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Getting it Across (Matthew 10.40 – 11.1)

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There is a wonderful poem by the English poet Ursula Fanthorpe which imagines Jesus trying to ‘get across’ his meaning to his disciples, such that they might in turn communicate him to others.¹ ‘This is the hard thing’, she imagines Jesus saying. ‘Not being God, the Son of Man ... But patiently incising on these yokel faces, mystified, bored and mortal, the vital mnemonics they never remember’. In the poem, Jesus goes on: ‘I envy Moses, who could choose the diuturnity [that is the lastingness] of stone for waymarks between man and Me ... The prophets too, however luckless their lives and instructions, inscribed on wood, papyrus, walls, their jaundiced oracles’. ‘I alone’, he says, ‘must write on flesh ... I am tattooing God on their makeshift lives’. And it is only by way of those same makeshift human lives that he will be made known to those who come after.

Chapter 10 of Matthew’s gospel is often known as the Sermon on Mission. Up to this point, Jesus has been teaching his disciples about the ways of God, and demonstrating the will of God to heal and care. Now he begins the next phase of his relationship with the twelve by ‘summoning’ them and giving them authority to do as he has been doing – to proclaim God’s nearness, to cast out unclean spirits and cure every disease (10.1). Then he sends them out ‘with the following instructions’. They are not in this first instance to go among foreigners – to Samaritans or Gentile towns – but only ‘to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’. As they go, they’re to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near and they’re to heal and release those they meet. They’re to ask for no remuneration (‘you received without

¹ U.A. Fanthorpe, ‘Getting it Across’ in *Standing To: Poems by U.A. Fanthorpe* (Calstock, Cornwall: Peterloo Poets, 1982).

payment; give without payment') and to take with them no provision for the journey, relying instead on the hospitality of the way.

Jesus doesn't minimize the risks involved: 'See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves' – 'they will hand you over', he tells them, to the authorities, and they will be detained, flogged, interrogated. But they are not to be anxious about defending themselves. If he, their teacher, is maligned they must expect the same treatment, and like him, they will be given what they need to say by the Holy Spirit. Moreover, he warns them, that their message, like his, will provoke division – 'do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword' – and this is because there are those who do not want the real truth of things uncovered, the real presence of God made known, the real goodness of God made available to those who are suffering and oppressed.

And this means, from the disciples' point of view, that being sent into the world to speak and act for Jesus, will require a radical detachment from worldly belonging, approval and security – including even from those bonds that matter most: 'Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me', Jesus says; 'and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me' (10.37-38).

Conversely, however, whoever *does* welcome and receive them, is effectively welcoming and receiving Christ himself: 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me' (10.40). It's as if there is no distinction between Christ and his faithful followers; nor is there a distinction between those who are themselves apostles, prophets or righteous and those who welcome apostles, prophets and the righteous. It takes one to know one – and the capacity truly to recognize and receive those whose lives communicate God, is a sign that the one offering hospitality has equally been caught up in the divine life. Which means, as we heard in our passage tonight, that 'Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; whoever welcomes a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a

cup of cold water to one of these little ones [because she is a disciple] – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward’ (10.41-42).

That’s the precis, and along the way this Sermon on Mission is peppered with a raft of sayings that have entered our cultural imagination. ‘If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words’, Jesus tells his disciples, ‘shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town’. In this hostile world, you must ‘Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves’, and yet unafraid to stand for the truth of things. ‘What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops’, and do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. For ‘are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows’. There’s a story about someone who attended a Shakespeare play for the first time, and complained how full of clichés it was. Similarly here – the images are so vivid and memorable that they’ve shaped our language, given us metaphors through which we experience our experience.

But what is the significance of these detailed instructions for mission in our context? Especially since the whole notion has such problematic connotations for many of us, who are inheritors of a history of Christian mission that’s too often been disrespectful of other cultures, if not downright murderous and imperialistic. Must we consider ourselves summoned and sent, as were these first disciples? And if so, what would that look like?

As I seek to engage this question, a couple of basic points seem important. The first is that, as the gospels present it, mission – being sent into the world to speak and act for Jesus – is of the essence of discipleship. As far back as we can trace it, Rowan Williams has noted, the Christian movement is a missionary movement. That is, it ‘assumes that it has the capacity and the obligation to seek to persuade persons from all imaginable human backgrounds that it is decisively relevant to their humanity, that it can deliver from whatever bondage women and men may happen

to live under'.² This assumption might make us nervous. Doesn't it reflect a dangerous sense of religio-cultural superiority? Except, says Williams, what gives Christianity its general relevance is 'its *difference* from existing patterns of human relation and power'.³

For those first disciples, fellowship with Jesus had drawn them into a new kind of human community. A community whose members belong to God and so to one another, not because they have earned it or been born into a certain social location or supposedly superior ethnicity, but simply in virtue of God's unconditional welcome and call. This belonging offers them a new freedom which is dangerously subversive of worldly hierarchies and systems of religious control. It challenges diseased patterns of alienation and domination that serve some at the expense of others – hence all those remarks about Jesus having come to bring not peace but a sword, and the risks to his disciples of a hostile reception as they threaten the powers that be. But the gift of God's unconditional belonging and liberating welcome wants to be given. It's this gift that the disciples are commissioned to enact and make known.

On this vision, then, mission is not primarily about recruitment. It's not getting people to join our religious team, much less to come to our church. It's about communicating belonging, reconciliation, liberation, fulfilment of human potential. Mission is about helping people recognize their own call to receive, to participate, to catch the rhythm of God's giving life in and through theirs – freeing them from fear, enabling trust, teaching practices like worship and prayer that deepen availability and connection to the deep source of life. Mission means taking a stand for the truth of this reality, making it the centre of your own life no matter what befalls – 'taking up your cross and following'.

And this is why the agents of Christ's mission are necessarily those whose own lives have been touched and changed by his coming. You can't communicate this

² Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.230.

³ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p.230.

possibility, you can't get it across, at a safe distance – in a text book or as a matter of theory. 'I alone must write on flesh', Jesus says. Extraordinary as it seems, in the Christian vision, God entrusts God's self-communication to ordinary and not spectacularly transformed human beings – not only to specially designated prophets, or divinely dictated texts, or enlightened beings, but to Peter, James and John. 'These numbskulls are my medium', Fanthorpe imagines Jesus saying, 'I called them'. And us too. And it is our changed lives, our freedom to be and to love that he seeks as the medium of his message.

Must we, then, consider ourselves summoned and sent, as were those first disciples? Well – yes. How our call to mission is lived out in practice will be different for each of us. But simply in virtue of our discipleship, each of us is called to let Jesus 'tattoo God' on our makeshift lives so that we become, as St Paul put it, living letters of his Word (2 Cor.3.2).