

**Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2022**  
**Luke 9:57-10:2 & 10:17-20**  
**Rev.Scott Burton**  
**Brightons Parish Church**

Sermon keypoints:

- Accept the call
- Prioritise the call
- Ground the call

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's Word:

Come Holy Spirit and soften our hearts to the Word of God.

Come Holy Spirit to renew our minds and our sense of call.

Come Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

I wonder, do you like telling stories? Do you like telling stories? Are you any good at telling a story? Do funny stories seem to happen to you a lot or embarrassing ones? I wonder if you've got a story that you've not managed to tell anyone yet, maybe from this past week? So, I'll give you 20 seconds, 30 seconds, turn to your neighbor. Have you got a story you've not managed to tell yet, anyone this week? And, if not, you can always have a blabber about the week that you've had. So, over to you for 30 seconds.

Thank-you so much!

Well, sounds like there's a lot to catch up on. Feel free to get into the gory details later on if there's a story worth telling there.

And our passage today, Jesus appoints 72 others and He sends them off on an adventure. He sends them off on a week or longer, of mission maybe and He sends them with a message and with power. And then, when they come back, we read at the end of our passage 'The seventy-two returned with joy and said 'Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.'" The seventy-two returned with a story, with joyful testimony to share.

I can almost imagine the stories they told that night around the campfire: 'Oh Liz, you remember that lady that you spoke with and you talked about the Messiah and the kingdom of God and how her eyes just brightened up and so much life just seemed to come to her.'; 'Hey Joe, you remember that kid you prayed for it and just how he was set free of something and he was jumping out of that place.' You can just imagine the stories that are around the campfire that night.

I wonder, what are the stories we're telling one another just now? What are the stories we are hearing from one another or other places? Only stories of gloom and decline. It's only our stories of the good old days and how things were when the church was at its peak. Maybe it's only stories of complaint and bitterness. I wonder, can we see anything of what God is doing in our day?

I was recently listening to a podcast when I heard something of the story of the Iranian church and it just grabbed my attention because so much of it gave me hope for our situation, gave me ideas for what our path forward might look like and I want to give you the opportunity to hear just a little bit of that story, just a few minutes and so I've got a snippet of the video interview for you to listen to just now.

*Thanks.*

*What's interesting is that for years, though they had that prayer and it was that was the 50's, they didn't see a massive growth and there had been some missionaries. The first missionary had come to Iran in well modern was the 1812 Henry Martin came translating the Bible into Persian then the late 1800s guy called Robert Bruce I believe went from Scotland to Iran and you had the Anglicans you had the Presbyterians came in the early 1900s, the Assemblies of God came in the 1960s and missions like OM - excuse me - were there and there's quite a lot of work going on but very few people came to Christ. So, by 1979, there were about 500 Christians from a Muslim*

*background after all those years of mission and work and prayer for years. Can you imagine praying for years you expect the revival to turn up and I'm sure God did hear those prayers and it was part of the process but by 1979 only about 500 Christians from a Muslim background so Khomeini comes back with the you know hardline regime and all the missionaries are kicked out. Everything's gone. Literally everybody's kicked out of the country and so people think that that small church is just going to wither away and die, and then the persecution increases that at that time with a few pastors were killed and obviously then pastors are spied on. Evangelism eventually it's banned. Churches are very limited and restricted. In 1990 The Bible Society was closed down. So, multiple crises really for the church and so you know people waiting for that to happen for the church just to wither and die. But somehow the opposite happened and Iranians became the most open Muslim people to the Gospel. There was hunger, there was just a deep hunger for it that began to grow and then the courage of the church. So, you had these two things come together. One was the reality that the Iranian space they began to see the true face of that religion. The government, their system, they began to see and there just was a new hunger that wasn't there before 1979. So, the crisis wasn't just a crisis for the church, it was actually a crisis for the people and there and I think that's something very important for us to remember. We think the church is just going through a crisis in the west, the whole world was going through a crisis. So everybody's facing some kind of crisis, and so for Iran, that the crisis was for the people saying what is true, what's reality, where do I find hope? And then, on the other hand, you had the church even though it was tiny, and you've used the word 'remnant' many times in your podcast, but they there was this remnant of people who believed in Jesus, who Loved Jesus and thought 'Okay, we're gonna go for it.' you know and with conviction did what they could. They preached the gospel, they shared their faith and so, remarkably, this tiny withering, small Church began to flourish and today many people say it's one of the fastest growing, possibly the fastest growing church in the world, Whatever the story is, I can tell you that every single day, all across Iran, people are coming to Christ just in remarkable ways. Beautiful testimonies as people share their faith. They come across the gospel online or on TV. They find Bibles, divine appointments, dreams and visions, these types of things are happening and it really is a remarkable story.*

