

Come As You Are, Go As You Are

A sermon preached at Lindfield Uniting Church on Sunday 3 July 2022, by David Gill.

Readings for the fourth Sunday after Pentecost were:

2 Kings 5:1-14, Galatians 6:7-16 and St Luke 10:1-11, 16-20.

In our second reading, we heard St Paul restating his fervent conviction that the good news of Jesus Christ is for all. No exceptions. No preconditions.

As we were reminded last week, Paul had a problem. Some fundamentalists among the early Christians were making a big deal out of the need for circumcision.

It's there in the Bible, they argued, so it must be binding on the followers of Christ. They could quote chapter and verse – actually, quite a few chapters and verses -- from their Hebrew scriptures.

To those biblical literalists Paul said an emphatic No! Don't sweat the small stuff. You're making mandatory something that doesn't need to be. You're boasting about something that doesn't deserve it. "May I never boast of anything," he wrote, "except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world".

Unconditional acceptance, unreserved inclusiveness is the name of the game. You've probably received the occasional dinner invitation that specifies "Dress: Formal" or "Dress: Smart Casual". The gospel's invitation, Paul knew, is different. It says to everyone "Come as you are".

Which is good news indeed, because mostly whatever we are is beyond our control. A person may be Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female - tall or short, gay or straight, black or white, young or old - the invitation is the same. "Come as you are".

That's the mystery of grace, of God's all-embracing love. All are welcome. Everyone has a place at the table. Just come as you are.

If the second reading was about the amazing comprehensiveness of Christ's *inviting*, the gospel reading spoke of what appears to be the amazing comprehensiveness of his *sending*. Jesus appoints 70 to go ahead as a sort of advance guard, healing the sick and teaching about the rule of God. They are briefed on how to act, what hospitality to expect, how to deal with rejection. Travelling without baggage and those hospitality instructions strike us as a bit strange, in our very different time and culture, but let's not worry about that. Then the 70 return to report on how things went. They're on top of the world. They had found themselves energized by a power beyond themselves, with results exceeding all expectations. Jesus, not quite so impressed, tells them to cool it, to rejoice rather that their names are written in heaven.

What do we know about those who were sent? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

We're not told their names or their backgrounds. We don't know how long they'd spent in the Lord's company, picking up the gist of his teaching. Even their numbers are unclear: one version of Luke's gospel says 70, another 72.

They had a great task -- their spadework was going to affect the response Jesus himself would receive when he followed them. It seems they performed the task well.

Yet they will remain forever anonymous.

I guess those who told this story, and the one who wrote it down, thought who they were didn't much matter. They were just a mixed bag of ordinary people, drawn by Jesus into an extraordinary task.

Just a mixed bag of ordinary people. Like us. Drawn by Jesus into an extraordinary task. Like us. Still today, God empowers very ordinary people for the job that is to be done. We sometimes forget that. Someone's ordinariness so easily blinds us to his or her potential for greatness.

I've told some of you this story before, so I hope you'll forgive me for telling it again. Fifty years ago, working in Geneva with the World Council of Churches, I had to go to Sweden, to meet with church groups and inflict speeches about ecumenism on people all over the country. I had two companions: a young Anglican priest from South Africa who was based in the World Council's London office, and his wife. For three weeks we travelled and spoke together.

When I got back to Geneva my boss asked about my travelling companions. The South African guy, I reported, was "great fun, but not a lot of substance".

That guy had a name of course: it was Father Desmond Tutu. He would become one of my heroes, indeed one of the great prophetic figures of our time. But all I'd seen was "great fun, not a lot of substance"! How could I have been so blind?!

It's so easy to do. When it comes to that kind of stupidity, I'm not alone. With a dollar for every such misjudgment we make through the years, we'd all be very rich!

We don't only misread others. We misread ourselves. You can be blinded by your own ordinariness too. You can miss your own potential for greatness in God's service.

But watch that word greatness. It doesn't mean being famous, collecting honours, being put on a pedestal. Usually, as the 70 discovered, greatness in the service of divine love means anonymity. It entails distinction of a different kind. Jesus spoke of having your name written in heaven, not seeing your face in the television news.

The opportunities are there, all around us. Every hour of every day. He may be lying in a sick bed, she may be a stressed-out shop assistant, they may be lonely students just arrived from overseas. All around us are people craving not facile words about religion but acts of compassion, hints of hope, glimpses of God's love incarnate.

Yet, I hear you cry, ... me? Me, in God's service? My name, written in heaven? David, you must be joking! That sort of sending is for saints, or perhaps the clergy, or at least pillars of the church. People who are sure of their beliefs, whose lives are in good shape, who are qualified to represent Christ, who have the necessary talents and confidence.

Wrong! Remember the 70. Do you imagine they were sure of their beliefs, their lives were sorted out, they were qualified to represent Christ, they had the necessary talents and confidence? No way. All they had was God's call. And apparently God's empowerment. It was enough. More than enough.

And it always is.

I will never forget my very last day as pastor of Kowloon Union Church, Hong Kong. On my final Sunday I had baptized a number of my young people. One of those I'd been preparing for baptism, however, could not be present. He had been in strife with the police, and was being held at Hong Kong's Lai Chi Kok Remand Centre.

Yet he was keen to be baptized and wanted me to do the job. So, I persuaded the prison chaplain to pull some strings.

Just hours before flying back to Australia and into retirement, I went to that remand centre. There were only three of us: the candidate, the chaplain and me. There, in that cell, I baptized young Sam. Then we celebrated holy communion. And we talked about the privileged position he was in, commissioned by his baptism and sustained by his communion, to witness to Christ among his fellow prisoners.

[So all those who'd been predicting David Gill would end his ministry in jail turned out to be right!]

True, a remand centre was an unusual setting. But consider: isn't that pretty much the story for us, too?

Ordinary people, invited "come as you are" into Christ's circle of friends. Appointed "go as you are" to live out his message. And – though this place is not exactly a prison cell - again and again welcomed back to a very special holy table, "come as you are," to be sustained and made new in his service.

That's us. Amazingly, that's us. By God's grace, that is us.

Thanks be to God!

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