

Westgate Baptist Community

4 July 2004

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

## **The Little Things Count**

A sermon by Geoff Wraight

I don't know about you but I reckon that sitting down to read the newspaper or listening to the TV or radio in recent times can be a serious mental health hazard.

The state of politics in this country of ours in recent years is enough to induce clinical depression in just about anybody. Lies and deception, the stirring up of fear, lack of compassion and endless pandering to popular sentiments rather than to reason and integrity has reduced both sides of politics to sitting ducks for ridicule and cynicism.

For me though, a deep heaviness settle on my heart back in August 2001 when the Tampa sailed onto the horizon and the vilification of refugees and asylum seekers started in earnest. This has continued and become entrenched in our society and I am ashamed that I am part of a nation that has imprisoned children for no other reason than their parents were seeking a better life for them.

In April of this year the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission delivered its findings from the National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention entitled "A Last Resort". The findings were devastating and showed without doubt that children were being seriously abused and damaged and long term mental and emotional harm was very common. A key finding was "that immigration detention laws, as administered by the Commonwealth, and applied to unauthorised arrival children, create a detention system that is fundamentally inconsistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)."

The report has been virtually ignored by the Howard Government but quietly and gradually the Immigration Department is at last releasing children and families from the Detention centres in an attempt to make sure there are no children behind razor wire come the election. Some being released just this last week have been in detention for four years. Consistently 9 out of 10 of these children are eventually found to be genuine refugees and allowed to stay in Australia.

Add to this reality the lies and misinformation that was fed to the public as the basis for the invasion and occupation of Iraq of which Australia was an official part. Saddam is now on trial as he should be but at what human cost was this brought about? The reported (and probably grossly understated) figures are that between 11,000 – 12,000 Civilian Iraqi men, women and children have been killed as a direct

result of the military intervention not to mention countless soldiers and military personal including nearly 700 Coalition troops. Then add to this the countless thousands injured and maimed. There of course voices of reason and humanity out there (Michael Leunig comes to mind) but sometimes they seem drowned out by latest heavily publicised spin..

One of the things we often talk about in church is that we are all involved in Christ's mission of renewing the world, of bringing hatred and injustice to an end, and of establishing God's reign of love and peace. But in the face of the real problems of the world we could be forgiven for feeling that our efforts are like spitting in the ocean.

Does what we do really make any difference? In the cosmic struggle between the love of Christ and the tides of evil, are our efforts at faithfulness and mission of any significance at all? Does God see us as important players on the team? These are the questions that addressed by the Gospel reading today in Luke 10.

The sending out of the 72 is a confronting passage but gives some clues as to the nature and practice of the mission of the church.

First it is interesting to note the number of disciples Jesus appoints and sends out. Some translations say seventy, some others say seventy two. In the book of Genesis, there is a table of nations in chapter ten. In the Hebrew Bible there are 70 nations in it, but in the Greek translation that was commonly used in the first century, there was 72. So for the gospel writer to say that Jesus was sending seventy preachers, the hearers of that time would recognise the image of sending out to every nation. The message: the worldwide scope of the harvest into which Jesus sends the labourers.

Secondly, the equipment they were or weren't to take with them. No purse, no bag, no sandals, no chatting with friends along the road. The message here is one of urgency. It is backed up by the harvest imagery. As country folk know, when the harvest is ready, you get it in quickly. Miss your chance and the crop can be ruined. Jesus is saying, "This is urgent, you've got a task to do, no messing around, no time for trying to sort out your baggage limits, no time for shopping, no time for social chats along the road. Go to it. The Kingdom of God is near now, so now is the time to respond."

So the message is clear: firstly that the good news is to be shared with all the world, secondly that all of Jesus' followers are called to proclaim the nearness of God's reign.

There was a time when I was a young Christian that the mission of the church and therefore the cutting edge of the mission of God was carried out by professional missionaries. These were people we supported and trained to go out and spread the Gospel to the nations. We revered and honoured these people. Not far behind were full time Christian workers and pastors. This calling was seen in a similar light at

those who were really seriously working for God and involved in the mission of God.

The truth is that in the context of what the NT is saying, a pastor is one who is called to equip and teach and nurture the whole of Christ's church to go out and engage in the mission of God and the sharing of Christ's love and peace – not to do it all themselves.

The task is too big and too important for me and a small bunch of other Christian professionals to be trying to do it. It's your job. You are called by Jesus Christ to be his labourers out there in the harvest field. You are called to gossip the message of God's love and goodness among those who need to hear it. You don't need any particular expertise or training to be able to love other people and show to others the welcome and acceptance and mercy that God has shown you. You don't need a theological degree to be able to talk about what has happened to you and how it is bringing healing and hope into your life. And it doesn't take any great prophetic gift to be able to recognise people who reckon there is something stuffed up or empty about their lives.

You are the people that Christ is sending out, like lambs among wolves to share the peace of Christ, to eat and drink with people, to respond in mercy to sickness and brokenness, and to talk about the nearness of God and of God's reign in the world. That is Christ's commission to the whole church. We are all ministers and priests. The New Testament words for minister and priest are never used of church leaders - they are used to describe the whole people of God. You are a royal priesthood, it says. You will minister in my name to the ends of the earth.

