

Sunday 4th July

Stepping Out – Paul Day

Ezekiel 2:1-5, 2 Corinthians 12:2-10, Mark 6:1-13

Over the past few months many people have said to me how much they appreciate everything that has been done to keep people in touch with each other and to keep the church functioning over the whole lockdown period. Every time I hear this I respond by saying how it has all been a team effort.

Members of our congregations have stepped up to do all sorts of things. A team of people have been telephoning around each week to make sure folk are OK; another group have been delivering envelopes every week around the parish in all kinds of weathers; still others are opening the St James building, wiping down the pews and surfaces and making sure all is safe for prayer and worship. Without all these people and more we couldn't have done what we have done. Some of these volunteers have been heavily involved in church activities for many years, but others have stepped forward in new ways.

Last week we had our climate Sunday service in St James – put together by a team of people, each with a concern for the environment. And what was done together was much richer and more inspiring than what could have been done by one person alone.

Sometimes we find it hard putting ourselves forwards. We hold back. We make excuses as to why it shouldn't be me, but someone else. We ask questions like:

Have I got the skills to do this task?
Am I good enough?
Isn't there someone more suited?
What if I make a mess of it?
What will other people think?

Our gospel reading today marks a transformation in the life of Jesus' first disciples. It begins with the words "and his disciples followed him" but moves on to Jesus "sending them out two by two". They were transformed from being simply followers into being those given tasks and responsibility. They moved from being observers to being participants. And this transformation is a model of how discipleship develops.

We have spoken a lot in recent months about following Jesus – being a disciple - and what that means for us in our everyday lives. How it means learning more about Jesus, how it means understanding more of what he has done for us and how it means turning to him each day as our guide and inspiration.

What the gospel story tells us is that part of being a disciple is a willingness to take part, to be actively involved in some way. For us that is most likely expressed in doing something through our church.

Those first disciples were just ordinary people like us. They were a rag bag of fishermen, a tax collector, a political activist and more. They had no special academic training, they were not from privileged positions and yet they were the ones that Jesus entrusted his message to. I think Jesus knew that we tend to listen to people like us. If someone we can relate to tells us something or challenges us about something we are much more likely to listen .

The reading from 2 Corinthians perhaps needs a little explanation. The church in Corinth was one that Paul had founded, and yet we can see from what he writes in his letters that it had moved on in ways he hadn't anticipated and ways he didn't condone. There were now influencers who were all too ready to boast about themselves – their spiritual experiences, their visions, their words from God. So much so that the Corinthians looked at Paul and viewed him as inferior to these others.

The short excerpt we had today shows Paul refuting their claims. I could boast – he says – but I won't. I could tell you about things that God has shown me – but I won't. I could speak about wonderful experiences I have had – but I won't. He recalls what he calls "the thorn in his side" – something he had asked God to take away on several occasions, but God did not. The reason Paul won't boast is that he has come to know that God uses our weaknesses and our hardships, and it is through them that true strength is shown.

Elsewhere in the letter Paul says that "we have this treasure in clay jars". The gospel message – the ultimate treasure – is entrusted to us who are like clay jars, made of ordinary everyday stuff and easily chipped and broken. It is entrusted to ordinary people, not to those of status, wealth or renown. Just as Jesus entrusted his message to his motley band of disciples so the Christian message today is entrusted to people like you and me.

If we are serious about wanting the churches in Shirley to grow and thrive then its down to us to be the ones who are prepared to be sent out. To do the work. To get our hands dirty.

Teresa of Avila – a sixteenth century Spanish saint is reputed to have said "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

But the good news is that we are not expected to do this alone.

In the gospel we note that Jesus sent out the disciple in pairs. In the Acts of the Apostles we note that Peter and John were often together and that Paul always had companions with him – Barnabas, Mark, Silas, Luke and many others.

One of the strengths of the church is that – as we were reminded a few weeks back – we are a community, a family if you like, and we do things together. In our communion services we say “we are the body of Christ”; the prayers we use are “we” prayers, we say “Our Father”. We are in this together. We can support each other and help each other; we can encourage each other and inspire each other; we can rejoice with each other and weep with each other.

Setting out on a new task can, as we have seen, be daunting. How much better to set out with someone else alongside us. We as a church will aim to provide that support, that encouragement whenever someone starts on something new.

We should also recall that Jesus promised his followers that he would always be with them through his Spirit. That promise holds true for us as well. Jesus will be with us in all that we do – whether its something new or something we have done many times before.

As churches in Shirley Parish we are on the threshold of a new season. Today is the first Sunday since March last year when all 3 churches have been open for worship; we had our first messy Church in person for over a year last month and will be meeting together again in a couple of weeks; our Welcome café will be starting soon; Jimmy Tots is getting prepared for reopening in September; Open the Book will begin again after the summer break. And much more besides.

As these things start we will need people to be part of them. And those people could be you. We all have skills, we all have abilities, we all have time and we all have faith. Now may be the time to step forward and move from being a follower to be someone who is sent.