposely compare himself with Moses?

It was also the number of members of the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of the Jews. Does Jesus present himself as the true leader of Israel?

The Jews also believed that there were 70 nations in the world. Luke, not a Jew but a gentile, had a world view and it may well be that he was thinking of the day when every nation in the world would know and love his Lord.

What was the message of these 70?

They had to announce peace, shalom, to every home where they came. That was not just a greeting like 'hi'. It really meant the peace of God. That is at the heart of the Good News.

God offers peace to this world. He wants each of us to be reconciled, in a relation of peace with him. Our first act of service to God, is to receive this peace with God. And then to become a peace maker. This is how we please God.

Our Christian service to God is not a political program or the offer of a cultural alternative. It implies the spreading of peace, 'infecting' others with a desire to love, peace and joy. We are called to infect others with God's peace. So as Christians we please God by spreading this good news. Peace be with you. God be with you.

The message of the 70 was also that the Kingdom of God was near. If people think that God is far away, if they just cannot imagine that there is a God, if people have given up on God, we have a good message. God is near. He is not far. He can be found.

How can he be found? Well, the 70 disciples were sent to the cities to prepare the people for the visit of Jesus. The Kingdom was near because Jesus was coming. God is not far because we can meet him in Jesus. Jesus himself is the Christian message. Not a theology, not all sorts of religious ideas. Jesus is the message, because when He is around, God is there.

That is good news!

So to spread this great news, that is what God wants us all to do. Surely, there are so-called 'professionals', like those 70 disciples. But they were farmers, fishermen, teachers,

students, government officials, all sorts of people who had been attracted by Jesus and after having listened to him for a while, he was able to use them for his kingdom.

As He can use each of you for his kingdom. For spreading peace. For talking about Jesus.

So open your mouth, speak about him.

2 Urgency of the message

But this is not so easy, is it? It is not.

Jesus told his 70 disciples that he was sending them as lambs among wolves. That is scary. How can sheep go to wolves?

We can, because the shepherd is with the sheep. He protects you; he cares for you; he holds you by the hand; he also gave his spirit as your helper.

If the good shepherd commands his sheep to go here or there, we may trust him to help us and protect us.

Christ wants to instill Christian bravery into his disciples; this is why he says, "I send you out", which leads St John Chrysostom to comment: "This is enough to give us encouragement, to give us confidence and to ensure that we are not afraid of those who may attack us", that is, of the wolves. (Hom. on St Matthew, 33).

We can be firmly assured, that they we are on a God-given mission. And with his commission, he promises to also take care of us.

As Christians, we are all called by God to be on this mission. And in this mission we need to have clear priorities. Therefore Jesus tells his disciples to not greet people on the way. Well, you know how people can greet each other in the Middle East. That is not just 'hi' and 'see you'. That is seriously time-consuming.

If we have a task given to us by God, we please him if we prioritize and not allow other things to distract us. Jesus' commandment to not greet people on the way simply meant, do not be distracted by good things, but make sure you do what is most important.

That is also why his disciples must not be worried about money, their bank account, not about their daily life. God takes care of us. His mission has priority and urgency. So worry not too much about what distracts you from serving God.

And we must certainly be very careful that the worry about providing temporal things for ourselves does not distract us from providing others with eternal things. We have good news and it is actually shameless if we keep it for ourselves.

3 CONSEQUENCE of the message

The good news also has a downside. There is another side of the coin. If people reject the peace that is offered to them, their home will not know this peace of God.

It is a terrible thing to reject God's invitation. There is a sense in which every promise of God that a man has ever heard can become his condemnation. If he receives these promises they are his greatest glory, but each one that he has rejected will some day be a witness against him.

Reject the message of Christ, and we we reject Christ himself. "The one who hears you, hears me", Jesus tells his disciples, "and the one who rejects you, rejects me; and the one who rejects me, rejects him who sent me." So to reject the Christian message means, to reject God the Father himself.

That was a pretty strong word in the context of Israel, where the Jews were sure they had God on their side. They had had all the privileges of God's covenant and having God's Word, but in many villages and cities Jesus and his disciples were rejected.

Jesus is very clear when he addresses those cities that rejected him. He could have mentioned dozens of others, but he picked just three, Chorazin, Betsaida, and Kapernaum. Before God, at the time of judgment, even Sodom, Tyre and Sidon will be punished more leniently.

Those gentile cities were prime examples of evil cities and the judgement over those cities is harsh and justified.

But those who have heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ and who have rejected it, will be held accountable. Being part of the people of God will not help at that day of judgment. We will be more strictly judged if we have more knowledge.

So, having grown up in church, in a christian environment will not help us a bit if we do not do what we have learned.

So the Gospel message is also a painful message - for those who do not accept it.

But it is also a tough message for the messengers. For those 70 disciples of Jesus. He sends them as lambs among wolves; he gives them authority to step on scorpions and snakes. Scorpions and snakes are symbols of evil powers in this world.

But does the fact that we have this authority mean that the process of pleasing our Lord will always be painless? That none will die? That the lambs are not eaten by the wolves?

I think this would misread these promises. Because we know that as Christians we do have to take risks in serving God. In some countries in this world it can mean prison, or even death. And by the time when Luke wrote his Gospel, many disciples had already died in the service of Jesus Christ.

The promise of the Good Shepherd for people who obey him, is that he cares for them. His promise is for people who act in accordance with the importance and the urgency of the Christian message of peace and salvation.

His promise that he cares for us is not a promise that we will have an easy life. And the promise that we can step on the evil forces in this world is not a promises that today all will be well for us.

The real promise is a promise about eternity. The last words of the Gospel reading were, 'rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

God is the one who holds us safe in his hands; he is with us all the days of our lives. And God commissions us all to serve him, in whatever work we do. And God gave us the treasure of the Gospel, to share with others

And he guarantees our eternal fate. So that we do not fear the wolves; and we do not fear the snakes and scorpions; because by our serving of God and by our life for him; by speaking about him, we are stronger than anything in this world. God is on our side forever.

Your names are written in heaven. That means, you are already present in heaven; your names represent who you are. Your name is written in the palm of the hand of God.

Conclusion

That is, of course, also part of our Gospel message. Obedience to and faith in Jesus Christ relates us eternally with God.

This Gospel can make us brave, daring. It is too good to not talk about with our friends and neighbors.

The message is important, as it is about eternal peace with God; and there is an urgency - people need it.

So let us be open and share what we have!

Amen