

Today's gospel describes what the very early Church, the community of the first disciples, were doing. There was a tremendous sense of immediacy, of urgency, a feeling of almost nervous expectation. The disciples were commissioned to go out and preach the Good News, but they were told not to prepare for this journey: they were to stay wherever they were welcome and eat whatever they were given. In other words, the preaching of the Good News, the Word, was to come before any other consideration. Inevitably this immediacy, urgency and nervous excitement faded and was lost as time went on, once people realised that the return of the Lord wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

Then, the worst calamity to befall the Church happened in 380AD, when Christianity was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire. The emperor Constantine had begun the process about 45 years earlier, and this declaration was its conclusion. Christianity became identified with imperial power. It was in charge. It told people how to live and what to do. It persecuted non-Christians. The word 'pagan' was used at this time to denote someone who still held on to belief in the old Roman gods and goddesses; it was a pejorative term – almost an insult, really – meaning a rustic, an out-of-towner, unsophisticated, naïve. The term 'heathen', coming from the Greek word for Greek, *hellene*, was also used to denote someone who was not a Christian. After a couple of centuries paganism had almost died out

everywhere in Europe except for Scandinavia and a few parts of northern Europe. The original charism of the early Church, which was prophetic, Spirit-filled and inspirational, died out with it. Bishops became princes, temporal rulers and hardly ever visited their dioceses; monks built great monasteries – many of them still the architectural glories of Europe – and became land-owners; priests became property owners with families and the chasm between the hierarchy and the everyday People of God was wide and deep.

Today, we have come full circle and can actually compare ourselves to the early Church, to the disciples whom Jesus addresses in today's gospel. Having lost its temporal power the Church is being called to reclaim and renew its *spiritual* power. Because we face an increasingly hostile world, just as the first disciples did. In those days, the world rejected God in favour of many gods and goddesses – now, it rejects God in favour of a greed-fuelled materialism; then, it rejected Christ in favour of Jupiter or Zeus – now, it rejects Christ in favour of its own collective ego; then, the people prayed to the Fates for the victory of their favourite chariot team at the games; now, they pray to narcissistic celebrities; in those days, they bowed before the kingdoms and empires under the rule of Rome – now, they bow before the monolithic institutes of corporate hunger for profit. The situation is the same.

Therefore, our response should be the same; we cannot reproduce the circumstances in which the first disciples went

out – nor should we want to – but we *can* do it in the same spirit. Like them, we are called to be an antidote to the world, a remedy: to live in the world as best we can and as well as we can (which according to Jesus means being as gentle as a dove and as cunning as a snake) while not compromising our faith; to know the true nature of this world, which is only the shadow of a partial reality; and to live a life that is rooted in hope, trust and joy.

Hope is never misplaced or in vain, even when all hope seems to have gone. We often say: ‘Oh, it’s hopeless...’ but we do not truly mean it. Hope is like walking towards the sun: it frees us and casts all our burdens behind us, mere shadows. In the Lord of the Rings Frodo and Sam are journeying in Mordor when all seems hopeless. Then Sam looks up and Tolkien continues:

“There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star glitter for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.”

We cannot live without hope – we were created with hope inbuilt in our psyche and soul. In Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, over the gates of hell it is written: ‘Abandon Hope All You Who Enter Here.’

That can never be the direction we’re heading in.

Trust is the offspring of hope. Very often we have to trust despite all evidence suggesting that it would be foolish to do so: we lose our health, our wellbeing, we suffer, we are stricken financially, the little place of prayer in our lives shrinks to almost nothing; the early disciples – *because* they were disciples, gave up all security, being with their families, freedom from danger and more. Yet sometimes God's blessings are not in what he gives, but in what he takes away. Our hearts must learn to trust him. There is a process and a path to this: if we first learn to trust ourselves – and this isn't easy at all – we will find ourselves trusting others; and, at last, trusting God.

Joy is the child of hope and trust. There is nothing sentimental or soft about joy – it has nothing to do with what we call 'happiness'. Unlike happiness, it does not depend on outward circumstances. It is a wellspring within each one of us, whether we drink from it or not. Like the first disciples sent by the Lord, we may share joyfully in the sorrows of the world; we cannot take them away, but we can, through personal example, help others to find the joy even in the most difficult of circumstances. When a fissure of pain or desperation opens up in the heart, that is where God will be found; and from that place, too, will come the graces of acceptance and surrender.

Joy is infectious and, in any case, if we are to truly taste the fullness of joy, we have to share it with someone else. It is a conviction of soul that – as the Lord told Julian of

Norwich – ‘all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.’ Julian says that God’s love for the entirety of creation is the source of all our joy:

“Before he made us, he loved us [...] and just as we shall be eternally, so we were treasured and hidden in God, known and loved since before time began.”

The medieval Sufi mystic – who lived not so long before Julian – said the same thing in his own way:

“‘Heaven and earth cannot contain me,’ says the Lord, ‘but the heart of my believing servant contains me.’ By loving us, God loves himself. And since God knows and loves himself from all eternity, it follows that he has loved his creatures from all eternity too, without beginning, and will love them *for eternity without end.*”

The three midwives at the birth of divine love in ourselves are hope, trust and joy. These were the companions of the first disciples when they went out to proclaim the Good News to the waiting world.