

2 Kings 5.1-14

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, 'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.' So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, 'Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.'

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, 'When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.' When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, 'Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.'

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, 'Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.' So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, 'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.' But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, 'I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?' He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, 'Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, "Wash, and be clean"?' So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy and he was clean.

Galatians 6.7-16

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

Luke 10.1-11,16-20

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near." "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.'

The Return of the Seventy

The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

Jesus has just sent his disciples – not just the twelve, but seventy of them – to go and proclaim the gospel. He sees it as a harvest: there are people like ripe crops, ready to fall into the Kingdom as if they were falling from a tree.

But it's no good, however abundant the harvest and however tasty the fruit, if it's all going to fall to the ground and rot. The farmer needs labourers who can gather the crops and take care of them. Make sure that they are stored properly and can be used and eaten.

In England at least we tend to see harvest as something that happens in autumn. But different crops ripen at different times, and farmers need to be on the watch all the time for when different fruits are ready and make sure they are gathered at the proper time.

Look to the harvest of souls and the basics are the same.

Except, where do we fit into this story? Are we among the seventy: the good friends of Jesus who he trusted with the task of gathering the harvest? Or are we those who are waiting to be harvested, people who need to be 'gathered in' as the hymn puts it?

Trick question of course because the answer is 'both'.

A very simplistic way to understand this story is to think of the disciples as the clever ones, the trained ones, maybe the ordained ones, who have all the answers. They are doing the Lord's work and they know it.

A lot of the time in the church's history, those who have been given power and status by their ordination or education, have let it go to their heads. They have imagined that they were God's friends and their job was to go about whipping the lower orders into submission. The church was built into structures to support this idea, that bishops and priests were there to be obeyed and to exercise power. If you go to Durham Cathedral in the north of England you'll see an amazing example of this: the bishop's throne stands at the top of an enormous flight of steps. It is I believe quite a bit higher than the throne of the Pope in St Peter's.

Most bishops of Durham in recent years – probably all of them – have been more embarrassed about this than proud. That's not how clergy are encouraged to think these days, thank God.

Our job, as bishops or priests or deacons, is to look out for those who need support. As the Prayer Book ordination service says, we are to be 'messengers, watchmen and stewards of the Lord; to teach and to premonish, to feed and

provide for the Lord's family; to seek for Christ's sheep that are dispersed abroad.'

Well all that is true, and a good thing. But that doesn't mean the rest of the Christian family doesn't have to do these things. All of us are being called to go out into the harvest, to care for God's children in the world. When we think of those 70 disciples we should realise that we are all called to do what they did.

The crops ready to be harvested, or in many other parables of Jesus, the sheep waiting to be herded and fed.

The fruit is ready to be gathered. How it got there – well, it must have been planted by somebody. It must have been fed and nurtured and grown to maturity. And the people who Jesus looks on as the harvest are not just weak simpletons. They are people who have life experience; they have learnt about life and love and hate and struggle and joys and how to be human. When we go out to preach the gospel we are not preaching in a vacuum. We are preaching to those who already understand what the gospel is about even if they haven't managed to put a name to it.

God loves all those people who live and work around us. God loves everybody whether they are Christian believers or Muslims or atheists; he loves everybody whether they are gay or straight or black or white, whether they speak Italian or English or Igbo or French or Arabic... And God's love has been soaking into the lives of everybody from the beginning.

Jesus says he is sending us out 'as sheep amidst wolves'. And it can seem rather terrifying. But that's only one way of looking at it. And the picture of the harvest is much more encouraging.

Because 'those out there' aren't the enemy. They are children of God. And it's only when they are shown the love of God, shown that the fruit they are bearing is lovely and worthwhile and valuable, that they will be able to release those fruits for all to share.

We might not persuade anybody to come and worship God with us in church; we might not even persuade them that God exists. But if by our love we can show them that they are loved, that they are valuable, then Satan will indeed fall like lightning.

