

Come As You Are, Go As You Are

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 7 July 2013, by David Gill. The readings were Galatians 6:7-16 and St Luke 10:1-11,16-20.

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

Paul, you see, was dealing with 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 what we used to call the Old Testament. Now, respecting Jewish sensitivities, we tend to refer to it as the 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". That's the mystery of grace, of God's all-embracing love. Everyone is welcome. Everyone has a place at the table. Just come as you are.

Our second reading speaks not about the amazing comprehensiveness of Christ's inviting, but about 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. Baggageless travelling and the 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, encourages them to cool it, and 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 remain forever anonymous.

Perhaps 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 task that is to be done. We sometimes forget that. Someone's ordinariness so easily blinds us to his or her potential for greatness.

Forty years ago, in Geneva with the World Council of Churches, I had to visit Sweden, to meet with church groups around the country. My two companions were a young Anglican priest from South Africa who was based in the WCC's London office, and his wife. For three weeks we travelled 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 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. 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 newly 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 ministers, 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 with authority, 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. The previous Sunday I had baptized a number of my people. One of those I'd been preparing, however, could not be present. He had been in trouble with the police, again, and was being held at Hong Kong's Lai Chi Kok Remand Centre. Just hours before flying back to Australia and into retirement, I went to the remand centre. There were just three of us: the candidate, the prison chaplain and me. There, in that cell, I baptized him. 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.

An unusual setting. But consider: isn't that pretty much the situation in which you and I find ourselves too? Ordinary people, invited "come as you are" into Christ's vast circle of friends. In baptism, made part of that circle and appointed "go as you are" to bear his message. And at this holy table, again and again welcomed "come as you are" to be sustained and made new in his service.

That's us. Yes, incredibly that is us.

Thanks be to God!

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