7 July 2019: Choral Eucharist
The Third Sunday after Trinity

The Revd Canon Edmund Newey, The Sub Dean

‘After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him’.

In nomine…

I wonder what it felt like to be one of those seventy appointed and sent out by Jesus. What does it feel like to be appointed – especially when you’ve little idea of the job description? What does it feel like to be sent out – perhaps when you’d rather lead a quiet life at home, thank you very much?

How do you think the seventy disciples responded? Were they keen and eager, straining at the leash, trying to get Jesus’ attention: ‘please, sir, choose me’? Or were they keeping a low profile in the middle of the crowd: ‘With a bit of luck he won’t spot me back here’? Or were they resigned and resentful: ‘Why’s it always me who gets landed with a job like this’?

For us today, the easy way out is to say that, back then, it was different. Of course, if it was Jesus who was asking, we think, we’d be bound to say yes and say it with enthusiasm. You only have to read the gospels, though, to know that isn’t true. Much of the seed that Jesus sowed fell on stony ground; some of it fell among thorns and was choked; some grew quickly at first and then died off for lack of soil. Only a handful grew and flourished.

Back then to respond to Jesus required faith, just as it requires faith to respond to Jesus now. Faith in Jesus himself, of course; but faith too in oneself – faith that the call of God is really meant for me: and faith in the world that Jesus wants to transform – faith that God’s kingdom can be made real, on earth as in heaven. None of those forms of faith is obvious or self-evident. Then as now, people were cynical, self-dubting and sceptical: cynical about preachers and their idealistic messages; doubtful about their own abilities; sceptical that the world with all its manifold problems would ever get any better. I’m quite sure that some of the seventy chosen disciples were not overjoyed to have been appointed and sent out by Jesus. And yet, for all their doubts and fears, they went. And when they came back, the gospel tells us, they were filled with joy.
I have many memories from my three years as a schoolteacher at a boys’ school in Bolton – some fond, some less so. As well as teaching I had extra-curricular duties as master in charge of cross-country running. The problem was that very few boys liked cross-country, so from time to time I had to supervise other sports. On one occasion, one of the football coaches called in sick and I found myself asked to referee a game of football. I guess that for most men that wouldn’t be a problem, but just about the only rule of football I know is that you’re not allowed to touch the ball with your hands! I should have said no, but, not wanting to lose face before the boys, I said yes. The situation was dire and I had to improvise my way out of it as best I could. My first tactic was to choose the most distant football pitch and take as long as possible to get there. Then, while the teams were being chosen, I identified the boys who seemed most authoritative about the rules of the game and decided that when tricky situations emerged theirs would be the voices I’d listen to. And so, for twenty-five minutes I, a football ignoramus, can proudly claim to have refereed a game whose most basic principles I fail to understand. I don’t suppose I fooled everyone, I don’t suppose every penalty or corner or free kick was correctly awarded, but it’s amazing how far you can get by allowing people to assume you have a competence and authority which in fact you totally lack!

I think that experience has taught me something about how to respond to God’s call, but before I say how, let me give another illustration. There’s a story of two trappers stuck in a hut all winter in Alaska. They made an arrangement whereby one of them would do all the cooking for them both until the other one found the food too disgusting to eat – then the other would take it over. Well, the first trapper had been cooking for a very long time and was getting fed up because his friend never complained. So, deciding to serve up something truly terrible, he went out into the snow, collected some moose dung and made a pie out of it. Well, the other one sat in front of the pie and took a mouthful. For a moment he almost spat it out: then he said, ‘Moose dung pie! But good moose dung pie!’ So the first one had to go on cooking.

Two stories: one true, the other probably not! The point of them is not that we must say yes to everything: I couldn’t have kept up my pretend competence as a football ref for more than a few minutes. But saying yes to something for which we feel poorly equipped, saying yes to something that repels us, can completely change the way we look at a situation and help us grow.

Very often what holds us back is a sense of fear: fear that we’re not good enough, not expert enough; or fear of the unknown, of the metaphorical moose dung pies we might have to eat.
But talk to almost anyone with a clear sense of vocation in life and you’ll find that it emerged through a struggle with doubt and uncertainty, perhaps especially with self-doubt. The story of God’s saints, God’s faithful ones, is rarely one of instant success. Almost always it involves false starts, hesitations and backslidings: Peter’s stubbornness and pride, Mother Teresa’s doubts, Cardinal Newman’s occasional propensity for prejudice and intrigue. If we wait until we feel fully prepared to answer God’s call, we have misunderstood it: God is not looking for competence, but willingness; not for people who have arrived, but for people ready to go on a journey.

Over the past couple of years Bishop Steven has been leading this diocese on a journey to develop a common vision for our service of Christ and his people in the many different contexts across our diocese of 2.4 million people. What has especially impressed me about the process is the fact that instead of tearing along in overdrive it has deliberately opted for the lower ratios in the gearbox. This is not a corporate panacea: the three adjectives proudly used about it on the diocesan website are ‘messy, untidy, iterative’ – just about as far as you can get from glossy! And a key part of the common vision’s purpose is to help every Christian and every Christian community to hear God calling them and to follow that call: to help all of us step out of the ruts into which we may have got stuck and encourage us to walk with God in faith.

‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few’, says Jesus as he sends out the seventy, ‘therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest’. The harvest that waits for us today, as for Jesus’ first hearers, is a harvest of people crying out for meaning, justice and love, the harvest of a world that longs to be transformed into God’s kingdom. I pray that each of us here – rather more than seventy of Jesus’ disciples today – may be inspired to ask God again how he may be calling us to serve him, that, appointed and sent out by Jesus, we may, like the seventy, return filled with joy. In the words of this morning’s psalm (66):

O be joyful in God, all the earth, sing the glory of his name.
Bless our God, O you peoples;
make the voice of his praise to be heard,
who holds our souls in life
and suffers not our feet to slip.

Amen.