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Dear Friends,

The sun is shining, the birds are singing, a lawnmower is gently buzzing its way across a lawn a couple of fences away and the breeze is rustling the leaves of the tall poplars at the end of my garden. There is a joyful air of summer normality.

Enjoy the sunshine, and stay safe.

This comes with my love and prayers as ever

Claire

The joy of not fitting in

Bible reading: Luke 11:14-28

Jesus and Beelzebul

Now he was casting out a demon that was mute; when the demon had gone out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed. But some of them said, 'He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.' Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven. But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? —for you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul. Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armour in which he trusted and divides his plunder. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

The Return of the Unclean Spirit

'When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but not finding any, it says, "I will return to my house from which I came." When it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first.'

True Blessedness

While he was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!' But he said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!'

Reflection

In the past, I have been somewhat critical of those who treat the brief descriptives of passages in the Bible as also being the word of God; I have even heard the occasional one used as a proof text! Having said that, the description for our Gospel reading is perhaps helpful; in my Bible, it is 'Growing opposition along the way'.

In our reading, we get the sense that Jesus didn't fit neatly into the religious leader's structures or strictures at the time (see Mark 3:20ff). They tried to sideline him and even attempted to claim that he was in league with the devil to discredit what he was doing. We need to remind ourselves that some of Jesus' closest friends included fishermen, a reformed tax collector and fanatical nationalists. These were not the sort of people you would choose if you didn't want to shake up the system.

As we emerge from the restrictions, my speculation is the future of the rural church will increasingly utilise and draw in people who don't neatly fit with the structures; people who don't speak in church talk, nor perhaps use the 'correct' liturgy. For many, there will be growing opposition along the way as they begin to challenge how we are church. Please hear my heart: there is nothing wrong with training and spiritual formation, and I am in no way seeking to discourage such disciplines. From my standpoint, I am simply saying that I see an increase in what God is doing in and through the laity in many rural congregations and that it is not always an easy fit.

Jesus challenges our notion of security, safety, and how we might view society; I cannot help but wonder if we still have something more to learn from this as we emerge from the pandemic?

For many, the notion of returning to 'business as normal' in the hope of seeing pre-2020 levels of attendance are very tempting; there is a notion of security and familiarity in this, and yet I believe we have potentially witnessed the most significant change in the church since the reformation. I don't think we can go back, but instead we need to press on with our security placed wholly in God, joining in with what God is already up to.

We all want to take as few risks in life as possible; I get this. The problem is that we tend to avoid any course of action in church that involves risk, which means we invariably play it safe. Going forward, I believe God's church needs to be less risk-averse, willing to try things, release people and even stop some things, despite the potential risks of doing so. In Luke 11, the people demanded a miraculous sign. They wanted a guarantee, evidence that this was 'of God'. Similarly, many people today want some form of assurance that a change will work before it is accepted; such thinking is not an act of faith.

The people that Jesus mixed with often brought criticism, and yet he was demonstrating an inclusive society, where those others avoided were often the ones he intentionally hung around with. I wonder, are our rural congregations too insular and tribal? Is there a just criticism that we have avoided working more consciously with those in the adjoining parish, village, with those whose 'ecclesiology' – their approach to being and doing church – is different from our own?

I wonder how we each might carefully and prayerfully reflect on what 'hearing the word of God and obeying it' might look like in our rural context. It might mean a closer working together with sisters and brothers of different traditions to our own. It might involve identifying and releasing those in our churches who have not had formal theological training. It could even mean that we have to engage in cross-cultural mission and travel outside our villages! We may face opposition to such acts, but as Jesus demonstrates throughout the Gospels, following God is rarely the popular choice.

Prayer

Sovereign God,
creator and sustainer of the universe,
present and active in our rural communities,
open our eyes to your greatness,
and our lives to your power.
Forgive us that so often in our lives
we lose sight of who you are and all you can do.
We view things from a human rather than divine perspective,
allowing our thoughts and actions to be tied down on earth
rather than soaring up to heaven.
Open our eyes to your greatness,
and our lives to your power,
so that what can still be, does not become what could have been.
Broaden our horizons,
increase our faith to attempt and expect great things
even though they initially seem beyond us.
Open our eyes to your greatness,
and our lives to your power.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

Response

- Make a list of all the community groups those in your congregation are part of, for example bowls club, food bank, school governors, etc. Actively pray for each of these groups, and for one another, seeking to discern what God might be already doing and how you as a church might intentionally join in.
- Prayerfully reflect on how you might join and bless others worshiping in nearby villages. How might you work closer together, recognising that the act of generosity and openness needs to begin with you.
- Seek to affirm, recognise, encourage, and release someone in your own congregation to share in an element of the next service. Perhaps by reading a prayer or working with you on planning a message. It might take you longer to do this initially, but in the long-term, it could release some of your time!

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