

**Fifth Sunday of Pentecost, Proper 6, June 15 2008 Year "A"
Genesis 18:1-15, Psalm 116, Romans 5:1-8, Matthew 9:35-10:8
Prepared by the Rev. Dr. Seamus P. Doyle**

The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.

This is a phrase that has stuck in my memory since childhood. Every opportunity the priests got, they came to our school and talked about the vocation to the priesthood and that girls should not try to keep boys from responding to God's call to be a priest.

In my teen years the emphasis was on the mission fields and the need for priests to go to places like Africa, Bangladesh, Brazil. In 1965 we had the last of the big classes. Of the forty-eight students who entered, twenty of us made it to the House of Theology, ten of us were ordained and only eight of us are still priests.

By the time I was ordained the documents of Vatican 11 had begun to take hold and we were talking about the priesthood of all believers; laity were becoming involved in the church much to the chagrin of many of the older clergy. One of the older clergy said, "They may believe in the priesthood of all believers but in my church I'm in charge."

Today the majority of parishes in the Roman Catholic Church are run by laity and mostly women. In the Episcopal Church and other mainline denominations laity have taken their rightful place in the church as readers, acolytes, Eucharistic Ministers, Eucharistic Visitors, trained chaplains, deacons, priests and bishops. Sad to say, after thirty years, women's ordination remains a hot button issue in the Anglican Church worldwide.

Despite all this renewal, and because of all this renewal, there remains a sense in which *the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.*

For all our growth in ecumenism, women's ordination; for all our renewal in liturgy and church music, with the exception of Christmas, Easter, Baptisms, funerals and weddings, our numbers at church services are seriously dropping in the mainline churches. The churches that are getting the most publicity about their growth are those who are more fundamentalist in their theological beliefs and more rigid in their demands of their congregation.

And yet this is not the whole picture. In the Roman Catholic Church there is now a movement called Womenpriests; women being ordained by woman bishops, sharing space with another denomination for Sunday services and they are growing. In other parts of the country laity are gathering on Saturdays or Sundays for Eucharists led by laity.

What is going on here is that people want the Eucharist but they want to change the structure of the corporate organized church. They want the life given to them by the Eucharist that helps focus and ground their commitment to social justice; to education; to the needs of their community and their own spiritual growth.

There are small groups of laity gathering to read a particular book, a workbook on one or other aspect of spirituality. Statistics indicated that bible is the most purchased book in the United States, the least read and the least understood. And yet there are small groups of people gathering to read the bible without the benefit of the background understanding of what it says. IN this we are reminded of the story in the Acts of the Apostles where Phillip came across an Ethiopian Eunuch who was reading the Scriptures. Phillip asked him if he understood what he was reading and he replied: *How can I understand unless someone instructs me?*

Let me make it clear to you, this is not a time to wring our hands and talk in terms of despair. Rather this a time to rejoice that people, just as they were in the time of Jesus, are searching for a spiritual meaning to their life. *The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.* As it was in the time of Jesus so it is in our time.

Jesus' enthusiastic response to his awareness of the needs and his limited manpower was to send them out to preach the Good News, to heal those in need of healing. Jesus was crucified and his followers went home. But that was not the end of the story.

They had a sense he was still alive. They experienced him as being alive. They began to believe at last in all that he had told them. Word began to spread and small groups of people began to gather and a radical new group within Judaism was born. Forgiveness became a hallmark; radical hospitality became a way of life and within a few years this small group were represented from Jerusalem to Rome.

Then came the battle for orthodoxy or right thinking. There were many understandings of God and of who Jesus was. People were branded as heretics and within a few hundred years there was, at least publicly, the belief that there was only one right way to be Christian. The role of the laity was diminished and the power of the priest and corporate Church became primary. And yet, for all the expansion of the Church, the words of Jesus remained: *The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.*

The Reformation brought badly needed changes and created its own extremes. A few hundred years later, those who genuinely believed the church was missing the power of the Holy Spirit brought about a new spirit

in the church through the Charismatic Movement. But that too was limited. Marriage Encounter, Engaged Encounter, TEC, (Teenagers Encounter Christ), Cursillo, were and are programs that have served the wider church well but are not *the* answer to the words of Jesus *The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.*

Jesus told his disciples: *As you go, proclaim the Good News, "The kingdom of heaven is upon you." Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.*

The questions this should raise for us are these: Do I really believe that the kingdom of God is within me? Do I really believe that the Eucharist is the power that drives me during the week when I go out to work; when I deal with injustice; when I show compassion and mercy?

What would happen if, the next time we have a coffee break at work and we said to one of our co-workers, "Do you really believe that the kingdom of God is within you?" "Do you believe in God?" "How does your belief in God make a difference to you in your life?"

What if we raised these questions in a non-threatening manner in which we offered others to participate in a spiritual discussion over a cup of coffee? Jesus said, *See, I am sending you out as sheep into the midst of wolves; so be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*

Jesus was no idle dreamer. He was well aware of the risks he was taking and the world into which he was sending the disciples and that did not prevent him from sending them.

Perhaps what we are missing in church today is the attitude of being a risk taker. Perhaps this may stem from our not taking seriously our belief

that the kingdom of God is within us. It is so much easier to talk about heaven and hell as if they were places to go to, or to avoid while on vacation. It is much more difficult to talk about the kingdom of God within us because it sounds more like a medical problem we don't want to discuss over coffee.

There is no one program that is going to spark the church growth program. Earthquakes have been known to fill churches for a minimum of ten years and then it was over. We are not looking for earthquake Christians.

Programs come and go and spark a generation but it runs its course and ends with a sense of failure. The message of Jesus has never failed, it never changes. The kingdom of God is within us. The question for us this morning is this: Do we believe this enough to get excited about it? Do we believe it enough to discuss it over a cup of coffee? Jesus put it this simply; *Seek you first the kingdom of God and all else will be given to you.* Let us leave Church today with a sense of excitement; with a glow in our eyes and a burning desire in our hearts that what the apostles said becomes true for us *Were not our hearts burning within us as he opened the scriptures to us.* Let us not let that flame go out. Let us put our light on a table where others can see it and experience the invitation to want what we have. Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord.