

OCTOBER 18, 2019 Friday of the 28th Week of Ordinary Time

Feast of St. Luke, Evangelist

2 Tm 4:10-17b

Ps 145:10-13,17-18

Lk 10:1-9

On this Feast of St. Luke, we listen to Paul's letter to his trusted emissary Timothy, in which he complains that he has no one to travel with, except for Luke. In Luke's account of Paul's travels in the Acts of the Apostles, we find at several points a sudden change in the narrative: the so-called "we passages" in the Acts of the Apostles (see Acts 16: 10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28). Up to Acts 10:16, Luke remained out of the picture, writing in the third person. In verses 1 to 9, he reports Paul's trips to Phrygia, Galatia, Mysia, Bithynia, and Troas. But starting at verse 10, Luke writes in the first-person plural: "We sought passage to Macedonia at once, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them." Luke embarks with Paul and, through his skilful narrative, invites his readers along on the missionary journey.

Luke reveals a detail about himself at the beginning of his Gospel. He writes that he is presenting the events "that have been fulfilled among us" just as he had received them from "those who were eyewitnesses," those who were with Jesus from the beginning of his public ministry (see Lk 1:1-2). In this introductory section, Luke reveals to his audience that even he is not a direct witness to the account he offers. The evangelist is part of the emerging Christian community thanks to the personal witness of those who had personally heard the preaching of Jesus and witnessed the crucifixion and resurrection.

Matthew (10:1), Mark (6:7), and Luke (9:1) each describe Jesus' calling of "the Twelve" and, after a series of instructions, his sending them on a mission to announce the Good News. But only Luke reports that Jesus later commissioned the larger group of seventy-two disciples, whom we hear about in today's Gospel. According to Luke, many more missionaries than the Twelve were involved in the first evangelization. Just before choosing and sending them, Jesus had begun his journey to Jerusalem (see Lk 9:51). He sent the seventy-two ahead of him, to prepare for his arrival in various cities. This prefigures Luke's personal experience traveling with Paul.

This sending of the seventy-two (or seventy, according to some manuscripts) both anticipates and provides a model for Christian missionary activity to all peoples. In the Jewish tradition, the nations of the earth that heard the promulgation of the Sinai law numbered seventy (see Gen 10, Dt 32:8); Jesus' disciples, then, are sent to all peoples.

The passage proclaimed in today's liturgy presents the apostolate as revelation of the kingdom and of the judgment already present in the world. For Luke, it is not a matter of announcing to Israel the greatness of the kingdom, but of proclaiming to the nations that the kingdom is near. The evangelist writes at a time when there are already, "in all nations," witnesses of the resurrected one. This is the decisive moment in history, in which everyone is offered the opportunity to become part of the kingdom of God.

The method, character, and perspectives of the missionary work carried out by the seventy-two disciples are similar to those of the Twelve. Jesus' instructions open with a description of the situation; abundant harvests and few workers stand side by side in significant contrast. Hence the categorical recommendation: "so ask the master of the harvest." "Prayer is the soul of mission," Pope Francis wrote in his October 22, 2017, letter to Cardinal Filoni. God, who is the master of the harvest, takes the initiative; he calls and sends. It is an invitation to join the prayer of Jesus and his exodus to the Father, which is expressed in his delivering himself into the hands of people: "I am sending you like lambs among wolves." Missionaries can never rely on force, power, or violence. They are rich only in the faith and prayer that keeps them rooted in the personal relationship of love with Jesus, the master who sends them.

Poverty of beginnings becomes the foundation and sign of their freedom and of full dedication to the one task that frees them from any impediment or delay. All this is precisely defined in a series of norms: free from any obstacle, those who are sent aim directly at the goal, without stopping, not even for the greeting that, according to Eastern custom, would have required a lot of time (see 2 Kgs 4:29). The true greeting, on the contrary, is reserved for those to whom the mission is directed. This greeting is not a simple prophecy or proclamation, but an effective word that gives joy and happiness. In short, it is messianic "peace," which comes with salvation (see Lk 10:5-6). Those who are sent, like the Lord, establish with those who receive them relationships in which living the peace of the kingdom has begun. Their behaviour leads them to depend on those who welcome them, to whom they entrust themselves and their very lives.

Missionaries are therefore fully exposed, even as regards their livelihoods, to the risks of the mission: welcome or rejection, success or failure. “House” and “city” symbolize private life and public life. Those who are sent depend on the hospitality of those who accept the message, but nothing can stop or hinder them from carrying out their mission; they are missionaries who bring the last and urgent appeal of the possibility of salvation, which must reach the ears of all, the hearts of all, whatever the cost.