

# the Sunday Readings



**Jesus called the Twelve and began to send them out, two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.**

**( Mark 6 : 7 )**

## **15<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time (b)**

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## Jesus' strategic plan for sending the Twelve <sup>1</sup>

### introduction

Earlier Mark reports that Jesus appointed the Twelve, *"To be with him and to be sent out to proclaim the message"*.<sup>2</sup> Now this is becoming a reality. After being poorly received in his home town, Jesus starts to teach in the neighbouring villages. And he seeks to broaden his mission by sending his disciples to announce the good news elsewhere. Which is where we come in! And Gospel messengers must travel light!!

### first reading: Amos 7:12 – 15 <sup>3</sup>

[ After Amaziah had complained to King Jeroboam about the prophet ]

*And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there,(12) but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."(13) Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet nor a prophet's son, but I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees,(14) and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'(15)*

The dramatic climax of Amos' preaching comes in this confrontation with Amaziah (vv.12-13). Amaziah supports the royal theology of King Jeroboam, but Amos doesn't want the ruler or the priests, to abdicate from their proper roles. Amos wants them to be hoppers. But the reality is that throughout Israelite history, rulers and priests have aggressively silenced prophets and crushed the voice of hope. Hope for the Lord's newness poses serious threats to their vested interests. Amaziah banishes Amos (v.12) as managers of the status quo always do to the agents of change. They continue the refrain, *"Peace, peace; peace and prosperity"*. Whatever party that is in power makes that claim.

Amaziah merely affirms the continuity of the royal house which means it remains immune to the demands of the Lord's holiness. In other words, Amaziah saw religion in civil terms – existing to promote loyalty to the status quo. He was the court chaplain, whose job was to smooth things out, rather than to sponsor disruptive change. For such people history is closed and the land is managed on human terms. Against Amaziah, Amos provides an alternative approach to civil realities (vv.14-15). As an outsider, his role is to deliver the WORD of the Lord. He speaks what the manager of the system; the court chaplain and the spokesman for an uncritical patriotism considers unspeakable (v.17). Amos echoes the curses that land, managed outside the covenant ways of the Lord, will be lost.<sup>4</sup> This is an

<sup>1</sup> Cover Image: central detail of Jesus commissioning the Twelve depicted by Ghirlandaio in 1481.

<sup>2</sup> Mk.3:14

<sup>3</sup> The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Dt.28:63-68

assurance that the northern kingdom will come to an end and that ending will result in an humiliating separation of the ruler and the land; a loss of place and power. Amos speaks out to show that the crisis in the institutions of the northern kingdom is a crisis about its humanity. The prophet clarifies that the tradition is really concerned with justice and integrity. The Lord's reigning means that all human structures, whether political or religious, are provisional and subject to the Lord's judgement.

**response: Psalm 85 : 8 – 13**

[ prayer for the restoration of God's favour ]

*Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people,  
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.(8)  
Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.(9)  
Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.(10)  
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.(11)  
The Lord will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.(12)  
Righteousness will go before him  
and will make a path for his steps.(13)*

The speaker represents the people who wait humbly with open hearts (vv.9-10). The Lord will be active on their behalf (vv.11-13). The situation suggests the conditions of Judea in the early period after the exile; the fifth century b.c.e.. The thoughts are similar to those of post-exilic prophets.<sup>5</sup> The speaker captures the theme of promise of the Lord's peace, foretold by these prophets. In a message of hope to the discouraged ones, the speaker offers pictures of restoration of the good life – as if it were a return to paradise (vv.10ff).