It really is a remarkable story. The Iranian church was on the brink, it was expected to die out and now, is the fastest growing Church, apparently, and according to some analysis. and their story actually has many of the hallmarks, themes that this little book talked about. I encourage you maybe to pick up a copy of it. And if we were to listen to their story, if we were to learn from their testimony and from the research conducted by others and then turn to the teaching of Scripture might we then also be able to have a story to tell? A joyful story to tell?

So, what does their story, what does this book, what does our passage today teach us for our day?

Well, we read at the beginning of chapter 10 'After this the Lord appointed 72 others and sent them two by two ahead of him.' Jesus appointed 72 others, just some regular folks, not worthy enough to get their names written down in scripture, not on the level apparently of an apostle but nonetheless, given power and authority, given a message and a purpose, and Jesus sends them out. And what's almost more striking in some ways as they said 'Yes' to Jesus, they accepted the call of Jesus, and in our video, we heard the same of the Iranian church, in our day, that there was this small remnant, a small group of folks, very few after so much labor and persecution, but they resolved to do what they could to make Jesus known. They accepted the call from Jesus as well and, do you know brothers and sisters, we too are called. The Scriptures have many ways of putting it across: 'go and make disciples'; 'you will be his witnesses'; we are Christ's ambassadors to implore people to be reconciled to God. That's what we are called to be about. We are called. And I wonder, do you know that? Have you accepted that call? And if you're maybe not nodding externally but nodding internally, going 'Yeah, I know that. That's old news to me, Scott!' But what are you doing about it? What are you doing about it?

As a Kirk Session we some years ago now said that our purpose as a congregation was to be a people who would seek to invite, encourage and enable people of all ages to follow Jesus. So how are we each playing a part in that purpose to invite encourage and enable? And a mature disciple would be looking to find ways that they give to all of those areas, to invite, encourage and enable. Not just saying 'Well, that's for, that's for other people to do that bit, and I'm going to focus on this bit because that's what I'm comfortable with,' Well, that's not what Jesus says. He says we've all to be witnesses, we've all to be ambassadors, who have all to go and make disciples. And that might not be a lot of time needs to be given to that. It might just be, who are you building a relationship with in the community? who are you seeking to encourage? how are you speaking to one another on a Sunday morning? It doesn't need to take up a lot of time but we all need to be playing our part in this if it's to be more than just a nice idea or words on a screen or something we nod our heads to. Have we accepted this call, and what are we doing about it? If we are going to have a joyful story to tell then we each, we each must accept this call.

I don't know if you've heard of that research that was done, it's actually referenced in the book, of people who were presented with a choice and they were presented with, I think it was particularly in kind of health situations with some of the research done, and they were said you've got this diagnosis but if you change your lifestyle in these variety of ways then this diagnosis will radically change, and the research found that more often than not people would choose to do anything else than change. To put it very bluntly, more often than not, people will actually choose death than change. And the same is true in the church sadly, because, if we don't accept the call of Jesus, then we're prioritizing something else.

And that principle can be seen in our passage today as well. Prior to the 72 being appointed we read just the end of chapter nine and in that little portion, three people encountered Jesus, three people as far as we know choose never to follow Jesus. We read earlier 'A man said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' Jesus replied 'foxes of dens and birds of nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' Let's pause there. It can seem like some very strange words of Jesus. Why does he say that? Why doesn't he just say 'Great, come, let's get going!' Why does he respond this way? Well, I think Jesus can see his motives, He's God after all. He can see into the human heart and He sees this man's heart. He sees that this man is wanting to follow Jesus for the wrong motives because, actually, if you were a disciple, a disciple of a Rabbi, that brought a certain degree of prestige and comfort with it, because only the cream of the crop, the best-of-the-best of young Jewish men got to be a disciple of a Rabbi and so, it brought that element with it. He's bringing that expectation with it. He's thinking 'Well, this will meet my needs and it'll be just a life of cushy blessing.' And Jesus is saying 'Well, I'm not experiencing that. My way is the way of sacrifice, of love for others, that pays a great price and so, don't expect following me to be any different. It's not about meeting your needs.' I wonder, do we bring that to our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus?

