

First Semon at Girton

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was 14 years old, I went camping with my friends to the lake district. Goodness knows why our parents allowed us to do that but they did. Very early on, by the second day in fact, it became apparent that we were woefully underprepared, and our supplies were all but exhausted. Walking through a large field as my friends argued amongst themselves as to whose fault it was, I began silently praying to God. "Please help us Lord. I promise I'll be good forever." That sort of thing. Well, upon finishing my prayer, I looked down, and there on the ground, in the middle of the field, was about £5 in scattered coins. A princely sum in those days. I told my friends and they immediately seized upon the area like a swarm of locusts gathering up everything they could find and stuffing it into their pockets.

It was then that I told them what had preceded the find. That I'd prayed to God, and God had answered my prayers. Of course, they didn't believe a word of it. By the next day the money was spent and we were back to square one. Admitting defeat, we sat at a bus stop next to Coniston Church, cold and hungry, and waiting for one of our parents to come and pick us up. Although completely disheartened, when considering the successful prayer in the field, I fancied it might be worth giving it another go. I closed my eyes and prayed to God to help us, again, as a child and in my immaturity, I gave a long list of promises that I assured God I would definitely keep, if only he would keep his end of the bargain.

I opened my eyes, and nothing happened. Oh well, I sighed, it must have been a one off. Suddenly, a Priest came out of the church and walked down to the bus stop. He said hello and asked us where we were going. We told him our plight, and he bought us all breakfast. I of course, once again told my friends about my prayers, but I was again, dismissed, and not believed. There's something immensely frustrating, when you know something has happened, when you know something is true, and no-one will believe you.

Those two incidents stick out as my first memories of really feeling and witnessing God's activity in the world, but then having the experience dampened, by disbelief. It wasn't until many years later, when I heard the gospel, that I began to join all the dots in my life. There's a difference between mission and evangelism. Between Christian outreach in deeds, and Christian outreach, in words. The money in the field and the priest buying breakfast were deeds, in this sense: No gospel message of repentance was communicated, but they awakened something in me; something that only came to fruition upon hearing the gospel.

Many of us are much more comfortable with doing good deeds than we are with evangelising. But there is no either/or dichotomy between mission and evangelism. It is clear from our gospel reading today that both Jesus's ministry in Nazareth, and that of 'the twelve' to the villages, was unitary, encompassing both healing – "mission" – and proclamation – "evangelism."

We heard in our gospel reading today a story in two movements. In the first, we see Jesus, accompanied by his disciples, teaching in the synagogues. But many rejected him and refused to accept his message. Then we see him healing. His ministry is comprised of word and deed. The second movement sees Jesus sending out of the twelve to preach a gospel of repentance. They are sent out with authority to teach, and to heal. They have a ministry of word, and deed. We too are called to a ministry of word and deed. We too are being sent out to proclaim the gospel.

The experience Jesus had in his hometown resonates with us. Because we know from our own experiences that some people don't believe, some people reject the message. But we are not called to be successful, we are called to be faithful. This is why Jesus tells his disciples to shake the dust from their feet if any place will not welcome them, or refuses to hear them. But that possibility of rejection looms large, and doesn't make it any easier to be sent out to proclaim the gospel. Who wants to be rejected?

It reminds me of a story of a Christian lady who worked in a bookshop. She wore a crucifix around her neck, identifying her as a Christian. Early one morning, having just opened the store, when no-one else was around, she was approached at the enquiry desk by a gentleman, whom by his dress was clearly an Hasidic Jew. She asked him if he would like any help, and he whispered, "I would like to know about Jesus."

"Oh," she said, "no problem, follow me." She took the gentleman upstairs to the religious section, and pointing at a shelf said, "these are all the books about Jesus." Then she turned and began to walk away. "No," he called after her, "I have plenty of books. I'd like *you* to tell me about Jesus." She recalls being frozen to the spot in absolute horror; completely panic stricken. But she gathered her composure, and began to tell him everything she could think of.

But her initial reaction was perfectly understandable. There's a fear of rejection, of embarrassing ourselves. We don't want to be too pushy, or to offend, and often we are not sure we know the right words. But this gospel text insists that, in spite of the potential for rejection (or at least anxiety or embarrassment) telling the story with words is part of the claim that Christ lays upon his disciples. This isn't done to 'get people on our side,' or 'grow the church;' but simply to tell others about the God that has come to mean so much, to us.

It is an action performed out of love. We don't need to have polished words, sophisticated theology, or finely-tuned doctrines to speak of our faith. We are simply called to speak truth in love, from the heart, in our own words, and to never be ashamed. Because somewhere, there is a child whose prayers have been answered, and whom no-one believes. Somewhere there is a person who has witnessed God's activity in the world, but is worried to speak up for fear of rejection. And a word from you, from any of us, could make all the difference in leading that person to Jesus. Why is all this important?

Because the greatest man who ever walked on earth, had no servants, yet they called him Master. Had no degree, yet they called him Teacher. Had no medicines, yet they called him Healer. He had no army, yet rulers feared him. He claimed no territory, yet they called him King. He won no military battles, yet he conquered the world. He defeated all his enemies, yet he never harmed anyone. He committed no crime, yet they crucified him. He was buried in a tomb, yet he lives today . His name is Jesus, and it is our duty and our joy to tell the world about him. God give us strength to do so. Amen.