The psalmist promises the peace of the Lord's new reigning. It is a message of hope to the discouraged ones. *Second Isaiah*,<sup>6</sup> had pictured such a restoration of Israelite fortunes. Because of the present strife, the possibility of the hoped for restoration lay in the future. *The "glory of the Lord (the living God)"* (v.9), which had deserted the temple and the holy city, is to return to the restored temple. The Lord's saving justice, blazes the trail (vv.12–13). The speaker emphasizes that the Lord's *power for life-giving* or *grace*, is the necessary condition for peace and happiness. And the speaker reflects that after a slow and difficult start, the returned community will enjoy a happier period – the future foreseen by such prophets as *Second Isaiah* and *Zechariah*. Prayer for the turn around in the people's destiny is justified by reference to an occasion which everyone knows –

5 Cf. *Hg.* 1:5-11 & 2:6-9.

6 *Is.* 51:3

when the Lord intervened to turn things around in the past – probably a reference to the restoration after the exile (vv.11–13).

**second reading: Ephesians 1: 3 – 14**

[ spiritual blessings in Christ ]

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,(3) just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.(4) He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will,(5) to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.(6) In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace(7) that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight(8) he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ,(9) as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.(10) In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will,(11) so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.(12) In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;(13) this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.(14)*

Paul describes the unity of all people and things with God, made possible by Jesus. This is the motive for would-be disciples' practise. In an outburst of praise, Paul introduces *'the Father'* as responsible for all spiritual blessings (v.3). He adds that God's people will possess *'the holy Spirit'* as guarantor of everything promised (vv.13-14). The themes of the intermediate verses are about the centrality of Jesus to a Christian's life and faith.

For Paul, it is in Jesus, that the divine will embraces all times, places and things. At the centre of the action will be the Christian community, or church, through whose surrender to God's will; *"He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits"*. In the God's reigning all things, including humanity's ills, will be set right. The holy God's grace is sure. The Love of God for us is the primary motive for the whole plan (v.5). This Love for Jesus Christ, *'the Beloved'* (v.6), forms the context of our redemption and forgiveness (v.7). Without this Love, the ultimate reconciliation of all things wouldn't take place. Paul reflects an awareness that everything God does, is connected with everything else. That is, where each Person of the Trinity ministers, the whole Godhead is involved.

**gospel reading: Mark 6:7–13**

[ the mission of the Twelve ]

*He (Jesus) called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.(7) He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff: no bread, no bag, no money in their belts,(8) but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.(9) He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place.(10) If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."(11) So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent.(12) They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.(13)*

The preparation for the mission of the Twelve is seen in the call of the first disciples to be *'fishers of people'*.<sup>7</sup> The Twelve are set apart to be with Jesus and receive authority to preach and expel demons.<sup>8</sup> Now they are given the specific mission to exercise that authority in Word and Power as representatives of Jesus during the time of their formation. Rejection by his own people, narrowed the potential audience that would hear Jesus' message about God's reigning. Mark then describes Jesus' strategy to overcome this narrowing.

From this point, the mission extends out beyond Galilee and begins to include non-Israelites. Rejection by his own people at this stage, poses the problem of how to inform a wider audience about the reigning of God. Jesus began to tour round the neighbouring villages, teaching (vv:7–9). Would-be disciples who think first about themselves; their conditions of employment and their travel arrangements; are not going to be effective at spreading the message about God's reigning. In fact they will be announcing a contrary message. Jesus tells *the Twelve* that such preoccupations are not important because would-be disciples who put their trust in God's *power for life-giving*, will surely receive everything they need, to complete their task successfully.

It seems there is a note of urgency about this work. The message needed to be spread as widely as possible in areas that were distant from the centres of power. The message was important for people *'written-off'* as pagan, or remote, or lacking influence. The disciples' mission was to target the ordinary people of the time. The message of God's reigning these disciples carried has indeed spread from town-to-town and has reached us (vv.10–11). Some households have welcomed it and others haven't. No-one can be forced to welcome the message. The news about the reigning of God has to be received freely.

The protest against those who didn't welcome the message, by shaking off heathen dust on re-entering Palestine, is a protest action intended to make those people think again and repent. They need to admit that they were not worthy of,

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7 Mk.1:16-20

8 Mk.3:13-19

*'the reigning of Heaven'*. It seems that Jesus' disciples had two tasks. First, to spread the news of God's reigning to as wide an audience as possible in the time they had at their disposal (vv.7a–9). And second, the would-be disciples had to help others (vv.6:7b,13). Like modern-day disciples, they couldn't just stay content with a verbal message. Merely raising awareness of Jesus' message wasn't enough. His message was for the humble, the sick and the poor in the small villages around Galilee.