The passage goes on 'He said to another man 'Follow me' but he replied 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father ..... Still another said 'I will follow you Lord, but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.' And here we see the call put off for a different reason, not taken up because they're attaching conditions, they're failing to see the urgency of the situation, there's something else they've got to attend too first. But Jesus goes on to say just a little later in chapter 10 'The harvest is plentiful' it's urgent, get involved come now, but there's other things that they want to attend to first and as far as we know these three individuals choose not to follow Jesus.

But, if they had, they might have been part of the 72. But by choosing not to follow Jesus, they miss out, they choose death over change, they prioritize something else over the call to follow Jesus. And in the little book the research shows again and again that so often the church will choose to prioritize something else over the call of Jesus. He particularly focuses on two little things - Denial and Blame. So often we choose denial or it's not that bad, like, church is busy enough, it's noisy enough on Sunday, like, oh just there's so much going on we don't need to fill up the place anymore. We deny the situation, we deny the need to change, we deny that we're called

Oh, I'm not called not little old me - we have a false sense of humility. Or we deny the need around us. You know, only two or three percent of the Upper Braes population goes to any church on a Sunday morning, any church, not just the Church of Scotland, any church, two or three percent. Literally thousands of people that don't know how great Jesus is, don't know how much He loves them. But too often we choose denial over prioritizing the call of Jesus.

But sometimes people don't choose denial. Sometimes we say 'Okay, okay, I can see the situation, Scott. You know, there's plenty of room here, there's a whole bank of pews up here. No one's sitting in them,' or we say 'Well, I can see the stats. Yep, we need to kind of share in the message and see more folks come into faith sure, but, you know, I don't need to change, I don't need to change, I'm doing my part, I'm busy enough, Scott. You have no idea and the amount of things that I'm juggling right now. I don't need to change. It's those other people that need to change. As those lazy members who need to change, who never come to church or who don't get involved or who just warm a pew, they need to change.' or 'The denomination needs to change.' You know, if it just threw more money at it, we could fill this place.' or 'If it didn't cut all the buildings, we'd be fine.' or we blame the minister 'He preaches too long.' Possibly true? or 'He's not doing the right things, he's not out there enough, he's not visiting enough. You know, if he followed up those 400 members that never come to church, then they'd all come back.'

We will choose blame so often, if we're not choosing denial, and sometimes we choose both. If we're going to have a story to tell, we must prioritize other things, we must prioritize saying yes to Jesus, not choosing blame or denial, not choosing procrastination or comfort. If we want to see the Kingdom of God come in our day then we must choose life over death, change over how we've known to follow Jesus up to this point. Because, let's admit, what we're doing just now isn't cutting it. There needs to be change. Much more rather. You think the last three and a half years has brought radical change? We've steadied the ship, we've weathered the pandemic, but there's thousands of people who know nothing of Jesus other than just a bit of a myth. So, if you think there's been a lot of change so far, there's got to be so much more to come and it's going to have to get a lot more personal, you and me changing on the inside because the church could throw thousands of pounds at us but if we don't change on the inside, it's all for nothing, because we need to prioritize the call of Jesus.

I was going to use the story in another a week but just to go back to the Iranian church, one guy came to faith and he was being discipled by someone from Elam Ministries in another country so they were doing over Zoom and within the first four months of him coming to faith he had shared the gospel 100 times and then seen 12 people come to faith. It's just incredible. Or this little book, this little book just puts it in a maybe a more accessible kind of next steps. He writes of a church in Florida who were on the path towards death and it just seemed inevitable and they were there was all the blame-game going on, it was very pervasive, he says, and then he writes 'five of the members, all senior adults, became weary of the decline and blame syndrome and they began to pray for God to direct them in a positive way. They all began to find places in the community to care and love for people they never knew. They became the hands, feet and mouth of Jesus. Three years later the church began to turn positively. No, there's not been dramatic growth but the signs of life are evident. Hope has replaced fear, obedience has replaced blame.'

