

Two lamentations of woe! Woe to you Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida! As these two geographical references may not be immediately relevant to most gathered here for this Synod in Perth, let us say it is almost the same as saying 'Woe to you Fremantle! Woe to you Kalgoorlie! Perhaps not the best or easiest way of beginning a synod sermon.

It would probably not surprise you if I were also to tell you that these verses which appear in Matthew's Gospel, as well, are regularly excised from the Matthean reading when it comes up in the Sunday lectionary.

Well, what are we then to make of them and what might they be saying to us at this Synod. First of all, let us put them in their setting within Luke's Gospel. They are part of the great commissioning of the seventy-two to go ahead to every town or place where Jesus was about to go. They are to be bearers of the good news but they are given strict instructions on what to take, where to go and what to do.

Where they are welcomed, they are to heal and pronounce that the Kingdom of God is near. Where there is no welcome, no desire to live in a way that reflects a faithful relationship with God, they are also to pronounce that the Kingdom of God is near but that their rejection of the good news will bring a judgment far more severe than received by the city of Sodom.

It is at this point that Jesus makes the pronouncements "Woe to you Chorazin, Woe to you Bethsaida" They are lamentations rather than oracles or curses – more an observation than a condemnation. Jesus

prophetically foresees the fate awaiting these two towns. God has given them a chance but if, unlike Nineveh, they do not repent then their fate is sealed.

Furthermore, their fate will be worse than that which afflicted the foreign cities of Tyre and Sidon. Because in the face of such signs, such miracles, those proud foreign cities would have acknowledged God and God's call to faithful living a long time ago and repented.

At this point the tone of Jesus' voice seems to become more pressing ***And you Capernaum*** - one can feel the emotion, sadness, and even a sense of betrayal breaking in. The ancient oracle against Babylon in First Isaiah is here reversed and directed against a town in Israel, Capernaum, the town where Jesus and his disciples have been the most active. The fate that awaits this beloved city is being brought down to hell.

Luke then completes this speech to the seventy-two with an assertion of the unity between the messengers and the one who gave them their commission. We come to recognise a line of authority and revelation which starts from God passes on to Jesus and ends up with the disciples.

Now we know that the experience of the early Church was often one of great hardship and not being listened to and being rejected, often physically, were common experiences. This assurance - that their endeavours were part of God's plan and judgment, and that they were, indeed, in communion with God must have been a great comfort and

consolation, not just at the time of Jesus' own ministry but also at the time of the early Church.

So far, I speak in the past. But this commission continues to this present day and it has been my privilege to spend time with overseas partners in places where missionary work and evangelism very similar to that at the time of Jesus still goes on.

On the border between Thailand and Myanmar I have spent time with Karen catechists and deacons who traverse incredibly rugged terrain, trying to avoid the numerous landmines that dot the countryside, to witness to the gospel. They, too, bring healing through prayer, education and a supply of simple medicines.

In PNG in areas regarded as low or no contact the extraordinary literacy work and bible translation being undertaken largely by women also brings good news. It is truly marvelous to hear testimonies of how being able to read the bible not only transforms one's inner self but also the whole community's perception of one's worth and role.

And then there is the Philippines, where in the remote tribal parts of Northern Luzon, I have been present on several occasions when a whole community has been baptized. While the strict instructions which Jesus gave to the seventy-two may have been varied in these different places, there can be no doubt that the great commission in Matthew 28:19 to go and make disciples of all nations continues.

It is not always easy - hardship and rejection are also part of the experience - and texts in Scripture such as today's passage in Luke continue to offer reassurance. However, from my observation there is one area where Luke's account seems divorced from contemporary reality. Luke's commissioning is followed immediately by a return by those who had been commissioned with stories of success. Missionary work in the contexts mentioned above tends to be over a much more extended period of time.

Well, some marvelous stories from the field, but I began with Perth, Fremantle and Kalgoorlie, and we are the ones commissioned here, so how is it going for us? I am not going to put you immediately on the spot by expecting an answer. But it does seem to me that Synods are a very appropriate place for this question to be asked.

As I travel around the Australian Church, I am struck by how so much of our missiology has been framed by a particular understanding and experience of the commission in Matthew's gospel which I would suggest now hinders us. We still seem to operate out of a mindset that views mission as something that happens in foreign climes. It is essentially a foreign exercise. It needs to take place out there or over there. It is often an extra or an add on, a special collection or a special project or a special person.

Historically, the Great Commission in Matthew's Gospel came to take prominence in the Church's thinking about mission as the first wave of globalisation in the western world began with the emergence of long distance sailing ships and colonial powers. It is often forgotten that for

the first 1400 years of the Church's life, the text from Luke's parable of the wedding banquet, (Luke 14:23). Then the master told the servant, "Go out to the highways and the lanes and make them come in, so that my house shall be full." was the greatest impetus for mission and lay behind the establishment of Christendom.

Perhaps the compulsion within that text jars a little on our ears, but the text does bring our focus back to here, right where we are, mission in this, our place and there is a sense of urgency. We, the Church, are the ones commissioned for this work and we are the ones accountable for fulfilling the commission.

As we look around at the state of the Church and its current standing in minds of people, at the highly secular nature of our society, and at the challenges from other faiths, I believe it is often far easier to limit the domain and responsibility for mission to those foreign climes.

But in doing this we fail in our vocation as the Church, the people of God gathered together, nurtured and strengthened by our worship of God, and sent out into the world as witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ.

Yes, it is vitally important to continue to share, support and learn from the work in other places, but that needs to connect with our own engagement in mission in our place and among our people.

Yes, it is a daunting task, and it is hard and maybe it involves rejection but this is where faith and God's assurances should equip us.

Or perhaps the concern is more about where to begin.

And Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.

He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me

to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives

and recovering of sight to the blind,

to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”

If we follow the example of Jesus, Paul, and the other early apostles and evangelists then we should go to the margins, seek out the wounds and wounded. Heal people, society, creation and confidently proclaim that the Kingdom of God is near.

The time is now, the commission is ours and our failure to fulfil it has the potential to result in devastation!

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