

Introduction: Engaging with the Other at Bonnie Doon – Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 – The Mission of the Seventy

Today's Luke reading, the 'Mission of the Seventy' occurs the very chapter after that pivotal moment when Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem; that moment when he resolves to take his uncompromising journey that leads him to the cross. He has proclaimed the Good News, the big miracles are done, he has assembled his followers and now he is sending them out to do God's work, the work that in a short while he will no longer do.

Today's reading is about the challenge of bringing his Gospel message and example to the World. It's a confronting message; Jesus sending out his followers two by two. "See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves" says Jesus. "Carry no purse, no bag, and no sandals; and greet no one on the road." And I can see you recoiling. I can see you thinking, "If Bartlett's trying to motivate me to walk bare footed to Seymour, Maldon, Warrnambool or Bonnie Doon without my wallet and a change of underwear, he's got another think coming. Then Jesus says, "Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!"... Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide." And I know exactly that your reaction is to muse, "There is no way I would front up to Daryl Kerrigan's place at Bonnie Doon and ask for a free bed for a few days."

I would of course agree with you. We might have been up for that in 1st Century Palestine, but today it is a different story. So the key question I want to address is how do we engage this story today? How does this story translate to Manningham in the 21st Century? How do we engage with our community and God's world generally.

The other reading is in Paul's letter to the Galatians. It's good stuff, but there are two sentences I'd like to highlight.

- Firstly Paul says, "So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith." That's interesting to me, because Paul seems to want us to favour other Christians and that doesn't seem very even handed, so I'll say something about that in the context of the Luke reading.
- Secondly is the key point of spreading the message of Jesus, "For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!" Simply put, Jesus engages all humankind and so should we.

Reflection

The question for me about today's readings is how should we operate as disciples of Jesus in today's world? For it is a very different world to Palestine in 30AD. Try walking up to Bonnie Doon barefooted today with no visible means of support and you'd be up for vagrancy. At my age I'd also be locked up as being senile. Yet in my view we really need to take on the messages of this story, if we are to seriously embrace our faith with integrity

Malcolm Fraser once said, and this story affirms it, that "Life isn't meant to be easy". But it is not only do-able, it can be an absolute real joy when we keep reminding ourselves that in Jesus we have been given the core values we need to live lives of value and integrity and most of all that God loves us through thick and thin. That nothing can ever separate us from God's love. This is the foundation on which all else that I say rests. I now want to drill down to the day to day reality of living faithfully to the Gospel.

For me one the thing that makes our mission in the world do-able at MUC is that we are immersed in a congregation that loves us. I really believe that from first-hand experience. I know the earnestness with which our Ministry Team, our Elders and Pastoral Care Portfolio take on their roles and each of you rally around when one of our congregation is in need. If you don't feel that, then I would want to know; indeed all those with responsibility within MUC would want to know and would want to do something about it. Knowing you are loved, not only by God but by a faithful community, in a world that is often hostile and bruising is liberating; when you are loved and affirmed by God and your community of faith that is all you need.

However, I really want to focus on how we are to go out into this often-hostile world, for I'm certainly not tramping to Bonnie Doon, with or without shoes. I want to start by taking you back to the church of my childhood and probably yours. As a boy, church and family was the centre of my life. Church, in my case Elsternwick Presbyterian, was a one stop shop:

- Sunday schools were booming; our's had five different levels all packed with kids, plus two Bible classes (As an aside, I only learned last year that our dear departed Rev. Dr John Bodycomb also went to my Sunday School. He obviously listened more attentively than me.)
- Cubs, Scouts, Brownies and Guides were part of church life and on Saturdays we played in one of the two cricket and football teams or on the tennis courts.
- The usual clubs PFA, CWMU, Men's Club and the annual fete all ensured that we were entertained and felt included; no need to get out of our comfort zone in the good old days. And the monthly dance!

Now as I look back on those years, it is clear to me that, while the church was full of wonderful people, we just didn't engage the outside world. Sure, we raised funds for missionaries in distant parts of the Empire and supported doctors and nurses in the outback, but in retrospect as a congregation, we just didn't get out of our comfort zone.