So, what are we choosing, brothers and sisters? Are we choosing to prioritize the call of Jesus or is it something else that's taken precedent?

Our passage today gives us one final principle to take note of. It's not in the research but it's there an Iranian story. A final principle that, if we don't take note of, we will seek to prioritize and accept the call of Jesus for the wrong motives. The wrong motives, because it appears when the 72 come back and start telling the story they've experienced, the wrong thing has got their attention and so, Jesus brings us a warning, 'Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.' I wonder if Jesus perceived in them that almost the power was going to their heads, that that was becoming the impetus, that spiritual high. 'Oh wow, it's

amazing, the crowds around us and those people set free.' and just 'Oh, it felt so good and it was great to see that life change.' but 'Oh, look at me!' and 'Oh, let's get out there again, let's have that again!' Maybe it's the wrong thing is becoming the impetus for mission, the wrong driver, the wrong ground of their call. I don't think Jesus is saying it's wrong to have testimony or to share testimony or it's wrong to want to have a joyful story to tell because, if that's true, we'd have to rip out the Book of Acts. The Book of Acts is just testimony after testimony of what happened through the new, the early church but these things cannot be, should not be the ground, the impetus of our call. Instead, it should be the love of God for you and for me. That God was willing to die on a cross, experiencing excruciating pain, for love of You and me, so that our names could be written in Heaven, that we could belong to the people of God. That should be the impetus, that should be the ground of our faith, that, in response to His love, we respond in love for Him and for neighbor and to take up this call, and make Him known. And that's the same for us as what we hear in the story of the Iranian church. I had another clip but I wouldn't play it just now, but basically if you were to go and listen to that story you would hear that what is really fueling the church there is a love for Jesus, that they have fallen in love with Jesus, they want to share Him and make Him known because they know the love of Jesus and they will love Jesus in response. That's what grounds their call, that's what is the impetus for their acceptance and prioritization of the call of Jesus.

And I wonder friends, is that the same for us? Do we appreciate the depths of God's call or is our love of God, our awareness of God's love for us become a bit cold, a bit distant, a bit old news rather than good news, that God so loved you He would die for you, for you and for me?

Well, if we can appreciate something of that then let's accept the call. If we can appreciate something of the cost that Jesus paid, that He hung there in pain to face the judgment of God on our behalf, to go to the depths of hell for our sakes, then let's prioritize the call, because He didn't put you second place, He didn't say 'I'll get to that later.'

And let me make this really concrete for you. You could, there's three ways that you could begin to put this into practice. The first is in your newsheet, there's details about our Alpha Course and it starts this Wednesday. Who are you going to invite to that? Now they might not make the first week because you've maybe not been thinking about it till now, but they can come along for the second week or even the third week, but they must be there by the third week or otherwise they're going to miss out. So, who are you going to invite? Who are you going to pray for and invite to that?

And, if you can't name someone that you're praying for right now, then maybe that's the second thing. Maybe you need to get praying, because, if you're not praying for someone, you'll never take that step of inviting them to Alpha because you don't care enough. If you cared enough, you'd be praying. So, who are you praying for? You know, sometimes we need encouragement in prayer and so, why not come along to Thursday evening or Sunday morning prayer times and get praying? It's lovely that we were quite filled this morning but there's loads more of you, come along in prayer because, in my own life, I know what it's like, you get so busy with the rat race and getting this job done and helping the kids and whatever, that you forget to pray and sometimes it helps to have those dedicated things in a diary that you tune in for online or you come in person on a Sunday morning and you get praying. So, that's step two.

Step three is, on your way out, pick up one of the leaflets for and the Belong Light Party at the end of October, as an alternative to Halloween and be thinking 'Well, who are the families on my street that I can invite? Who are the grandchildren, who are the nieces and nephews, I can invite along to this? And come along with them. And if you don't have someone to come along with then come along anyway because it's for all ages and rather than come along and be served, come along to serve, to get alongside people who are new to church and get to know their names and welcome them, because this is a whole church thing if it's to really have an impact.

Nice easy steps: Alpha, prayer, Light Party. Three easy ways of putting this into practice right now. Because the anatomy of a revived church includes a people who accept the call of Jesus, who prioritize the call of Jesus, because that call is grounded in the love of God and of their response of love to Him as well. I pray that we may be such a people. Amen.