

I wonder what the disciples were thinking when they heard Jesus telling them that they were to go off in pairs to the areas around.

Did their thoughts go back to their time in Nazareth where people refused to recognise Jesus as someone special? The people there thought they knew Jesus and so were not willing to recognise that he was more than just the carpenter's son. We are told that this meant Jesus was unable to do any miracles there. It amuses me that verse "He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them", as if healing the sick was not miraculous.

Did their thoughts go back further than Nazareth, back to Jesus healing the woman that touched his cloak and then following that up with raising a dead girl? Or even before that with the healing of the demon possessed man and the pigs drowning themselves?

Or did they start panicking because they were being asked to leave the large, comfortable group they were in and go out and actually do something without the other 11 to hide behind? Was there a mad scrambling to try to be the one that went around with Peter or James?

Then there were the conditions that Jesus laid on them for while they were out. Three instructions.

1. Take nothing with you except for a staff. No bread, bag or money meant that they would have no way of feeding themselves. A second tunic would have been used as an extra blanket if they had to sleep outside, so no extra tunic would mean that they would have been very uncomfortable if they didn't find lodging. In following this instruction the disciples would have to rely on being able to find people that would feed them and provide them with shelter. It would require them to trust God to look after them instead of being self sufficient.

2. When you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. This meant that they were not to try to upgrade their lodging while they were in a town. It's reasonable to suppose that the first accommodation offered when they arrived in a community would not have been the best available, possibly a room in a public house or inn. However, after they had been there a few days and healed people they may have been offered a room in someone's house as a thank you. With the instruction to stay in one place they avoided the appearance of preaching and healing for gain. It would also have avoided them spending time moving about and investigating other lodging options when they were supposed to be spending their time preaching and healing.

3. Finally, "If they will not welcome you or listen to you then shake the dust off your feet when you leave". This refers to a teaching of the Rabbis that taught that when someone entered Israel from a gentile area they were to shake every grain of "unclean dust" from themselves before entering the "clean" land of Israel. In doing this they were showing the absolute separation of clean and unclean. The disciples were instructed that if a community refused to open their homes, ears and hearts then they were to act as though it was a gentile place, it was a physical act implying that it was a place that was excluded from the blessings of God.

We don't know all that much about the disciples, but we can see that here Jesus is calling on them to step out and trust God. As I said at the beginning, I wonder what they thought. I also wonder how they encouraged each other. As Christians we often use bible verses or passages to encourage one another, but I was looking through a few lists of "encouraging bible verses" on the internet and realised that over half of the lists come from the new testament. As such they would not have been available to the disciples. Verses such as "If God is for us, who can be against us" (Rom 8:31), "We know that in all things God works for the good of those that love him" (Rom 8:28) and from today's first reading "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2Cor 12:9) are all written by Paul and so weren't available to the disciples.

That's not to say that they would have been without scriptural encouragement. "I know the plans I have for you says the Lord, plans to prosper you not to harm you" (Jer 29:11), "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint" (Isa 40:31) and the whole of Psalm 23 are all old testament verses to give encouragement and strength of will to those who are lacking it.

So the disciples are sent out, they are given their instructions and they went. I actually find the last couple of verses of our Gospel reading to be encouraging. The disciples have gone out after Jesus has experienced rejection. They are told about how they are to handle rejection if it comes to them. But then we are told "They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them" (12-13). Despite having been prepared for rejection we are told that they had a successful time.

Now for the bit that we don't like to hear as much. God has not stopped calling his people to go and proclaim his message to the world around us. Many of us would prefer to stay where we are, part of a larger group being taught by someone that we can relate to and staying "safe". But, that's not the way it works. If we all stay in our small groups then how are we going to introduce anyone else to our loving saviour? If we refuse to step out and proclaim the Gospel message then how are others supposed to hear?

So I say now, be prepared that God could call you. He could call you to step out in faith to a different area of the country or even to a different country. Equally, he could call you to acknowledge your faith to your friends at the coffee morning you already attend. Whatever he calls you to, you need to make a decision about whether you will obey.

You may feel that you are unsuitable for what he calls you to, that you don't have the skills you need, but that is when we need to remember the end of our first reading; "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (9-10) When we step out in Faith, relying on God, he will step up and give us what we need to fulfil what he has called us to.

So let's be prepared for God to call, open to obeying and let's see what God will do through us.
Amen.