

Luke 9:1-17

Introduction

Chapter 8 of Luke's Gospel has challenged us to consider how we respond to Jesus as the bearer of God's word. Do our lives display the kind of faith he's looking for? We've read stories that illustrate what that looks like. It's faith that's evident in times of testing. It's faith that overcomes fear and trusts in him. Yet, as we've seen, that faith has not been evident so far in Jesus' disciples.

Now, in chapter 9, it's time for that to change. Having heard what he had said and seen what he had done, Jesus now sends his disciples on a mission. The time has come for their faith to bloom and show itself. It's time for it to be seen in action. And I've put as our first heading: going in faith.

Going in faith

Please look down with me at verse 1.

When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal those who were ill.

It's no longer Jesus alone who will proclaim the kingdom of God. He's going to be joined by the Twelve. He appointed them to be his apostles back in chapter 6, but up to this point they haven't really done anything. Now that changes. Now he makes them partners with him in his ministry. Just as he had come to proclaim the kingdom of God, so they too are to go and proclaim the kingdom of God. Just as he had done so through word and deed, so they too are to do so through word and deed. Their ministry is to be an extension of his: they will do what they have seen him doing.

Jesus is training the Twelve for the work that lies ahead, when they will go out to be his witnesses in the world. It's through his apostles that Jesus will bring his message of salvation to all nations, and the training programme starts now. So look at the instructions he gives them in verse 3.

He told them: 'Take nothing for the journey – no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt. Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town.'

That might seem surprising! Imagine Jesus was sending you out on a similar mission today. You're going to travel around the South of England proclaiming the kingdom of God. Don't take any sandwiches, he says. Don't take your debit card. In fact, leave your wallet at home. Don't pack a change of clothes. In fact, don't take anything. You can't even take your mobile phone.

How *vulnerable* would you feel leaving home without your mobile phone! You won't be able to use Google Maps. You won't be able to phone Just Eat and order a takeaway. You won't even be able to book the Premier Inn! You've got nothing. No food. No money. No clothes. You're on your own. But that's the point. Jesus is sending his disciples out with *nothing*, to teach them to depend on him. He will provide for them. And that will include providing hospitality along the way. As they travel round from town to town, people will open their homes to them. And they're to accept such hospitality. They're not to abuse it by moving around from house to house looking for an upgrade. Rather, they're to stay in one place, wherever they're welcomed, until they move on to the next town.

As the apostles go into the world to tell people about Jesus, they can depend on him to provide everything they need. And it's the same for us today. As we seek to live for Jesus in the world, we can depend on him to provide everything we need. He may not send us out, like the apostles, to cast out demons and cure diseases. But he does send us out to do good and to speak to our friends and neighbours about him. And we don't go alone. He is with us by his Spirit. And we can depend on him to provide everything we need. There may well be times when we feel vulnerable and exposed. But, if we are willing, he will use those times in our lives too; to deepen our dependence on him; to teach us that we can rely on him to provide encouragements and little gifts of his grace along the way. The question is whether we will trust him and go.

I wonder how you would feel if you were one of the Twelve, and about to set off. Perhaps a little scared? Perhaps excited? It could be fun. But Jesus also underlines the seriousness of the mission. Just as some people will welcome them, others will reject them. That shouldn't come as a surprise if they've understood the Parable of the Sower. But now they're going to experience the reality of it. And Jesus wants them to communicate the seriousness of rejecting their message. Look at verse 5.

'If people do not welcome you,' he says, 'leave their town and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.'

It's something that Jews did when they left a Gentile town. The soil they'd picked up on their feet was unclean. So when they left, they shook it off to purify themselves, and to prevent it going with them and polluting the next place they went. But the disciples weren't going to Gentile towns. They were going to the towns and villages of Israel. So in this case shaking the dust off their feet would serve a different function. It would act as a testimony against the people who rejected their message. They were declaring that the town was unclean and saying that the inhabitants, their fellow Jews, were no longer to be counted among God's people. That's serious! And it would be offensive.

As we speak with our friends and neighbours, we too must think carefully about how we convey to people the seriousness of rejecting the gospel. Very often, our first instinct is to preserve relationships and avoid giving offence. We want to tell people all that's to be

gained from trusting Jesus; all that he can do for them. And that isn't a bad instinct. But nonetheless, the message we proclaim is the message of salvation and life. There is no other way to be saved than through faith in Jesus. We can't just shrug off people's rejection and tell them that it's fine. And although our words must always be spoken with love and sensitivity, we must find a way to warn them against ignoring him.

Friends, we too are called, empowered and sent by Jesus to be his witnesses in the world. He sends us out to carry the message of salvation wherever we go: to our homes, to our workplaces, to our sports teams, our music groups, our art classes... everywhere. That thought might well leave us feeling vulnerable and apprehensive. It probably does. Who is up to such a task? It's perfectly natural to feel apprehensive. But this passage is teaching us that that is no bad thing. The more apprehensive you and I feel, the more we will learn to depend on Jesus. The more aware we are of our own weakness, the more we will depend on his strength and his provision. Every situation in which we find ourselves feeling exposed and vulnerable is an opportunity for our faith to bloom and show itself. The question is whether we will go in faith and trust that Jesus will provide all we need.

