Sermon for Trinity 5, 4th July 2021

Mark 6 verses 1 to 13

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

By Rev’d Emma Phillips preached at Annscroft, and preached by Graham Phillips at Hanwood and on Zoom

*He called the twelve and began to send them out …taking nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts.*

One of the things I have missed about going away on holiday is the excuse for a little retail therapy. I can always justify spending a bit extra, even if it is just on snacks – and maybe I need something to wear? Or even, if the holiday demands it, some new kit? A camera, or the right sort of shoes, or a suitable coat? I read an interesting article recently on why we consider shopping therapeutic, and one reason is that it enhances excitement in advance of a special occasion, like a holiday, or a wedding, or Christmas. I hope that I am not on my own in feeling like this!

But Jesus makes it quite clear to his disciples that no retail therapy is in order here. He asks them to set off without a penny in their pockets, not even a bag to hold their belongings, and no picnic either! They are not even allowed to wear an extra layer of clothing to swap around when the top layer gets dirty! They are to be totally dependent on the welcome of strangers. This feels pretty uncomfortable to us today – though Kate, the daughter of a friend of mine was involved in a modern-day equivalent mission. She went with a small group from university, and they were told to turn up at the airport just with an overnight bag, and only when they got to the airport were they given tickets for a European city. They set off for a long weekend with no other agenda than to start conversations with the aim of blessing whoever they spoke to. They had no money or provisions, nothing except for an emergency backup phone number. Kate said that they had an amazing time, and she and a friend found herself invited to stay with a local couple where they had brilliant conversations about life and Jesus.

Which just goes to show that you can’t just write off Bible accounts as irrelevant to the present! However, before you all start to wriggle in your seats and think of reasons why you should not have to join a mission like that, I am not suggesting that you set off to evangelise the unknown. Jesus’ instructions are specific to the time and place – but they also hold some key challenges for all of us. We are all of us called to proclaim the good news of the gospel, maybe not as evangelists, but definitely as witnesses, by what we say and how we live.

Jesus calls us away from the highly materialistic culture in which we are embedded. We might like to think we were immune from advertising, but in reality, how can we be? We might not fall for specific products, but we are bombarded by the endless call for more, bigger, better. We just assume that life demands progress. Here’s a simple example - we can all recognise a movie set in the 40s and 50s by the style of cars driven then. They have a very obviously dated look to them, and we might regard them as classic, not practical for today’s world. But if you go to Cuba, you will see them driven everywhere, because Fidel Castro banned the importation of American cars after the Cuban revolution. Now I’m not saying that is convenient or easy for Cubans, but it just makes it clear that it is perfectly possible to get by without changing your car for a newer model every three years – or however often you replace yours! We just don’t have a culture that mends and patches together and makes do – we expect to be able to replace our possessions easily and often.

But we are increasingly aware that this is unsustainable. Our planet is finite, and we cannot go on using up resources indefinitely. Now is this an issue that Jesus addresses? Is it really something we should be talking about in church? Well, Jesus definitely asks us to put him before our belongings. He makes it very clear that we cannot serve God and money. He tells his disciples that they do not need possessions to spread his good news. The kingdom of God is abundant in the resources that it does need – love, hope, faith, joy, peace. He does not tell his followers to become penniless beggars, but to depend on each other, to expect generosity, and to enjoy the welcome they are given. This is a very different culture from the one we live in – but it is the culture we are called into.

We can only too easily have a split mentality. In church we believe in a God who provides for our needs, we give thanks for the beautiful world he has created, and we pray that we would be generous in our turn. But when we go out into the workaday world, we shrug our shoulders and accept that money makes the world go round. Folks, it does not! It is God’s love that makes the world go round. We just buy into the myth that is 21st century culture. We need to be different; we need to find ways to express that love in what we say and how we live.

Jesus asks his followers to live simply, to accept support from others, to rejoice in the things that cannot be bought. We now know that this is not just the way for especially devout Christians – it is essential for our planet. When we walk in the paths that Jesus shows us, we demonstrate the way that God brings renewal and sustainability. But we have to begin by weaning ourselves off the permanent consumption model that we have all taken for granted.

We are socialised into being consumers, from our schooling onwards. The economy is driven by consumption. The government tells us that the way out of the coronavirus crisis is to spend, spend, spend. Can that really be right? Can we not even **try** God’s way? Is it not possible to love our way out of the crisis? To care for each other, to share resources and to stop wasting so much of what God provides? If we are to be seen by the government as consumers, can we not, at the least, be ethical consumers? A decade ago, Fairtrade products were bought only by the dedicated few, many of them Christians. Nowadays they can be found on the shelves of every supermarket – there, you can be sure, not because the supermarkets are noble enterprises, but because consumers like you and me are choosing to buy them.

I was fascinated a few months ago to watch a programme about the Bruderhof, an organisation that seeks to establish intentional Christian communities around the world. I do not agree with all their principles, but I was very much drawn to the simplicity in which they live. On joining the community, members surrender all their rights to personal property, taking seriously the example of the early church, where everything was held in common. The needs of the community members, food, clothing, specific items for their particular needs, are all provided for through a central store. They have a very simple dress code, modest and practical. There is no personal expression through clothing, no enhancement of sexuality or status. The personality of each person shines through their words and actions, not through how they dress or what they own. None of us may expect to join such a community – but we are challenged again to think how much our society shapes our attitude to possessions. Can any of us say that who we are is separate from the things we own?

Returning to the beginning of my sermon, I freely accept that I am just as vulnerable to the messages of society as the rest of you! Yes, from time to time I do indulge in some retail therapy. But in my heart, I know that it doesn’t really help with underlying problems. Planning for a holiday, dreaming of what I’m going to do, which costs nothing, makes me just as excited as anticipatory shopping. Of course, some shopping is required! But it is perfectly possible to shop mindfully, for things I really need, the things that have the least possible waste afterlife, the things that will directly benefit those who made them rather than the multinationals that distribute them. I need to consider the reasons why I set out on a shopping trip - shopping because I feel down is rarely successful! Buying presents for the people I love tells them that I care for them, but so does the time I give them, the hugs and the things I do for them. Shopping for its own sake rarely glorifies God.

But God does not call us to lead lives of complete self-denial! He gave us bodies to enjoy the wonderful world that he has created. We are to freely engage in all the joys of living – just not let possessions and money get in the way of the truly important stuff. We don’t have to get things right all the time – indeed we can veer into adopting an unappealing moral superiority if we think we can. God said to Paul ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness’. We reach for God’s standards – he does the rest! Being a follower of Jesus does not make us perfect, but work in progress. Our witness is stronger if we admit to our mistakes and struggles, and share together in the journey to put God first. So this morning, let us encourage each other to step out of our materialist culture into God’s Kingdom, where money and possessions are just servants and not the masters. Amen

Rev’d Emma Phillips