Let me give you specific examples:

- Ecumenism was not part of the vocabulary. We never engaged with people of other faiths and certainly not those subversive Roman Catholics. We could never forgive them for Guy Fawkes and the Spanish Inquisition. Even the other local protestant churches were viewed with some suspicion.
- We never engaged in the social justice issues of the day. Banning the Bomb and the Vietnam War protests were left to those long-haired university students. Neither did we protest the evils of the White Australia policy, the removal of indigenous children from their families or capital punishment.
- We certainly didn't engage with those different from ourselves. We didn't know any indigenous folk and as for most of the newly arriving migrants, they were Italian Catholics or Greek Orthodox, so thankfully they went elsewhere and the poor and homeless would have felt out of place in a church where you needed a suit or hat and gloves.

That's not to say these folk were not good and decent God centred folk. In hindsight, in many ways they were far better than us; more neighbourly, less selfish and let's not forget, they endured two World Wars and a depression – tough times. But loving our neighbour was done within our own circle or in the case of outsiders, essentially delegated to others. And we wonder why people disengaged from formalised Christianity. The church of my childhood didn't love our neighbour in the broadest sense and we weren't there as a congregation for the poor and the marginalised. We certainly didn't go out two by two, barefooted, without our wallet and a change of underwear. So what should we have done and how should we have interpreted the Luke reading both then and now? Firstly, it seems to me that in 2019 there is no need to walk to Bonnie Doon to tell Daryl Kerrigan about the Beatitudes. He and all the good people in Bonnie Doon can 'Google' and download them on their mobile phones. Indeed, the whole world, pretty much, has access to the Bible and any number of theological discourses. For me, the story of the mission of the seventy today is simply being out in our community living the Gospel on a daily basis. It is about living with others in the widest sense; the circumcised and the uncircumcised. That is what we just didn't do in the church of my childhood.

Fast forward to MUC today and we are a different church; not perfect but with a vastly changed mindset. Again let me give a few examples:

- Firstly, we are challenged theologically about what we believe. I don't know about you, but I find that liberating. Our Church gives me the tools to figure what I believe for myself. As I see it, in the final analysis it is my journey and my faith. And this allows us to fairly seamlessly engage with other faith traditions. That solidarity we showed our local Islamic folk after the Christchurch massacre is a good example.
- Secondly, we have a strengthening sense of social justice. We have banners on our churches that announce to the world that we want to 'Make Poverty History' and stand with the asylum seekers and refugees and we want action on climate change 'Coral not Coal'. We attend protests, proudly displaying our church banner. We write letters, we sign petitions and social justice is often up front and centre at Sunday worship.

- Thirdly, we are at work in the world both inside and outside the church. Whether you are one of our English class tutors, Kid's Hope mentors, take services in our aged care homes or drive or grow vegies for LinC and much more, you are walking to Bonnie Doon.

But most of all we need to be out there, because that is where we can have the greatest impact and that is where we can find growth in our own lives. Let me finish with 3 simple examples from my own walk to Bonnie Doon:

- Through most of my life I'm ashamed to say I was homophobic. My excuse has been that I was formed in an era when most Australians were. It's a poor excuse, as the message of the Gospels clearly is that all are loved by God. I really only started to change my ideas in my fifties when a lesbian minister became a really wonderful mentor to me.

But my views have been more radically changed in more recent times, particularly by my annual attendances at the Queenscliff Uniting Church's 'Sacred Edge Festival'. This event has brought Helen and me and a number of others of you who have attended, face to face with people who are marginalised by the mainstream society, notably indigenous peoples, refugees and asylum seekers and the LGBTQI+ community. But this year's attendance took me a whole lot further and I thought I should share it with you. But first I want to say two things. Firstly, I am not asking you to totally embrace my views, because your journey is for you. I cannot tell you what to think. But secondly, I couldn't have told this story anywhere else but in my church, simply because I know I am in a safe space surrounded by people I love and trust.

At this year's festival I had a couple of pivotal experiences. Firstly I heard directly from three Gay Christians who had endured Gay Conversion Therapy for years on end with calamitous outcomes. I had been blissfully unaware how damaging parts of the Christian Church has been to the LGBTQI+ community and I was deeply shocked about that.