That's what the disciples did, just as Jesus instructed. Verse 6.

So they set out and went from village to village, proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere.

They went and did exactly what Jesus sent them to do. We'll be told about their return in verse 10. But before then, the next few verses provide a short literary interlude. They also contain a rather ominous note – which is our next heading.

An ominous note

Please look down at verses 7 to 9.

Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was going on. And he was perplexed because some were saying that John had been raised from the dead, others that Elijah had appeared, and still others that one of the prophets of long ago had come back to life. But Herod said, 'I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about?' And he tried to see him.

The activity of the Twelve as they go out proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere is significant enough that Herod hears about it. It leaves him puzzled about the identity of Jesus. And, once again, we hear a familiar question: Who is this man?

Rumours are rife. Some people think that he's Elijah, raised from the dead. Others that he's a prophet from long ago who had come back to life. Still others that he's John the Baptist. Only now do we discover the grizzly detail that Herod had had John beheaded. And when we're told that he now wants to see *Jesus*, we wonder what his intentions might be. And

our suspicions will be confirmed later in Luke's Gospel, when Herod's mentioned in connection with the plot to kill Jesus, and then again in connection with Jesus' death. This short interlude, then, has a rather menacing tone.

Jesus taught in the Parable of the Sower that his message would be received in a variety of ways. And the same is true of his disciples. As Jesus prepared the Apostles to be his witnesses in the world, he warned them that they would face opposition. And, in the Bible, he warns us of the same. As we take the gospel message to the world it will be received in different ways. And one of the responses we should expect to encounter is rejection and hostility. That shouldn't surprise us. It's a theme which will develop as we read on in Luke's Gospel. But for now, Luke leaves it there as a dark cloud hanging over this story. And, in verse 10, he focuses on the disciples' return. What is striking in the verses that follow is how quickly they forget, and how more they still have to learn, which is our final heading: more still to learn.

More still to learn

In verse 10, we're told that: **When the apostles returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done.**

The Twelve come back and I reckon they must have buzzing. I can imagine them all excitedly speaking over each other, trying to tell Jesus what they had seen and done. They must have been full of amazing stories. But what is so striking is that, having just experienced Jesus' ability to provide for them, in the verses that follow, they forget so quickly what they had learnt.

Now that their mission has concluded, Jesus takes the disciples away by themselves, perhaps to pray with them. But when the crowds hear about it, they follow. Rather than being annoyed, Jesus welcomes them, speaks to them about the kingdom of God and heals those who are ill. But then, as the day nears its end, the disciples get nervous about how they can provide for such a large crowd. We're told that there were about five thousand men. The total number might be significantly more if we include women and children. How could they all be fed?

So the Twelve come to Jesus and ask him to send the people away to the surrounding villages and countryside to find food themselves. On the face of it that seems like a reasonable request. On the other hand, Jesus' reply sounds altogether unreasonable. **'You give them something to eat,'** he says. 'What? All these people? How can we do that?' they ask. 'All we've got is five loaves of bread and two fish.'

It's another test of their faith. The irony is that they've just experienced Jesus' provision in the mission field. They'd gone out with no money and no food, yet they had been wonderfully provided for wherever they went, just as Jesus had said they would be. So if he could provide for them then, why not now? Perhaps the answer is the enormity of the

problem. The need is massive. If their faith is inadequate, surely, it's due to the scale of the problem.

But once again, Jesus graciously extends his ministry through them. He provides for the crowd through his disciples. Again, this is part of their training. He's still preparing them for the ministry that lies ahead of them. He's teaching them to depend on him even when the challenge seems enormous.

So we're told in verse 14: **he said to his disciples, 'Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each.' The disciples did so, and everyone sat down. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.**

It's an amazing miracle. A staggering miracle. Herod had asked a question: who is this man? And this stunning miracle, of such enormous scale, provides the answer.

As we live for him in the world, can he really provide for us in every situation? When the odds are stacked against us, can he really deliver? When the scale of the problem seems overwhelming, can he really come through for us? You bet he can! Here is God's King who is more than capable of meeting the needs of his people as they give themselves into his service. The problem is that, like the disciples, we so quickly forget.

Every experience we have of the Lord's provision, no matter how small, is teaching us that we can depend on him. Perhaps, unexpectedly, you receive some money just when you need it. Perhaps a friend gives you a call at just the right moment, when you're feeling low. Perhaps you find that famous parking space, just when you fear you wouldn't. Each time we experience the Lord's provision in the small things, he's teaching us to depend on him in the big things too.

When the crisis comes or the tragedy strikes. When the need is massive. When the scale of the problem seems enormous. When the times of testing come. In *those* times, remember the Lord's provision in the smaller things. And trust that you can depend on him in the big things too.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for Jesus and for his care of us through the ups and downs of our lives. Please help us to trust that we are safe in his hands, that we can depend on him in every situation. And in that confidence, please help us to live each day for his glory and praise. We ask it in his name. Amen.