We are not an institution. We are a movement. A missionary movement. And to be effective in mission, we must be free.

St Luke was NOT one of Jesus’ apostles. You know that. Fred, alas, did not. Fred was a delightful old boy who sang in the choir of the parish church where I grew up in Wolverhampton. I say sang – perhaps, for the musically pedantic, it would be safer to say that he joined in. But delightful he was, and a great encourager to me, and to young people, in general. This included young curates, and when our relatively newly ordained deacon found himself preaching on this very day in 1981, Fred sought to encourage him.

The curate decided to have a quiz – always dangerous in church, but he was young. What, he asked, were the name of Jesus’ twelve apostles? LUKE! shouted Fred. The curate smiled kindly in a chancel-wards direction, and carried on his quizmastering. LUKE! shouted Fred again, this time more urgently. The curate turned more definitely this time, sort of half-smiled, and continued his enquiries in a nave-ly direction. After a few more names were tentatively proffered from the assembly, Fred, aggrieved, had one last go. LUKE! he screamed from the back row of decani - and promptly collapsed, the exertions of apostolic exegesis proving too much for both him, and for the curate, who hastily made his way to give apologetic first aid to the hapless tenor.

Luke, as Fred discovered to his cost, was not one of the Twelve. Nor was he, we think, one of the seventy, and probably just as well when one reads what they had to contend with. Jesus’ instructions are vivid, austere, and demanding.

Go. I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road.1

Why no equipment? In Mark’s gospel the twelve are sent out with a staff, and some sandals too.2 Perhaps Jesus didn’t want his followers to look like cynics . . . I don’t mean the sort of person whose state of mind is characterized by a general distrust of others’ motives (or as we call them in the Church of England, clergy); I mean the wandering philosophers of Jesus’ day, who were as snappy and snarly as the dogs of the street, and so were named after them, ‘kunikoi,’ dog-like. They carried staffs, and begging bags, and were pretty exploitative, so we’re told.3

Perhaps. Or perhaps Jesus was reminding his followers that their task was sacred – in the Mishnah, an early authoritative commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures, we find a prohibition which states that nobody should walk with a staff, or sandals, or bag in the temple because of the holiness of the place.4

Perhaps again. Or perhaps it’s something to do with the Passover. Or with vulnerability – after all, it’s hard to make a getaway when both unarmed and discaled.5

We could go on having fun with these varying interpretations – but I think that there is one obvious, applicable, sensible interpretation that you and I can draw for our own lives. And it’s an obvious, applicable, sensible interpretation that has a special relevance for cathedral people, and this Cathedral in particular. It is this:

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1 Luke 10.3-4

2 Mark 6.6b-11


4 http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/shemot/shi.html

As humans beings we accrue stuff as we go – and we don’t necessarily notice. We get grumpy, tired, cross, prejudiced, laden with expectation which are our own creation and yet neither we, nor others, are capable of meeting them. We get cynical – and Jesus didn’t want that. It’s not our calling to bark and snap, not at one another, and not at anyone else.

And we accrue churchy stuff too. The wider institution of the church accrues dogma, and doctrines, adopts positions, makes rules. We worry more about the equipment than the task, more about the luggage than the message. Jesus didn’t want that either. We are too heavy. Too weighed down. We run the risk of not getting where we need to be, because we are carrying too much stuff.

If we are to journey effectively, we need to learn how to travel lightly, not dependent on the stuff we feel we ought to be lugging around with us, but dependent on the essentials: on love, trust, hope - above all, dependent on Christ.

But we also note that we don’t undertake this journey alone. We read in verse 1 of today’s Gospel that the Lord sent them ‘ἀνὰ δύο’. Two by two. Here in black and white we see that we are not an institution – we are a movement.

Jesus appointed the seventy, and sent them out in pairs, not to random destinations, but to the places he himself was due to go. So who are the seventy now? The Bishops? The Chapter? St Michael’s Committee? No. You, all of you. Without exception. We are a community called by God, with the mandate of God, to undertake the Mission of God. And what is that mission? To enable all those outside this cathedral - and perhaps, even within – to know that the burdens that weigh them down and wear them out need not do so. Because the Kingdom of God is near.

In my seven years – and here I must be careful: the past is, after all, a foreign country - there was sometimes a tendency amongst some in the cathedral community to think that mission was a fad on the part of the then Dean. He was unashamedly evangelistic, forcing this community to focus on the world that lies beyond that glorious great West Screen. He was right to do that. There is a danger in all our churches (and I see it in my own in Oxfordshire), and especially in great churches like this one, to be very self-concerned. This cathedral has a fine tradition of not falling into that peculiarly Anglican trap. Its story, and ministry of reconciliation, have forbidden a cosy quasi-monastic existence.

But that does not mean that this cathedral has always found the missionary task an easy one. So we, and all who profess the faith of Christ crucified, must heed the urgency of today’s Gospel, and respond to its call. The reason that the seventy are so lightly equipped is because the task is too urgent to be weighed down. There’s no time to stop and chat en route. The mission claims our all.

So let us leave this place today committed, like Luke, to be bearers of the Gospel. To be one of the seventy for today’s world, living out our faith, sharing the good news, witnessing to that love of God of which each one of us, is a living testimony. And for God’s sake: get shot of the baggage. Feel free. Because the more you’re weighed down, the harder the task is.

And nothing must delay us: for

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