

Persons of no importance?

Evensong – St Bartholomew (24th August) - Canon Neil Patterson
Ecclesiasticus 39.1-10, Matthew 10.1-22

If I was better at planning ahead with my sermons, and had noticed that the choir who would be singing for us this evening were conducted by a good friend, I could have requested as tonight's anthem 'The Twelve,' William Walton's setting of verses composed for the purpose by W. H. Auden in 1965 for Christ Church, Oxford. But I didn't, and they might have said no, so I'd better read out the first part of his memorable tribute to the Twelve Apostles:

Without arms or charm of culture,
Persons of no importance
From an unimportant Province,
They did as the Spirit bid,
Went forth into a joyless world
Of swords and rhetoric
To bring it joy.

When they heard the Word, some demurred,
some mocked, some were shocked:
but many were stirred and Word spread.
Lives long dead were quickened to life;
the sick were healed by the Truth revealed;
released into peace from the gin of old sin,
men forgot themselves in the glory of the story
told by the Twelve.

Then the Dark Lord, adored by this world,
perceived the threat of the Light to his might.
From his throne he spoke to his own.
The loud crowd, the sedate engines of State,
were moved by his will to kill it.
It was done. One by one,
they were caught, tortured, and slain

Auden's words, so very much of the mid-20th century in style, still to me at any rate capture something of the strange and unsettling importance of the apostles listed in our second reading. This is true even as we reflected with Mel this morning that we know remarkably little about them as individuals, and how that stands testimony to the value of hidden service and witness.

Together, though, there is a sense as in our reading that these are, as the Te Deum sings, 'the glorious company of the Apostles.' After they are named, Jesus' charge sending them out undoubtedly has something of the epic about it. Their task is vast – to transform the world in his name; the calling austere – to do so with no needless equipment, trusting in God alone. The paradox of their situation springs from the paradox of the Gospel itself, that God's redemption is fully realised in Christ's death on the Cross. And this passage ultimately lies, I feel, behind every confirmation sermon and bishop's charge to those being ordained, and many a valedictory sermon or speech to school or cathedral choir. Go forth into the world, and bring it joy!

How does such a heroic charge make you feel? Stirred to action and ready to face the sins and corruptions of the world in purity of heart? Rather fearful and doubtful, but willing to give it a go? Or altogether alarmed, and ready, like Jonah, to run the other way? Clearly our response will reveal a lot about our own temperament and experience, and we all know that the first instinct may not be the most lasting or the most wise. But somehow the twelve disciples, so recently chosen by Jesus to join him in his ministry,

accepted both this charge to go out and proclaim the Gospel, and only a few years later, the still more daunting mission to proclaim his name to all the world after Pentecost.

So as we remember Bartholomew and the rest, this is a day to remember that the Christian story does not stop with Jesus's work of death, resurrection and ascension. As we said just now in the Creed, we believe in the Holy Spirit, that descended once for all time at Pentecost and lives still in the heart of every Christian, and we believe in the Holy Catholic Church that is founded on the apostles and through which we received the good news ourselves and belong still. To be clear, the meaning of 'catholic' in the Creed has nothing to do with catholic and protestant churches, or the sense in which some churches or services in the Church of England are said to be more or less catholic, meaning a certain style of worship. Rather it is the original sense of catholic meaning universal, the one Church of Christ that is united in him across time and place even as it is sadly divided by history and human sin.

That is the place of the apostles in the Christian story, a central and irreplaceable one that we celebrate on this feast of St Bartholomew. But we return to the question of what it might mean for each of us today. Maybe you are someone of naturally heroic disposition, and have always heard the call to dedicate yourself to service in the ringing terms of Jesus's charge? Or maybe you are, just now, at that point in life where there is a decision to be made or you are on the cusp of new opportunities, and the clear call to lay down everything and follow Christ without delay is exactly what you need to hear, welcome or not?

More likely, though, I suspect, you may not be feeling so dramatic today. The call to drop everything and go forth is more perplexing than anything else, if faced with the everyday struggle with work or money, or maintaining an important but challenging personal or professional relationship. And that is perhaps a reason to look to our first reading from Ecclesiasticus. The book of Ecclesiasticus, in the Apocrypha, is not to be confused with Ecclesiastes, in the canonical Hebrew Bible. The title just means 'church book' but it is also known as 'the Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach' as we know who the actual author was, a Jewish scribe of the 2nd century BC. And the passage we heard is very much a summary of his own agenda – it is a pity the lectionary misses the explanatory verse from the end of ch.38 that makes that clear, 'How different is the one who devotes himself to the study of the law of the Most High.'

Ecclesiastes falls within what is known as the Wisdom literature in Scripture, also evident in Proverbs, some Psalms, Job, and that near namesake, Ecclesiastes. And it is so important that we have the Wisdom literature because it offers a foil to the existential drama of which Jesus' charge to the apostles forms a part. God knows that we need his direction in both crisis and normality. And the advice of Ecclesiasticus and the other Wisdom books is much more measured – read and reflect on the words of the Lord, and see what you find there. Some of you will be familiar with the ancient form of reflection on Scripture known as *lectio divina*, where one reads a passage slowly several times, noting particular words or phrases that speak to you. Try it with Matthew 10.1-22, and you may find some specific element speaks to you today, quite independently of the big story of the sending out of the disciples, and that is good and wholesome.

There will always be times of crisis and decision, and times of reflection and steady journeying with God. I am reminded of a moment in C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* where one of the children says something to the effect that there always seems to be something important going on, and is told no, that's why you're here, to help us with this crisis – most of the time it's all peace and plenty. Much of Scripture reflects the times of crisis and change, but there is also that that speaks of peace and reflection. But our own times today are perhaps moving more deeply into crisis than ever in living memory, and we must be ready to heed the call when it comes.