

Sermon for Sunday 18 June 2017 at 8.00am (Patronal Festival)

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There has been very little to off-set the unspeakable horror of this week's tragedy in London. Because of the immediacy of modern communication systems, we've been spared nothing – not the ferocity and speed of the flames, nor the agony of those unable to be rescued, nor the heart-breaking anguish of those looking for lost friends and relatives. I make no apologies for speaking of this because it is something which has deeply affected me. I cannot put it out of my mind. And so the following words from our gospel reading this morning seemed to leap from the page; “When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” When our nation saw the crowds rescued from the inferno of Grenfell Tower during the early hours of Wednesday morning, we had compassion for them, we cried for them, because they were bereft, homeless and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

However, we know that with God's grace, there is good even in the worst of situations. He is always there --- and it was wonderful to know that among those first responding to the devastation were people of faith. The local Mosque, the Church of St. Clement and a Pentecostal church immediately opened their doors to shelter survivors. Since then, they have become the gathering and collecting places at the centre of the spontaneous and generous community movement whose aim is to provide help in whatever way is possible for those who have been affected. The involvement of the churches and the Mosque has been an enormous positive. It shows faith in action. But more positive still is the community response --- people of different faiths, and none, people from all races and of all ages, recognising a need, and coming together to meet it and to support each other in the process. Leaders and politicians are deemed to have let them down, but they have known what to do. They have recognised a call and they have answered it.

Jesus knew that the people of Israel had need of direction and help. They, too, had been let down by the religious elite; and by the Romans, whose rule had proved oppressive and punishing, especially for those poorer members of society. They were lacking a lead and they were eager for God's kingdom. So Jesus called his apostles and sent them out – (for that is what the word “apostle” means--- someone who is sent out) --- on a healing mission. It was a mission certainly to cure the sick, raise the dead, heal the lepers and cast out demons, but in doing all these things, it was a mission to proclaim signs of God's new life breaking in. It was to offer to all the message of hope as the coming of

God's kingdom was proclaimed. So he called his apostles, called each one by name and sent them out in pairs, equipped only with faith in him, with knowledge of him, but with trust in him to strengthen them in their appointed task.

There are many parallels that may be drawn between the situation in Israel two thousand years ago and our own society. We also face an uncertain future and it seems more and more often that those with power and authority disregard the poor and weak. There is an ever-widening gap between those who have – and those who have not. Justice and compassion, it would seem, have been ignored in the face of financial considerations and life is still very unfair for too many struggling families. Sadly the tragedy of Grenfell Tower has showed us that in the most awful and most graphic of ways.

People are seeking to make sense of all of this, seeking to find a meaning to life, searching for healing. Some may recognise that theirs is a spiritual search. Others, those who are sick, those who are dead to any kind of hope, people with mental health issues, the outsiders of society, may just know that they are isolated, lonely and shunned. They want to belong but don't know how. All these are the "harassed and helpless" – Jesus sees them still and knows that they are like sheep without a shepherd.

So he calls us to be as shepherds in his stead– and yes, he calls each by name. We are called to be apostles – to be people who respond to a great need, to share the healing message of faith and hope and the news God's kingdom among us. Please God we may never be called to respond to something on the scale of the tragedy witnessed at Grenfell Tower. And it's quite possible that our calling may not take us away from homes and families, as did the disciples'. However there will be many smaller, perhaps less obvious ways in which we can respond and we ask God's guidance to discern those. It may be that practical help is called for, or a listening ear, or someone just to walk alongside in a time of deep darkness. We need to share our faith sensitively and always, always we need to pray.

The apostles were sent out in trust, with nothing of the material preparations that are usual for a journey. Likewise, we shouldn't fear or doubt that we have all that is needed to do the task that our Lord sets us. Christ's apostles throughout the ages, all the saints including St. Botolph our patron whose day we celebrate today, have all suffered the same uncertainties, the same doubts. However their obedience and trust has resulted in the growth of God's kingdom down the generations. Like them, we know our Lord Jesu Christ, we have our faith and we can have absolute confidence and trust in him that we will be equipped to face all he asks of us. As we're sent out we can be sure that when

the time comes we will know how to respond --- just as the community around Grenfell Tower knew immediately what was asked of them. The Holy Spirit moved through them, people of faith and people of none, in a powerful way and we have Jesus' own promise that it moves in us, too. As we pray for help, as we pray for people to help, an answer comes back. Through God's grace and in the power of the Spirit, we are the answer to our own prayer.

Let us pray;

Gracious God, we pray for all those caught up in the fire at Grenfell Tower, for the casualties, for the wounded, for the missing and the traumatised.

We pray for the emergency services and for those who are responsible for co-ordinating the responses to this major incident.

In despair bring hope,
In injury bring healing
In fear bring comfort
In our own helplessness be our strength.
In your mercy, hear our prayers,
in Christ's name Amen