Secondly, I knowingly met an intersex person for the first time, although I understand 1.7% of people are just that. I had no understanding of what it means to be intersex or of so called 'normalizing' medical interventions that many of those folk have been subjected. Yet the man we listened to, and ultimately met, was a warm, witty, caring human being who seemed to be coping with his marginalisation with stoic grace. I told him at the end of our conversation that he had utterly changed me from being accepting of the LGBTQI+ community to someone who now celebrates the diversity of sexual preferences in the same way I celebrate the diversity of racial difference. We hugged me and I was deeply moved, as I think he was also. As I said before, I do not ask you to agree with where I am at, but my hope is that you will also walk the Bonnie Doon Road with me to engage with those who are different. Let me make one controversial point about Israel Falou – a bit like me; might I suggest that he won't be changed by theological argument, but he might just be changed by meeting folk who are different.

- My second example is the great friendship that Helen and I have forged in recent years with Essan Dileri and his family, refugees from Afghanistan. Now I had never before engaged anybody from the Middle East as a friend and certainly not on of Islamic faith and, if I am honest with myself, probably treated such people circumspectly or worse. But Essan changed me that weekend. Apart from submitting to my wife to become a mad Collingwood supporter, he is a well-balanced, grounded, energetic, yet spiritual human being with great insight, who remains undiminished by the traumas and set-backs of his life journey. If you are interested in his story I can lend you the book he has written, but better still you'll get a chance to meet him at 'Building Bridges Through Story' in October. One never knows who will cross your path in Bonnie Doon.
- My final example comes from my volunteering at Box Hill Hospital, where my role is to show people where to go and generally empathise and jolly folk along and do stuff the staff doesn't have time for. One night I offered a guy in one of the cubicles in the Emergency Department a cup of tea. His reaction, "Listen Mate, I'm going to knock your block off before the nights out". Now I'm no hero, so I backed out of there very fast. However, I kept nodding to him each time I went past him as I did my rounds and perhaps half an hour later offered him another cuppa. Since he was now sitting at the side of the bed, I made sure I made the offer at some distance. This time he accepted me. I then took the opportunity to engage in some small talk. A few sentences in I asked

him what he had done for a crust. “I was a hard plasterer”, he said. Now I had some knowledge about hard plastering, so I said, “Gee, there aren’t many good hard plasterers around these days”. “No”, he said, as he reached out and thumped the wall. (I think he could have knocked my block off.) “Shoddy paper-faced plaster board”. The question changed him utterly. From that moment we were best of friends and at the end of my shift we were both sorry to part. Now I have no idea why he had been so aggressive to me. Perhaps he had been given some tough news, perhaps he’d just had a bad day, but underneath it all he was an artisan who had taken pride in what he had done and it only needed somebody to simply acknowledge it and affirm him.

In the same vein, a man came up to me a few weeks back in the hospital foyer. He grabbed my hand and said, “Wonderful to see you again. I’ll never forget what you did for me last time I was here”. Now the joke of it is that I would only be doing my normal job; absolutely nothing special at all. (they don’t let me do triple bypasses yet!)

Now let me get this straight; I’m not telling either of those stories to big note myself. Indeed, I remember both those incidents not because of anything I did, but rather because of the impact those two guys had on me. It’s about getting out there and making a difference and growing in the process. We can all have similar stories, but they are best found when you go on that road to Bonnie Doon.

So for me, the story of the mission of the seventy today is simply about getting out on that Road to Bonnie Doon metaphorically; walking the walk. And MUC certainly gives us the theological insights and opportunities to do just that. You are always welcome at our Social Justice Action Group meetings and LinC, Kids Hope and our English Classes can always do with more support. And beyond MUC the opportunities are endless. You just need to put your toe in the water.

Let me end with a commercial and that is for the ‘Building Bridges Through Story’ festival MUC is running in October. It is to be along the lines of the ‘Sacred Edge’ festival that has so profoundly changed the way I see life in the context of the Gospel. Reaching out to the marginalised and those who differ from us is exactly what Jesus did; it affirms that they are valued and loved. But it does far more than that; for it turns us from being armchair experts to people who engage and have a lived understanding of the real world. So make sure you come and get really involved in ‘Building Bridges’ later in the year and come being prepared to change the way you see things. I certainly hope and expect it to help me continue my wisdom journey.

In summary, we are on the same journey as the seventy, except for us it’s OK to wear shoes and take your wallet. For the distance to Bonnie Doon is short; in fact it’s just outside the door. Those encounters you will have with folk with life experiences and outlooks different to yours might be challenging, but they can be life-changing for those you touch, but for you also. So go out into the world, rejoice in the diversity of God’s wonderful world, do your bit to change and be changed for the better. Amen