



ST HELIERS CHURCH  
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



# TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

## Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> June 2023, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

*19 The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. 2 He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." 3 But he urged them strongly, so they turned aside to him and entered his house, and he made them a feast and baked unleavened bread, and they ate... 12 Then the men said to Lot, "Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city—bring them out of the place. 13 For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it."*

### **Genesis 19:1-4, 12-13**

*5 Jesus sent out [the twelve] with the following instructions: "Do not take a road leading to gentiles, and do not enter a Samaritan town, 6 but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' 8 Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease; cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. 9 Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, 10 no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff, for labourers deserve their food. 11 Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. 12 As you enter the house, greet it. 13 If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. 14 If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. 15 Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town. **Matthew 10:5-15***

## As you go, proclaim!

So last week you will remember that Jesus commissioned the twelve disciples. And this week's reading from Matthew carries on and elaborates on that commissioning. Jesus has called the twelve – and now he sends them out into Israel to proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near.

One of things that immediately struck me about this passage is that Jesus doesn't spend a lot of time going into detail about the *content* of the message they are to proclaim. He simply says, 'proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near'. How? By curing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons. By enhancing the quality of life of those around them. It's a simple message that he gives them.

Instead, Jesus spends a lot more time explaining to them *how* they are to go; the manner in which they are to go. We're told they are to give without payment and they're to go without anything with them. They're not to take any money. They're not to take any provisions. In short, they are to throw themselves at the mercy of their hosts. They are to be guests.

Jesus clarifies that they deserve to be paid. They deserve to eat. But if they get paid, it needs to come at the initiative of their hosts. If they're not offered food and shelter, then they're to move on.

To our ears, it seems like an odd thing for Jesus to require. Surely, if you're wanting to ensure the mission succeeds then the best way to do that is to make sure you're prepared: take food, money, clothes -- whatever you need – with you.

But Jesus is very particular on this point. You are to be guests. It's as if the manner in which they come – *as guests* – is *as* important to the message as the message itself.

I want us to think about that today. Often in the church, we play the host. We welcome in. That's our motto isn't it? "Reaching out and welcoming in". A wonderful statement that embodies that radical inclusiveness and hospitality of the gospel. All are welcome here.

But we're very much the host. Inviting people to come to us. And even when we go out, it's often on our terms. We're providing something for others, playing the host. Whether it's this or that programme. Or this event. Or that group. Whatever it is: we are the host. Even in its mission and outreach, the church has become accustomed to playing the host.

But how often do we think about ourselves as guests? Guests in our neighbourhood? Guests of our wider community? I think it's really hard for churches to do so, because in many cases we've been in a community so long. We're well established. But in our reading today, in talking about mission, Jesus wants us to

think about ourselves precisely in this way. He wants us to go out not as hosts, not as the ones in control. He wants us to go out with our pockets empty. Ready to receive.

And he's drawing on a rich tradition that stretches right back into the Hebrew scriptures. You know there are many stories in the scriptures in which God's messenger comes in the guise of a stranger. Perhaps the most famous story is from the book of Genesis, in which Abraham offers hospitality to three strangers. And of course, it turns out these strangers are angels, messengers of God. By welcoming them in, Abraham receives God, and is blessed.

Our Old Testament reading today gives us another example. The same strangers that visited Abraham carry on their journey and go to Sodom – a town infamous for its depravity and lack of hospitality. It's a direct contrast to Abraham's hospitality. As the story goes, the strangers are going to see whether the town is as hostile and violent as its reputation suggests. Abraham, in his goodness, begs God not to destroy the town if ten righteous people are found.

And so there in Sodom the strangers encounter a man called Lot who, like Abraham, is a righteous person. How does he display that righteousness? By offering these strangers hospitality and safety. As a result, he and his family are saved while the rest of Sodom is destroyed. It's a fairly dark story and one that requires a lot of unpacking, which we don't have time for today.

The point is that, time and again in the scriptures, God visits people in the guise of a stranger. God puts himself at the mercy of the host – almost to test them. And through welcoming of the stranger, God himself is welcomed in and God's salvation and blessing comes to the house.

Jesus is putting the disciples – and us – in that same tradition. He is sending us out as messengers of God, literally angels. We are bearers of the good news that God is with us. And the way we do this is *as guests*.

Why does Jesus insist on this point? Well, I reckon being a guest is a lot harder than being a host. Because as the host, you're in control. It's your space. You set the culture. It's comfortable. But as the guest, you're not in control. You make yourself vulnerable. You put yourself at the mercy of your host. You enter the unknown and it's uncomfortable.

I was recently at Te Tahawai Marae in Edgewater. And I've been on marae a few times before but it's an uncomfortable experience for me. I know some words, some customs. But I'm still worried that I'll make a mistake in powhiri, or do something to offend, or make a fool of myself.

And I find, particularly for me as an introvert, the biggest barrier to getting to know others is the fear of the unknown. The fear of that discomfort. The vulnerability you put yourself through.

Now as it happened, the powhiri and the meal afterwards was a lovely time. It was uncomfortable. But it was enjoyable. And the unknown is now known. I know some faces on that marae now. I know what to expect. And going back isn't nearly as scary.

Here's why I think Jesus wants us to be guests before we're hosts. He wants us to overcome our fear. To come as people of love and peace. To make ourselves vulnerable – because in doing so, we cross over the barrier of difference. The unknown becomes known. The stranger becomes friend.

At a time when I think social cohesion and relationship is breaking down in our society; at a time when society is becoming more polarised, more adversarial; at a time when people increasingly live in an echo chamber – one of the most radical things we can do as a church is to be guests; to cross over that barrier of difference; and to find that the person out there ... is actually kind of like us.

It strikes me that in being guests, we are not only doing what Jesus commanded, we are actually doing what Jesus did. In him, God comes as a guest among us. In love and peace, Jesus puts himself at the mercy of humankind, making himself vulnerable.

There is of course a danger to being the guest, to walking that way of peace. For Christ, it was the way of the cross. But that is our way too; to be sent out as lambs among wolves with nothing in our pockets but the love of God...

... So, I've had numerous discussions with several people since I've arrived about one particular element of our Sunday service, which we do every week. I wonder if you can guess which part of the service it is. It is the processing in of the Bible at the beginning of the service. And the processing out at the end.

Some people love it. Some people suspect it's ... Anglican. To be honest, I don't know where the practice originated. Some Presbyterian churches do it, others don't. But people have been asking why!

Well, the best reason I've heard ties in closely with our reading today. It's that the church has been tasked to go proclaim the good news of the kingdom *out there*. We are people of the Word. And the Word ever goes before us, leading us out.

And so the service ends with the gospel leading us out into the world to be guests. It directs our attention out there and reminds us this good news is not ours to keep hid away. We have no right. No, the good news of God-with-us is for everyone.

That same Word which has led out into the world, calls us back to worship every week, inviting us to lift up our world in prayer, to pray for its healing, and to hasten towards the kingdom, which is coming. Thanks be to God. Amen.