

Do you remember the time you learned to ride a bicycle? This will be a more distant memory for some of us. We watched other people doing it – they looked so capable, so confident but it looked so difficult. What if I can't stop, what if I fall off?

Then we were persuaded to try it. Maybe we started with stabilisers but eventually they had to come off. Or maybe, as in my case, someone helped. They hold the saddle, walking along beside us, stopping the worst of the wobbles, encouraging us to keep trying.

Then we finally set off on our own, the wobbles stopped, we steered, we stopped, we didn't fall off. I thought of that process as I read our Gospel reading for today, back to when I was learning, when I was watching my children do it, watching my grandchildren do it.

We watch, we are shown, we do.

We've already read of Jesus calling his disciples, that group of fishermen, the tax collector, the hotheads. They began to follow, they watched Jesus in action, as he declared the Kingdom of heaven has come near, is close at hand, in his life, in his ministry. They heard him teach, they saw him heal, they saw him reach out to those who others did not want to know, who were banished from family, from community, pushed out onto the outskirts of villages, the lepers, those in deep distress who others saw as demon possessed.

Now, in our Gospel reading he sends them out to do as he did. He sends them to the very people he himself went to, the sick, to those who mourn, to those no-one else wanted to know about, the leper, those in deep distress, declaring that the Kingdom of heaven, from which so many felt excluded, was drawing near.

In Jesus' time there was not the same scientific approach to health and sickness as we have in our contemporary society. Health was seen as a blessing from God. By the same token, disease was seen as a sign of God's displeasure at sin. This had its effect not only on the sufferer, who feeling they must have sinned in some way felt God at a distance; it affected the attitude of society at large to the sufferer, as one to be avoided, to be excluded. And so the leper, the distressed were excluded from the community. In extremes the blind could be excluded. Jesus sends his disciples to declare that the Kingdom of heaven is near. The Kingdom, in the eyes of Jesus, is not for an exclusive elite, it is open to all. Healing is a sign that even the excluded, those living on the edge are being welcomed into the Kingdom.

In our own day, the Church, the Body of Christ is called to be a sign, an agent of the Kingdom of God; called not to be an inward looking spiritual elite but rather an instrument of God's healing and reconciling love in a broken and hurting world.

In the wake of the tumult that occurred following the killing of George Floyd in the United States, there has been a very honest reflection on how racialism, racial stereotyping, racial discrimination is present in our own society. On the

morning radio programmes, people have shared experiences of racial harassment, witnessing racial harassment on public transport. There has been discussion on how we as fellow citizens can stand alongside those who are facing such treatment.

Down through the years, Christians have been in the vanguard of campaigns for social justice. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century we have the figure of William Wilberforce campaigning for over 20 years for the abolition of the slave trade and Lord Shaftsbury waging his own campaign against child labour in the factories of Victorian England; both acting out of deep Christian commitment, facing trenchant opposition from vested interests, whose profit margins depended on the deep rooted injustice of slavery, of exploitation of child labour. Then in the 20<sup>th</sup> century we saw Rev Dr Martin Luther King, in the face of violent opposition, leading a Civil Rights Campaign characterised by non-violence in the face of deep injustices in American society, again speaking out of a passionately held Christian conviction. Then as the 20<sup>th</sup> century came to a close, the campaign against apartheid in South Africa by Christian leaders including Archbishop Desmond Tutu brought an end to the system of apartheid and the Dutch Reformed Church formally repented of its former support.

We, as members of the Body of Christ, are called to be witnesses in our own time, in the situations we find ourselves in; witnesses to truth in the face of untruth; to justice in the face of injustice; to reconciliation in the face of forces that would divide; to love in the face of hate.

We do this because this is what we have seen in the person of Jesus, in his life, in his teaching, in his death and resurrection - and he calls us to do the same, to be witnesses, heralds of the Kingdom of heaven. In the words of the hymn:

Freely, freely you have received,  
    freely, freely give;  
go in my name and because you believe,  
    others will know that I live.