

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Lord appointed seventy-two others whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he himself intended to visit. “Into whatever house you enter, first say: ‘Peace to this household’...Whatever town you enter, once they welcome you, eat whatever they set before you, cure the sick and say to them: ‘The kingdom of God is at hand.’”

Luke 10, 1-12, 17-20



There's a certain urgency about Luke's account of Jesus sending out the seventy-two disciples. An explanation of that would appear to be the fact that Luke and the Christian community of his time believed that the end of the world was imminent. Consequently, it was important to get Jesus' message of God's love for the world to as many people as possible in the short time that was left. That seventy-two disciples were chosen to go out door-knocking is Luke's way of saying that Jesus' message was for the whole world. The people of Luke's time believed that the world was composed of seventy-two nations because that was the number of descendants who had come from Shem, Ham and Japeth, Noah's three sons who had survived the great flood.

The clear message of this account that we hear in today's gospel is that it is now our turn, as disciples and followers of Jesus, to carry on the task that was entrusted to those seventy-two. And while we might be inclined to excuse ourselves by saying that we are not educated enough or have no skill in selling anything, the expectation is that we can proclaim the message of Jesus very simply by living it. St. Francis of Assisi put it very nicely when he urged his followers to do likewise: "Go and proclaim the Gospel, and, if necessary, use words."

If you have read these weekly reflections before, you will surely have noticed that I am a collector of stories. A couple of years ago, I came upon a story in a periodical called *Commonweal*. The story was simply entitled: *The Knock*, and was recounted by a university magazine editor by the name of John Doyle who wrote about the experiences of one of his friends who happened to hold two positions in a small town: soldier and policeman. That means that he was the one who carried the responsibility of knocking on doors to tell people that someone close to them had been killed fighting in a war overseas or had been involved in a fatal accident. This soldier/policeman now tells how he had become a student of doors and how people open them:

"First, you never bang on a door, even if you are knocking for the fifth time and have been freezing on the porch for ten minutes. I always start with my knuckles, then go to the knocker or the bell if I have to. Most doors have a good loud hollow sound. Usually people answer right away...Women who answer the door look first to see who you are. Men just open it. When I wear my army uniform, people know immediately why I am there, whereas if I am the policeman, it could be for anything. I have had people cry in my arms. Some invite me in and give me tea, even after I have delivered the news. It's like their automatic-pilot function is to show courtesy. I've had some people refuse to believe me, and some who got angry and asked me to leave. The thing I look for is shock. I've had people faint, men as well as women. People can go into serious shock and you have to be prepared for that. I carry a medical kit in the car. I try to visit in the late morning. I stay as long as is necessary. I have

been in some houses for hours. Sometimes I have waited with a person all afternoon until his or her spouse came home from work. You mostly just listen. People tell stories. Often their first reaction, after the initial shock and grief, is to tell stories...It is a difficult job and it wears you down. I try to do it with as much dignity and courtesy as possible. There are more visits now with the wars, but I still make more calls as a policeman. The message I deliver most is that a loved one has been killed in a motor accident. Often teenagers. The hardest messages to deliver are about the deaths of children. There is nothing I can say - other than the facts - to a mother or a father in that situation...I take as much time as is needed. When I am absolutely sure that the initial shock has lessened and the person is safe to be alone in the house, I express my condolences and prepare to leave. At the door, I usually add that I will keep the deceased in my prayers. I make it clear that I am saying this as a private citizen, not as a soldier or a policeman. In my experience, saying that and meaning it matters a lot. Generally, I stop at the church on the way back and say the rosary. It's become a form of closure for me, a way to hand over the pain." ("The Knock" by Brian Doyle, *Commonweal*, 9th February, 2007)

Jesus commissioned a large group of disciples to take his message of hope to a confused and hurting world through word and action. He did that because he could not do it all single-handedly. Jesus' action as described by Luke is probably the earliest account of carefully planned and organised ministry that we have. It illustrates that God's dream for our world will only be fully realised through disciplined and detailed planning. It requires concentrated human effort from committed disciples, for it certainly does not happen by magic. That's the realisation that the man who is both Police and Army officer has come to. He understands that he is also a messenger of the Gospel and, as such, has a responsibility to be an agent of compassion, encouragement and hope for those who are numbed by grief or hurting in any other way. It's that very same realisation to which we all must come if we are to be credible witnesses of the Gospel and genuine disciples of Jesus.