Sermon Isaiah 35: 3-6 Luke 10: 1-9

Today we're remembering the ministry of St Luke: physician, disciple of Jesus and author. His first book, the Gospel of Luke, explores Jesus' life and mission with a particular emphasis on the poor, the sick and the disregarded, and records the stories of women (which throughout history have often gone untold). His second book records the Risen Jesus' final days on earth, the coming of the promised Advocate, the Holy Spirit, and then the history of the early church and the ways in which Jesus' friends and early followers, including women, sought to continue Jesus' mission enabled by the Helper that Jesus had promised them. I think Luke is fascinating because the thing we know him for - writing - is in fact an expression of an earlier and enduring calling, that of being a physician, a close observer of the human condition and a prescriber of remedies for the ills of individuals and society. He was layer upon layer true to himself and demonstrates the sort of authenticity that so many younger people are searching for. The need for 'authenticity' is something for us all to reflect on at a personal level, but it seems to me that it is also something that we, the church, need to demonstrate too, at a local, national and international church. If we are to disarm the use of the symbols and language of Christianity by those who seek strife and exclusion rather than peace and healing, we need to ensure that our actions and initiatives are not only perceived to be good fun, a blessing to our community, maybe even 'quintessentially British' in themselves but must also speak of our primary calling to be worshippers of God, followers of Jesus and the bearers of 'Good News'.

Last Sunday at the St Luke's 11am service we held a baptism service for Mo, who has been on an exciting journey of discovery and has found Jesus as his personal Saviour. During the service Tudor reminded us that in this we were continuing in the centuries old calling of the church summarised in Jesus' Great Commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age". Mt 28: 19&20. It's an exciting thought, that here in our parish we're connected through the practice of baptism to Jesus and his mission! Our 'layers' can be peeled back to Jesus' mission and God's plan and we are authentically God's people. But, given that we're not quite at the point of holding weekly baptisms, how can we, the local church, layer upon layer be true to that mission in the times in between? And in the dark times? And times when hope has worn thin?

Today's reading from Isaiah would help us to answer that question at any time, but there's an extra poignancy to it this week because the context of the original prophecy is so similar to the events we've seen in Gaza and Israel. Biblical scholars debate when it was written, but there's some agreement around the idea that it's a bridging passage between a time of exile and the return from exile to devastation. It's a passage that describes God's good promise of peace, wholeness and well-being though it has not yet been experienced. (In my mind's eye I see those terrible pictures of Palestinians who have returned to ruined apartment buildings in search of the bodies of loved ones and the traumatised hostages hugged tight by their

families but with anguish etched into their faces.) Isaiah's prophecy is that God will bring healing and restoration even in the face of such horrors. Like streams flowing in a desert bringing growth and bounty, God's mission is to save, and Jesus' life, death and resurrection are the turning point of that story, the point at which we are all drawn in to God's saving presence. Death, the final enemy has been overcome, and Love has brought hope and everlasting life. This dear friends, is the good news that we have received and is also the message of healing that we, along with St Luke, are commissioned to share.

The 72 disciples who Jesus sent out like lambs amongst wolves were also commissioned to bring healing, but they did not have the complete story. They were able to share what they had seen and experienced of Jesus' ministry, but the utter transformation of life out of death was a work in progress. However, Jesus' instructions give us a great framework for checking that our words and actions, our strategies and plans are true to God's healing mission:

⁴Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. God's mission is urgent! How easy it is to procrastinate and prevaricate ...

⁵Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" ⁶And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. There are people all around us – family, friends, neighbours, colleagues, people we recognise in Tesco. God knows their hearts. We are simply called to offer 'peace': an invitation to a special service, an offer to pray for a situation that they face, encouragement to come along to a church activity. People are generally pretty polite, and we lose nothing by inviting someone to something, even if they say, 'no thank you'. Let's all make the most of the upcoming season of Remembrance, and of the opportunities that the festive season brings by making sure that our services, words, music, welcome and atmosphere, all speak of God's great love and the healing offered through Jesus. Let's invite people to them and welcome them, praying that the peace we offer will be accepted.

⁸Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." When someone says 'yes please' then like the 72 we need to follow through, to be grateful for their support for us, to 'stick with' people and to be our true selves, worshippers of God and followers of Jesus who have experienced healing and transformation in or own lives and who share the Good News that we have received.