

**Sermon by the Revd James Shakespeare, New Priest in Charge, 18<sup>th</sup> June at 10am**

*Exodus 19.2-8, Romans 5.1-8, Matthew 9.35-10.8*

It is good to be at St John's and thank you for your welcome. I am looking forward to getting to know you, to sharing joys & sorrows, hopes & dreams; and discerning the will of God together, as we build one another up in love.

Words from our Gospel - Jesus sent out the 12 with the following instructions, *'As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.'*

There is a lot of **calling & sending** in our readings at this time, and today's readings are no exception:

- Last week, at my Licensing service, we heard about the call of Isaiah and his commission *'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me... to bring good news to the oppressed.'*
- Last Sunday, Trinity Sunday, the Gospel included the great commission of Jesus at the end of Matthew, *'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.'*
- & today we re-wind back to Matthew 10, towards the start of Jesus' ministry, with his commissioning of the disciples to proclaim the gospel, heal the sick and cast out demons.

On one level, today's words could not be more appropriate for a new Priest in Charge, for they codify Jesus' challenge for my - indeed for all of our - Christian ministry: to preach the gospel of God's kingdom, in word and deed; proclaiming God's love for everyone. Precisely the challenge that, with God's help, I hope to be putting into practise in my ministry here... But the reality is, of course, if we follow Jesus' words closely, that it's all a trifle difficult to relate to, isn't it? All this talk of raising the dead, cleansing lepers, casting out demons... we may well care for the sick and pray for healing for all who are oppressed or in any kind of need; but do we really put Jesus' words into practise? Indeed one commentator suggests that 'the only [real] point of contact between what Jesus told his 12 followers and what the average church-worker does with most of his or her waking hours is that we wander around like lost sheep in the midst of wolves!'

So what I want to focus on, this morning, is not our calling or sending (vitaly important that these are), but (at the beginning of my ministry, to start with) **the 'gap' between the two**. So the title of this sermon is quite simply, 'Mind the Gap - between the train and the platform edge'. Yes, 'mind the gap' between our calling and being sent out. Or, to put it another way, how are we to be equipped to go out and serve God (wherever we find ourselves), so that aspiration can be translated, in real terms, into the fruits of the Spirit. How can we, as Tim Farron struggled to do so (under the acute scrutiny of the media), live out our faith in public life, as well as in our local Christian community?

And at the heart of this challenge - of putting Jesus' words into practise - is quite simply **space and time**; the gap between being called by God, as the disciples were (as it says in the Confirmation service, 'God has called you by name and made you his own'), and being sent out. A vital and inescapable gap, what we might call an apprenticeship in the Spirit, or (in the words of St Benedict) a 'school of the Lord's service'. In other words we all need time & space, whether it's at the start of our

Christian journey, or periodically, as we stop to re-fuel, to be refreshed and equipped by God for the particular task that lies ahead; whether it's by coming to Church on a Sunday or embarking on a particular spiritual exercise. So remember, 'mind the gap!' Don't be busy all the time; don't assume that God will ask you to do things without giving you the means to carry them out; and don't forget, even when the going gets tough, to stop and take time for God... because even Jesus did that!

So let's look at our readings for a moment, before we tease out in a little more depth what it might mean for us, here, to 'mind the gap'... It's easy, when you read Matthew 10, to assume that it all happened quite instantaneously: one moment Jesus was calling the 12 disciples and the next moment he sent them out to fulfil his mission (to preach out good news, cure the sick, raise the dead and cast out demons). It makes me feel quite exhausted just to listen to that passage: which goes on, of course, for another 36 verses. But let's stand back a moment and think again.

If you look closely at Matthew you discover that it's actually in chapter 4 that Jesus calls the first disciples, so we've already had 6 chapters by this point; and the reality is, of course, however much the Gospel writer has compressed all the action together, that Jesus & his disciples, would have taken much time. Time to be together, time to pray, time to learn and time to deal with their many questions and doubts and difficulties. Jesus himself may strike us as an activist - constantly on the go - but even He took time: time to withdraw, time to regroup, time to listen, time to relax with friends, time to pray; time to discern where to channel his energies; what his priorities should be; who needed him most. Indeed in Luke 6 we discover that on one occasion, Jesus spent the whole night in prayer to God; as some of us attempted to at our recent Prayer48.

Then look at the Israelites in our OT reading, Exodus 19. They've already been called out of Egypt, God has called Moses to great things, and important work lies ahead, but what happens here? They journey on, slowly, in stages through the great wilderness: a vast empty space in which they will be taught to stop and look and listen to God; to hear his words and to pledge to follow him afresh. As Paul says in Romans, it only makes sense & is made possible (our calling & our sending out to serve God) because 'God's love has been poured into our hearts, through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.' And we all need time - we all need to mind the gap - in order to be made aware, again, of this great gift within us, waiting to be rediscovered, in faith and trust in God; a gift our waiting world so much needs.

So if the disciples did it and the people of Israel did it and even St Paul did it - **minding the gap** - so can we. And let me suggest a few specific ways that we might consider minding the gap, the gap between our Christian calling and all that God is sending us out to be and to do, for Him. Various different ways, building on 'Prayer48', of further deepening the foundations of our faith, in order that together we can continue to do great things for God... Being equipped and discerning what God might want us to do.

And let me suggest, v briefly, 5 different ways - these next few months - that you could 'mind the gap' and make space for God (all things that I've experimented with, with the capacity to lead to abundant fruits) (& be assured, if your time is pressurised, that all of these things are possible, even for those who **are** v busy);

- Daring, in a frenetic world, to carve our **oases of stillness** and silence (even if only 5 or 10 minutes a day), stepping into God's transforming presence.
- Daring to spend **enough time with the Bible** (& not necessarily big chunks of it, but just a few words or pictures), in order to hear what God wants to say to

you; God who is 'merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love'.

- Having the confidence, if the opportunity arises, of **praying together**; taking time (whether through formal or informal prayer or just silence) to start or close a church group or meeting consciously acknowledging the presence of God, who is with us and ministers to us.
- Taking time, in this beautiful city and at this time of year, simply to relax and enjoy **God's creation** – which we so easily take for granted. For in simply attending to creation, God also comes to us and speaks to us.
- And, lastly, when the time is right, taking time to **learn more about faith** and prayer and discipleship; whether it's via a home group or course or quiet day; and I look forward to finding out what's already happening and how to support this, as well as exploring what else might be needed – what would help you to grow in faith, in the months ahead.

All ways of **minding the gap** between our calling & our being sent out. Allowing time & space for God to refresh our vision, putting down deep roots, so that (like the first disciples) we might, each in our own way, be good apprentices, equipped to do his work and proclaim his kingdom, to an uncertain, suffering & waiting world, so much in need of God... Let me end with some words attributed to St Francis:

If you want your dream to be, build it slow and surely.  
Small beginnings, greater ends, heartfelt work grows purely.  
If you want to live life free, take your time go slowly.  
Do few things well, simple joys are holy.  
Day by day, stone by stone, build your secret slowly.  
Day by day, you will grow to; you'll know heaven's glory. Amen