

Sermon

The Revd Elizabeth Caswell

Here we are then, welcome to 'ordinary' time, the long, slow weeks after Trinity Sunday – no more festivals or excitement now until Advent, except for short bursts of activity at Harvest and Remembrance.

Yet this season is not dull: it is the time of fullness, everything fully grown, bursting with life, heading for fruitfulness. It is the season of the Spirit. We go on learning who we are in Christ, as the Spirit refines and gifts us to be God's people – a 'kingdom of priests. A holy nation' (Ex. 19).

An old legend has it that God actually auditioned several nations for the role of "chosen people" before hitting upon the Hebrews; but each one wanted to see the Terms and Conditions before signing up! Only Israel was so trusting in the God who had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and who was bringing them home that they just said "yes" – we'll do it, Lord; we'll do it, everything. And they hadn't even heard what the Commandments were which the other nations had balked at... That is faith to an absurd degree.

But that is what faith means. It is entering a relationship of trust. We are offered a covenant relationship with God, and because of what we have experienced so far we dare to say "yes" to what lies ahead, not yet knowing what that might be. We walk by faith not by sight, as scripture says.

In Romans 5 Paul describes how, through faith, we now stand in a relationship of grace. Jesus is the Door through whom we have entered a new state – no more fear or condemnation, no more unworthiness or uncleanness; we have peace with God; we are forgiven and loved and at home. We have a future and a hope based on who God is and what God has done for us through Christ. Ahead lies more and more and more, until we share in the glory of God, God's own nature, until we too are completely whole, overflowing with love. And God's love, already poured into us by God's Spirit, is the foretaste of what lies ahead and empowerment for life in the present.

That doesn't mean that life is easy or pain free – far from it, for learning to live in love, come what may, calls for endurance; suffering is to be expected. As we grow up into Christ we become more like him, in his suffering as well as his joy, because we are growing into our vocation as his people.

This Christ, who died for us out of sheer love, he calls us to follow his way. And as we follow and learn and receive, as disciples we find ourselves sharing Christ's calling – disciples become apostles.

"Look at it", says Jesus, "look at the need, look at the opportunity! Sheep need shepherds, harvests need labourers." Then he summoned the twelve disciples...the twelve apostles. It's as though as soon as Jesus reveals a need to us he also reveals that we are called to help meet that need. Disciples, who are standing in God's grace, forgiven, loved and at home; reconciled, healed, inhabited by God's Spirit, disciples are also apostles – sent out, messengers, mediators, deliverers, healers, communicators, priests, agents of change.

Apostles do not simply speak a message; in some extraordinary way, courtesy of the Holy Spirit, they *are* the message. Christ's hands and feet, mouth and presence, his body no less.

When they speak things happen... Were they shocked, the Twelve? Terrified? Are *we* shocked? Terrified? Ah, wait a minute, I've just realised: there's a let-out clause! It doesn't mean *us* – there were many disciples, but only these twelve were called to be apostles. Phew. But soon enough we will read of Jesus sending out seventy others...and on the Day of Pentecost they were “all together”, all the followers, men and women, young and old, and *all* were filled with the Spirit. And later new disciples joined in, believed, received and went out with the message; and by sharing it and living it, despite persecution and suffering, were proved to be apostles – men and women of grace and truth; agents of change.

Whoever we are, whatever we've done, or failed to do, if we respond to Jesus' invitation to follow we will find ourselves around his table, a place laid for us, forgiven, loved, at home. And standing in the reality of that grace, inhabited by that Spirit who is God within, among and for us, we will know that we are being sent out into this strange, frightening world to convey God's good news – Jesus – to our generation.

Right now we are locked in, some of us may be for some time to come. No matter. We join the ranks of the imprisoned, the hospitalised, the marginalised – but God is still empowering us, still with us and for us, opening new doors, often surprising doors, of opportunity. Just think how many of Paul's letters, letters we now see as Holy Scripture, flowed from a prison cell or house arrest.

What loving concern, what compassionate giving, what music and prayer and poetry, what befriending, what campaigning for justice, may flow from God's “shut down” people? What dreams of new ventures, new ways of worship and community may grow as we listen and hope and pray?

It is no accident, is it, that we live now, in these circumstances? Now, as then, God calls us to be his own, to absorb and live out his grace. Whoever we are, whatever we've done, or failed to do, there's a place set for us at the table, and work for us to do, and a living, loving Spirit to inspire and lead us.

‘Thank you, Lord, for your amazing grace and your astounding faith in us. We follow gladly as you lead on. Amen.’