Wouldn't it be interesting if we put up our new sign out the front that said underneath Westgate Baptist Community. "The ministers of this church," and put every bodies photo on it with a brief caption identifying their ministries. Person 1 - helps in youth group, ministers among frail elderly people by keeping in touch and visiting regularly. Person 2 - helps run a homework help group for refugee students, father of two kids, works with Amnesty International. Person 3 - leads worship services, works for justice through a family welfare organisation, sings in a local choir. Person 4 – Financially supports several refugee programs, works for a large IT company practicing ethical behavior and good work practices, manages the finances of several church groups. Person 5 – Mother of three kids, mentors a teenage girl, cares for families in need, coaches junior netball team. Person 6 – Retired school teacher, visits elderly shut ins, writes letters to newspapers about justice issues, prays regularly and specifically for everyone in the church.

Perhaps there are times that we just want to retreat into a privatised faith and our own spiritual journey because we can't see any significance in what we manage to do in the world. We feel so inadequate as ministers of Christ, because the harvest is so large and our little patch seems a very little return for a lot of effort. Sure we might help in the homework group and youth group but there are still hundreds of

struggling kids out there desperate for some help and support. Sure we might see the occasional colleague at work who was locked into systems of greed and ambition and stress and heart attack set free and become a healthier more balanced generous creative human being. But average work hours are still rising and the rates of suicide and terminal illness among Australian executives are still on the increase.

Sure our local Refugee group may have helped a few families establish their new homes here in Yarraville, but the attitudes of most Australians are still ambivalent at best and hostile at worst toward Asylum seekers. We're out there, we're doing our best, but it all seems so insignificant.

But what does Jesus say when we report back. "I was watching Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning." What, all we did was have a games night for some local kids. "I was watching Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning." What, all we did was offer a holiday to a struggling family. "I was watching Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning." What, all we did was take a meal to a sick old pensioner. "I was watching Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning."

It might all seem very mundane when you're one of the seventy sent out with no sandals to say "Peace to this house." But Jesus can see the whole game plan. Jesus sees the demonic structures that begin to topple and fall as we do our little bit of chipping away at the bottom. The demonic structure that was holding that family in highly stressed conflict till they were snarling and tearing one another apart. And your offer of a holiday didn't solve all their problems but it broke the cycle just enough to allow the pathway through to be glimpsed. "I was watching Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning."

The demonic structure that had that had that work colleague quietly contemplating putting a final end to the interminable stress and pointlessness of making more and more money only to have less and less time to live when you spoke a word of friendship and invited him around for a meal and he glimpsed a window into another way to live. "I was watching Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning."

The demonic structure that created the fear and xenophobia that blinded the whole of a nation's public to the mistreatment of some of the most vulnerable people on the planet, like the straw that broke the camel's back your little campaign of letter writing tipped the balance and forced the government to listen and act. "I was watching Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning."

The kingdom of God has come near, and you might not be able to see the full significance of your little part of it, but through you and many others God's tide of love and truth is pushing back the currents of corruption and brutality. Your little drop in the ocean might not seem like much, but when the tide turns every drop is in it together and nothing can stand in its way. The Spirit of God is at work and

sometimes we just need to open our eyes and cooperate with what God is doing among people beside us. We need to be able to encourage and find the people living for peace as our reading puts it, and stay with them, pray for them and join with them.

I began with the sad story of recent asylum seekers in Australia. I want to finish with another story I heard told on the radio during the week..

### **Ranjan Abayasekara from Whyalla in South Australia**

My wife, Niranjala and I migrated to Sydney from Srilanka in January 1995. Within a few weeks after our arrival, I was off attending job interviews in distant places; a train journey to Wollongong and two plane trips to Hobart. I finally accepted a job offer in Whyalla, South Australia, a ‘bush city’, located 400k’s north of Adelaide with a population of about 25 000. We didn’t know a soul when we got off the 24-seater plane at the small airport in August 95. We soon made new friends and began to enjoy life. But before long I realised that policies of inclusiveness were not fashionable for the new Government. Reports about the marginalised and victimised were not worth discussion.

The nadir was reached in August 2001 when the MS Tampa's unwanted cargo was turned into election fodder .....and subsequently when 353 souls, including 146 children, perished trying to reach their promised land down under. I could hardly find anyone to discuss this human crisis. Among some of those I moved with, attempts to discuss the issue raging in the media at the time – ‘Children Overboard’, ‘Illegal Immigrants’ and ‘queue jumpers’ were not well received. The government’s lies were apparently being believed ‘hook, line & sinker’, since they were targeted to reach in-built fears and paranoia, based mainly on ignorance.

I began to doubt if we would ever really fit in,.... but there appeared a band of people whose hearts beat unwaveringly for those who were being vilified. Whyalla Rural Australians for Refugees was formed. The folk we've got to know through WRAR have been inspirational. In them we've seen another face of Australia. Some live close to our home, others in faraway cities and bush towns. Their beliefs and the example of their lives, have been an inspiration like no other.

They have proven that the spark of humanity cannot be quenched by lies and propaganda, however many times those in authority may repeat it.

Many of them have large families, but they have also embraced these so-called “aliens” as their own. They visit them in detention centers, write to them, share their sorrows and joys, lobby parliamentarians, write letters to the press, compose poetry and take them gifts and necessities. They devote time, energy and money on behalf of those the authorities prefer to keep hidden and forgotten.

This amazing network of people consider themselves first and foremost as humanbeings, before any other categorization, be it ethnic origin, religion, nationality or skin colour.

My wife and I consider our exposure to this network, as the most uplifting experience of our lives.

The Kingdom of God has come near and I saw Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning.