

**Sermon preached at Marlborough Road Methodist Church
at the Morning Service on Sunday 5th July 2015
by Michael King**

This morning I would like to spend a few minutes thinking about how we intentionally reach out and communicate God's message of love to a needy world.

Mark 6:7 "Calling the Twelve to him, Jesus sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits."

You have heard the lectionary readings for today. God sends Ezekiel to the Israelites in exile, with an uncompromising message. Jesus sends his disciples to villages where they are known, with a similar message of the need for people to change their ways, or repentance. For us in Marlborough Road this morning, what is God saying to you and me in these passages, even as we give thanks for 150 years of faithful witness on this site.

In February 2012 I was asked by the Methodist Church in Britain to go to Christchurch, New Zealand one year after the earthquake that devastated the city. It was a solidarity visit. Just over a year ago, a small church in the West Country got to hear about my fleeting visit, and asked me to lead a world church service with the focus on New Zealand. It transpired that a church steward had visited his son in Christchurch, who was working for the Methodist Church in New Zealand, about a year before and had been challenged by the idea of worshipping in spaces that were safe, but not necessarily the usual church buildings. He had returned to UK asking what 'church' might look like outside the expected buildings? Moreover, this small church fellowship was stimulated to ask what the community around the building what they 'needed' from the church, and just how relevant the church was? The exercise of asking others, of listening to others, revealed a variety of needs; and resulted in a church that is now much more accessible to others, more relevant, and open to all on a number of days in the week. If we were to go from here this morning and ask people around this church similar questions, what would they say about us?

I have been fascinated recently by the space probe Philae, which has suddenly started sending information on the comet that it has landed on. It is not primarily sending information about itself, but about its surroundings. I was musing the other day about a comet landing in Banbury town centre and what details it would send back to another planet. It might describe human beings, but also state that some lived in big houses, some small, some flats, some in doorways. It might state in a matter-of-fact way that the environment is very polluted, and that both pollution and general warming is accelerating. It might state that some young people seem intent on self-destruction through the imbibing of harmful substances on Friday and Saturday evenings. It might state that people spend a lot of time in shops buying things. These would all be described factually. It would not be the job of the probe to ask "Why?" or "What is anyone doing about it?".

Then the same space probe landing in Banbury might describe large buildings, let's call them churches. And people from another planet would be left wondering what is the connection between what people do, their environment, and these large buildings?

When God called Ezekiel it was God saying, "I need someone to go and make my ways known," When Jesus sent his disciples to the villages it was Jesus saying, "This is God's mission to bring people to their senses." God needed bridges, people who could relate to, get involved with, be relevant to, the people around; and God now needs us for the same task.

Jesus "sent them out two by two and gave them authority..." He still does.

The message remains the same. It's about repentance, changing one's ways, and it's fundamentally about forgiveness and grace. Now I'm going to come clean with you – and hopefully I'll feel better for telling you! I don't know HOW forgiveness works. I know about a man upon a cross, his death and resurrection, but HOW exactly it works, I don't know. But what I do know is that it certainly does work! I know it for myself and my own life, and I have seen people's lives turned round by knowing that God loves them, knowing that they are forgiven, knowing that their lives now have meaning.

This message is not just for people in the past. People like John Newton – "I once was lost, but now I'm found." Or John Wesley "Died he for me, who caused his pain? ... Amazing love! How can it be?" and don't forget the first line of the next verse, "Tis mystery all." It was probably true for people 150 years ago, who helped build this church. It's a message for this age too, and I've been alongside people traumatised by war in Sierra Leone who have had their lives turned from despair and hopelessness to a knowledge of being in God's presence. And I often keep in my pocket a little bullet from the war in Congo that has been re-shaped into the shape of a cross. Such change of heart and mind, such examples of repentance, I also heard when alongside a Street Pastor a few evenings ago. When I asked why he was out on the streets in the early hours of the morning, he replied, "A few years ago God turned my life around, and I just want to show God's love practically to others as best I can." And at 3 o'clock in the morning one can have a deeply theological conversation with people, please believe me - perhaps deeper, more honest, than many conversations within our church walls.

Mark 6:7 Jesus "sent them out two by two and gave them authority..." and later in verse 12, "they went out and preached that people should repent."

I have been reading the history of your church in "Brewers, Brokers and Builders" which Alan Vincent and the late Trevor Parry compiled. There is a delightful cameo of a story about the pillar in the middle of the room at the back of the hall. Having built the sanctuary, the main reason for the church as it would have been in 1865 when people were more used to attend church on Sundays, the rest of the building was probably considered less important.

So it was only as an afterthought that the growing Sunday School was considered, and an extra room on the first floor added – with the resultant strengthening needed by means of a pillar! I found this a fascinating insight into the church's building priorities.

Nowadays, surely we would see any church building less as a refuge, and more as a launchpad for outreach. How best can we connect with our community? So in 2015 many of you are involved with Age UK, the Beacon Centre, St John Ambulance, Street Pastors, Fairtrade Action, uniformed youth organisations, mums and tots, etc. And underlying all these activities is whether or not we have the confidence to go and share the 'good news' with others; however sensitively, are we able to let another soul know that Jesus can turn lives around? We may even do it, two by two! But if we are not able to do it, churches like this will not be around in another 150 years.

Banbury and the surrounding villages are full of needy people. You and I know that. We know that we find answers to the deepest of needs in our faith, nurtured in places and fellowships such as this church. Our task is how to communicate that mystery of faith, the love of God that we see in Jesus on a cross. How do we connect the need and the love? Who will build the bridge if it isn't you and me?

Ezekiel heard God speak, and went forth. The twelve disciples went with the authority of Jesus to change lives. What is God asking you to do today, probably just outside your comfort zone? But all for his glory. When we sing in a few moments 'Hear the call of the Kingdom', are we listening to hear what God is wanting us to hear this morning.

So I finish with a couple of direct questions. To whom is God calling you to go this week, or perhaps to pray for this week, with his authority? Who does God want you to connect with in the days ahead?

"Calling the Twelve to him, Jesus sent them out two by two and gave them authority over the evil spirits."

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.