



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

Learning to Improvise

Sunday 14th June (Trinity 2)

Matthew 9:35-10:8

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm sure many of us have, either now or in the past, a recurring dream, hopefully not too many of the nightmare variety, but nonetheless, an odd one that comes up again and again.

And one of mine is I dream that I am acting in a Shakespeare play, weirdly always a Shakespeare play I'm not that familiar with in my waking life, and I am about to perform, I'm being hurried from a dressing room to the stage, and I do not know any of my lines, and I'm frantically trying to learn them.

And I'm sure this gives a great insight into my particular psyche, in that I am not a natural improviser, although years of ministry with children has definitely improved this somewhat. I'm a bit more of a planner by nature. The idea of being lost for words when words are needed is something I worry about.

And sometimes this worry is unfounded. Sometimes we do not need to worry about not having the right words. Sometimes silence, listening, holding someone's hand is far more needed and warranted than any words could be. Being with those who are in need is not always an exercise which requires great speeches, but rather quiet, steady, often practical acts of love and presence.

But sometimes, we are called into times and seasons, where great swinging risks, and rising to the challenges of improvising are warranted. And we have to trust that we will be given what we need, whether that is words or deeds, or searching the very depths of ourselves for love we did not know we could possess.

That is what Jesus is calling the disciples into today, in our gospel reading.

Who among us would not hesitate at a role in our world where you are asked to leave what you know, the comforts of your home and loved ones, your stability, what peace of mind you have managed to have, for a new thing when you have no way of knowing how it will pan out.

Where you cannot take so much as a change of clothes or money, where you rely on total strangers, Neither a job nor a pilgrimage, but something wholly other. A new way of being. A journey that has not yet revealed itself, one where the very act of embarking upon it will break and remake you.

Oh and by the way, you have to go on it freely and humbly. If you're after clout, or attention, followers of your own or accolades for participating in this great work, you're on the wrong track. You are only to give out freely what has been freely given to you.

I can't imagine, that phrased in these terms, many of us would jump at the chance as wholeheartedly as we think. In re-reading the gospels and the book of Acts, and the early accounts of Christianity as it emerged as a way of life, I am always amazed at the sheer bravery of those involved. Indeed, we need not even go back that far into history, there are many people of many Christian denominations today, living through struggles and strife, remaining faithful and not just proclaiming, but rejoicing in the good news in astounding ways. People running foodbanks and holiday clubs and socials, keeping communities together, making a way out of no way and a lot out of very little. People caring for loved ones, people answering hotlines and praying on WhatsApp groups, people volunteering at domestic violence shelters and homeless shelters. Wherever the body of Christ is hurting and in need, we find people inhabiting that journey and that call to go into the world, letting peace come upon it.

The call Jesus describes is one where we are called into just this. You may note in our reading that Jesus does not command his disciples to go into the wealthiest places, but rather every town and village. He does not say seek out those with most power, or the hierarchy, or those most able to organise, or those calling themselves the most popular or most devout. He says find the worthiest, those who most want to listen, and by extension, those who know themselves to be the most in need, for theirs is the love of God, for whom God has come near.

One of the best things I have watched on tv recently has been the most recent season of Race Across the World. The premise is that teams race over land and sea, with only the money that an airfare would cost them, with different checkpoints along the way. And in

submitting themselves to this great journey, they learn an enormous amount about themselves, their travelling partner, and the world around them. They are frequently taken in by kind strangers, shown hospitality beyond what they expect, and are frequently reminded of the fact that they have something to learn from everyone around them. They come away changed, born anew. It is, in a way, a very improvised journey, in which the participants surrender control and management, what the world regards as a linear journey from A to B in favour of a way of living that embraces the variable, the conjecture and under the radar, and emerge better for it.

And whilst we may not be signing up to race with backpacks quite yet, there is something appealing about this idea of surrendering to the journey, learning how to improvise, embracing those moments of encounter with God and with our fellow human beings, seeking to learn and grow from those around us, particularly those we initially think we don't have much in common with.

We too, must learn to surrender to what God has in store for us, trusting that when we get there, we will know what to do. That whilst we may not feel ready now, we will be as ready as we can get, because God will be there too. To take nothing with us, not because we alone are sufficient, but because God working through us is sufficient. And to not worry if we do not know our lines, or if we can't prepare for what we will find, because whatever life in God brings us, we can trust God at work within it.

Amen