*The Twelve* spread the message; that *'the reigning of Heaven was near'*. The prophets had spoken of, *the reigning of God* that would come at the end of time. What's new about Jesus' sending, was his insistence that the reigning of God was a present reality in his person. The disciples confirm the closeness of God's reigning, by sharing in the exorcising and healing signs of Jesus (v.13). Oil was used in medical treatment.<sup>9</sup> Oil had a symbolic value in miraculous healing. James' letter mentions that healing by anointing, was known and practised in the early church (v.13).<sup>10</sup> The practice of *the Twelve*, may have been the start of that later practice, which eventually became *the sacrament of Anointing the Sick*.

As would-be disciples of Jesus, we often settle for raising awareness of a possible alternative life-style demanded of Jesus' followers. But because of the effort of will needed to bring about real change, we often lack the courage to act. We acquiesce to injustice through fear of the powerful, or fear of public opinion. We conform to the dominant values of our society. We fail to face and deal with difficulties and dangers, by being over-aggressive or too timid; by being angry about the wrong things; and by not being prepared to suffer patiently when the spread of the gospel demands that suffering is necessary. Sometimes we do just one thing – without the other. That is, we help others without announcing Jesus' message about the power of God's victory over a culture of death. Or we give the message, without giving any practical help to the needy. In the practice of the first missionary disciples, a balance was demanded between these two possible approaches; a balance demanded by Jesus and a balance that was given by his first disciples.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Lk.10:34*

<sup>10</sup> [v.13] *Anointed with oil . . . cured them*: A common medicinal remedy, but seen here as a vehicle of divine power for healing. (see *Jm.5:14–15*).

**for sharing:**<sup>11</sup>

- *In Israelite history, kings and priests have tended to silence prophets and crush the voice of hope, because they are too threatening to the present arrangements of power. Comment on Amos 7:12–15*
- *The apostle describes the planned unity of all people and all things with God, made possible by Jesus. Comment on Ephesians 1:3–14*
- *Sometimes we give help to others without announcing any message, or we give the message without giving any help. Comment how the first disciples got the balance more or less right according to Mark 6:7–13*

**prayer:**<sup>12</sup>

*God of justice, God of salvation,  
from every land You call a people to Yourself.  
Yours is the work we do,  
Yours the message we carry.  
Keep Your Church single-minded and faithful to You.  
Let failure not discourage us  
nor success beguile our hearts,  
as You send us to proclaim the gospel.  
We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

**review:**<sup>13</sup>

*Jesus' instructions in today's gospel reveal a lot about his values and priorities. The spirit of these instructions continues to be essential. We are to depend utterly on the hospitality of those with whom we come into contact, not to seek sustenance and security on our own terms. We are to stay where we*

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- 11 Lectio Divina: reading God's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (*reading*) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (*reflection*) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (*prayer*) – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (*rest*) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*
- 12 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.
- 13 The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.

*are welcomed and work there, to build up the community; not taking advantage of the generosity of others and moving on quickly on before our unworthy motives are found out! We are forbidden to retaliate when our message is rejected and not to impose our views by force.*

*Our liturgical enactment of the telling of the good news is part of the long line of many re-tellings of the story of God's life in the world. The re-tellings are for our time and place, against the many competing and conflicting powers-that-be. The struggle could go either way – because the resilient power-for-death relentlessly seeks God's defeat. There has not yet been complete defeat of the resilient power-for-evil. There have been only battles along the way from which we take heart. In our experience, another 'telling' is always required. Without this 'telling'; we, our neighbourhood, our community and our world; are dead! The gospel of Mark is optimistic. It reports how the Word of God was spread at the cost of disengagement with the old world's powers-that-be.*

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