

Matthew 10:40-42 Sermon

Historically, being an emissary was a double-edged sword. To an extent the emissary was in a privileged position, carrying the words of their Lord, and enjoying a level of status and diplomatic immunity. But on the other hand, an emissary risked the wrath of an enemy for faithfully delivering a message which could be received badly.

In 1218, Genghis Kahn sent an emissary to Shah Ala al-din Mohammed, the Lord of the central Asian kingdom of Khwarezm. The emissary had good news to convey – the promise of trade agreements and relative friendship with the Mongol empire – but the suspicion of the Shah resulted in the death or humiliation of three emissaries, and the execution of an entire trading company. The Mongol retaliation which followed cost the Shah his land, his life and the lives of up to 3 million people (though that number may be exaggerated).

The point being that being an emissary can be dangerous because you cannot be sure of the welcome you will receive, even if the tidings you bring are good.

In Matthew chapter 10, Jesus sends his disciples as his emissaries. They are to announce that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near – Jesus himself is God come to live among his people, prefiguring a new world where sin and sickness are subdued and death is conquered. But like any emissary, they may not be received well and their message may not be universally accepted. In today's short reading, Jesus assures them of his own identification with them as their message is received. Just as his disciples are identified with Jesus, Jesus is sent from God the Father. The disciples are God's own emissaries and what people do to them, they do to God himself.

Some have described this as the 'Emissary Law.' The emissary is identified so closely with their Lord that what is done to the emissary is effectively done to the Lord himself. This is why Genghis Khan reacted so violently to maltreatment of his emissaries – he took it as a personal insult and a threat to himself. Similarly Jesus's disciples are emissaries of God – if they are welcomed and their message is received, God himself is welcomed and received.

A trio of examples of different kinds of emissary is presented in our reading – prophets, righteous people, and 'little ones' – and for each there is the sense of welcome, meaning how someone is received along with their message, leading to reward. We don't have time to do the detail on this, but often when a trio of things is presented, the focus is on the surprise third item. Like I have a friend who has a friend with three children, beautifully named, Faith, Hope... and Kevin. This grouping in threes happens in lots of Jesus's teaching – the Good Samaritan for example, when the Samaritan follows on from the priest and then the Levite. The point here is that few of us, as Jesus's followers, would identify with the prophets or the righteous people. Both of these would feel like super-Christians who should be welcomed: these are the ones who know what they are talking about and who you can really appreciate God through.

Surprisingly though, the third of the trio are the 'little ones,' who are Jesus's followers. These are all believers, big or small, young or old, literate about their faith or not, and dare I say it, with a track record of righteousness – or not! Jesus says that even someone who extends the most basic of welcome (just a cup of water – the lowest limit of social nicety at the time) will be rewarded. They have provided for Jesus's emissary and therefore for Jesus himself.

I think there are three things we can take away from this reading, all of which are based around the idea of the disciples as Jesus's emissaries.

Firstly, there is the sense in which being Jesus's emissary isn't just reserved for the brightest and the best. All of us who are followers of Jesus are witnesses to what he has done, in the Bible and also in our own lives. Even if we don't feel equipped, don't feel 'good enough', we are all Jesus's 'little ones' and God will reward those who welcome us and our message of Jesus.

Secondly, as Jesus's emissaries, we are to be fearless in our confession of Jesus and his Good News for all the world. Even in the midst of conflict, we can stand with our Lord and courageously recount the deeds of God. Even if we don't fully understand, we can tell of God's goodness. Even if we have doubts, we can proclaim the presence of God in the world and in our lives. As we do so, we are identified with our Lord, Jesus, and the response of those we talk to is a response to Jesus as much as it is a response to us. This helps us in our fears – derision of us, is actually derision of Jesus; violence towards us is actually violence towards Jesus, withdrawal of friendship from us is actually a withdrawal of friendship towards Jesus. All this and more, our Lord has already suffered for us on the cross, and as his emissaries we are prepared to identify with Jesus in his sufferings and in his glory.

Then thirdly and finally, there is the question that lingers over this passage: Why tell disciples that those who they are sent to will be rewarded? Surely, the people to be rewarded should be the emissary, not the potential enemy they are sent to visit??

I listened to a podcast about ex-Prime Minister, Boris Johnson's, honours list, where the presenters were arguing that rather than members of the civil service and advisors to the prime minister receiving honour for their work, they should be mindful that service in this capacity is a reward in itself. A similar argument was made by George Washington in his refusal of compensation for his time as President. In essence he said that service to his country was its own reward.

However, the talk from Jesus in our reading doesn't mention rewards for his disciples (though he does elsewhere), but the assumption is that the emissary serves his Lord faithfully, and this privilege of service is a reward itself. It is the audience who is rewarded by God when the disciple-emissary is welcomed and their message is received, even if only on the most basic of levels. Imagine being an emissary, sent deep into enemy territory, and finding that those who have the power to reject and kill you will be rewarded if they simply give you a glass of water!

I wonder whether what's going on here is more to do with how the disciples see the other people rather than being about rewards themselves. Perhaps Jesus is reminding his followers that though he sends them on a dangerous mission where the costs are high, the people he sends them to are not enemies but people who God wishes to bless? Everywhere they step, therefore, and everyone they talk to about Jesus, are people who God is able to bless. Just as rejection of the disciples is a rejection of Jesus, so welcome of the disciples and reception of their message is a welcome of Jesus and a chance for Jesus to bless the hearer.

Thinking like this dramatically changes the mindset of Jesus's emissary. No longer are they grudgingly taking a message to an enemy, but instead they are taking God's blessing to all who will listen as they, through their identification with Christ, literally bring Jesus near to the people they visit. This way of thinking changes everything – for them as well as us.

Let us be Jesus's emissaries – no matter how we feel we don't deserve to be one, or how badly we feel equipped and trained. Let us fearlessly bring Jesus to those around us, knowing that Jesus was rejected long before we were. And let us treat every other person as a potential object of God's blessing through us as they receive the Good News of Jesus, a new Kingdom dawning and a glorious future on that day when our Lord comes to reign forever. Amen.