

## Near and Far

Is Wellington far or near? Zachary, my son, had thoughts – up until the week before – that we were planning to visit this Wellington, so it's not that far. It's only 4 hours by car, so that could be near. It is a town that hits the headlines for its social problems – obesity levels and drug addiction. Perhaps that makes it feel far away from Canberra. But last year Robyn and Garry Hayes from Wellington visited us and on the June long weekend we visited them and this has brought our two churches a little nearer.

Is the kingdom of God far or near? Jesus tells the seventy who are sent out in mission that it is near! They are to say to people, "The kingdom of God has come near to you."

So I want this morning to reflect on the nearness of the kingdom of God – the signs of that nearness – and our recent mission trip to Wellington.

But I am not doing this alone. **Because the first marker of the kingdom in this passage is that we do not do mission alone.** Just as Jesus did not send his disciples out alone, Canberra Baptist did not send out me alone. There were 12 disciples on this journey; Marlene and Keith, Meryl, Keith, Kathy, Ian and Rebecca, and my family. And this morning \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ have agreed to help me reflect on our experience.

Why does Jesus send out his disciples in pairs? It would have been far more effective - they could have visited twice as many towns - if they'd been sent out individually! What the commentators say is this is related to the Jewish system of giving witness. One witness speaking of the kingdom of God might not be believed, but a second person collaborating their testimony makes it far more credible.

And there are good practical reasons for having a companion.

1. \_\_\_\_\_, *what do you think was the benefit of going to Wellington in a group?*

Our faith is radically communal. We are not intended to do mission or ministry - or to grow in faith even - in isolation. We are called into a community that testifies with us, that supports and cares for us, that also irritates us and rubs up against us requiring us to demonstrate forgiveness and grace – *for it is loving, generous, grace-filled community that collaborates our testimony that the kingdom of God is near.*

Secondly, the seventy are sent out without a purse, a bag, or spare sandals. Rather than being equipped for this journey, they are *de-equipped*. (I keep thinking of the scene in the Bond films...) And as I said last year when we looked at this passage, this methodology is a strong driver for forming community because they must find food and shelter and changes of clothes. But the message here is that we must be prepared to become – to be - vulnerable to form new community.

2. *Is there something you had to give to go on this trip?*
3. *Was some of your thinking/preconceptions challenged on this visit? Was there an experience of making yourself vulnerable to form new friendships/community?*

**Becoming vulnerable – less equipped – more open to others is also a sign that the kingdom of God has come near.** In verse three Jesus says, "I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves." What does this mean? It means that the path of discipleship is

difficult and dangerous, but it is also a reference to where it leads. It is a reference to Isaiah 11 and the beautiful vision of God's kingdom where predators lay peacefully with prey, where wolves live with lambs. Just as Jesus was like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, we are called to open our lives to others so the kingdom can be revealed.

**The third marker of the kingdom being near is that having become vulnerable hospitality can occur;** hospitality that is not charity, that is not a one-way street, but a mutual exchange of giving and receiving.

The seventy are told, *"Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not it will return to you."* Greeting others with 'peace' was a common Jewish practice, but proclaiming peace, identifying others who 'share in peace', and eating and drinking together, are all ways of enacting, of playing out - of playing forward - life in the kingdom of God. Greeting and eating in peace expresses a robust eschatological hope.

4. *Does someone want to talk about the hospitality we received in Wellington?*
5. *In what ways is the Wellington church offering hospitality and receiving hospitality in its community?*
6. *What encouragement for our mission here did you gain from this trip?*

Wellington Baptist is a very different to Canberra Baptist in many respects. They are currently working through a series on eschatology – identifying modern nations with visions in Revelations (flee to the mountains!) – and they might have a different take on 'the kingdom of God is near' than the one we have presented this morning. But *having been in community with them, having seen their openness to their community and having experienced their hospitality* we would say, that the kingdom of God – in Wellington – is near. And as we continue in our work here we also proclaim the kingdom of God has come near to us.

Because we -like Garry and Robyn and the people in Wellington – and like the seventy have been appointed, have been commissioned, to continue proclaiming and enacting and working for the kingdom of God. This is the journey we are taking together and together with God.

I began our Wellington journey with this quote from Don Helder Camara and I am going to close with it now:

*Setting out is first of all getting out of oneself. Breaking through the shell of selfishness hardening us within our own ego. [It is] to stop revolving round oneself as is we were the centre of everything.*

*Setting out is not covering miles of land or sea, or travelling faster than the speed of sound. It is first and foremost opening ourselves to other people, trying to get to know them, going out to meet them. Opening ourselves to ideas, including those with which we disagree, this is what the good traveller should do. Happy are those who understand the words, "If you agree with me, you have something to give me."*

*It is possible to travel alone. But the good traveller knows that the journey is human life and life needs company. 'Companion' means ...the one who eats the same bread, Happy are they who feel they are always on the road and everyone they meet is their chosen companion.*