

Relying on God's Grace Alone

4 July, 2021

Reading: Mark 6:7-13

Jesus ordered them to take nothing for the journey: no bread, no bag, no money in their belts, and they were not to put on two tunics.

It's great to be back from my Sabbatical. I was worried you might have forgotten what I look like. I went to my local church in Auckland and clearly, they didn't know what I look like. "Hi John, I've got a reading for you," was the welcome. "I'm not John," was my answer. "Are you sure?" the welcomer asked me. At 'the Peace' she came up, "Are you still sure you aren't John?"

Sometimes it's not until we are forced to that we come to rely on God. Coss grew up in the Bronx in New York. He began smoking drugs at 11 and by 13 he was dealing. He admired the men on the corners who had jewellery and lots of money. They became his role models. By 26 he had twenty people working for him and was earning over two million dollars a year selling drugs. That was until the police caught up with him. He lost everything and was put in prison for seven years. Overweight, Coss began working out and it wasn't long until other inmates asked him to help them lose weight. Using only his body as a gym Coss lost seventy pounds and even helped Bus who was, you guessed it, the size of a bus.

With only two months to go and looking forward to a new life outside, one of the guards accused him of hitting him. He was put into solitary confinement with the prospect of a further long sentence. He literally started banging his head against the wall. He had nothing, but the worst of all he had no hope. One of the other inmates gave him some paper and a pencil so he wrote a letter to his sister. Please, please, he said, get me a lawyer to get me out of here. He felt better writing the letter but then he realised he had no stamp. More desperation. What to do? Apart from a bucket and a blanket he had nothing.

Then he remembered the little Bible that each inmate was given. Maybe he thought if I just read the Bible something might happen. No sooner had he

turned to Psalm 91(**1** *Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.* **2** *I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”*) than something did happen that was to transform his whole life. What fell out of the Bible? A stamp. It was then Coss had what he called a spiritual awakening. He realised there was more to life than just him, there was God. He confessed to God all the harm he had done dealing drugs and misery. He pledged to do something positive with his life.

Today you will find Coss not dealing drugs but CEO of a growing chain of gyms: *Conbody*. He employs people like him who have left jail and are trying to start over, fifty-six of them, and not one has ever re-offended. He has helped thousands of people renew their bodies and it all began with that moment of grace when he had nothing, only God and a postage stamp.

So why does Jesus urge the disciples not to take stuff on their mission journey? No explanation is given in the Gospel, but commentators think the reason is twofold.

First, it was to contrast the disciples with other travelling philosophers who sought enrichment from their preaching. The followers of Jesus are to rely on the hospitality of those in the community they find themselves in. Secondly, it enables them to experience God’s grace. Like Coss it is the experience of the people of God that when we have the confidence to call on God, then God is gracious and does provide. Even if it's a postage stamp.

The disciples are urged by Jesus not to be weighed down by stuff or even the image we carry around about ourselves. God has already given us what we need.

Coss learnt in prison what Jesus is trying to teach us today, that we don’t need the right stuff to be a follower of his. Coss’ exercise programme is revolutionary because it requires no equipment, no weights, no lavender towels - just your own body.

Jesus taught the disciples and is teaching us that we don't need special equipment to share his love because we are the equipment.

A friend of mine was a lay chaplain in a large hospital. Each week they had a key staff meeting. One day he was feeling very despondent. As they went around the room many told stories of lives saved and people cured. One of the staff came up to him afterwards, seeing his despondency. "You look a little down in the mouth," she said. He explained, "You are all doing such wonderful work. What is it that I have to offer?" Quickly she responded, "Never say that" she said, "We can give out medicine, but you are the medicine."

We don't need special equipment or fancy words or lots of training to be bearers of hope in our community. Simply being who we are makes us bearers of hope.

Our message is as simple as it is profound. Once upon a time there was a person who so lived God's love that we saw God in him. Not even death has overcome him and his message, and every time we gather, we experience his presence with us.

Today more than at any time in my lifetime our community needs to know that there is God who is concerned for us, who journeys with us, who offers us moments of grace and hope, forgiveness and meaning and purpose in our lives.

Like Coss there are times in all our lives when we reach rock bottom. Maybe you haven't been a drug dealer in the Bronx and 70 pounds overweight. But it may be that through the loss of income, or ill health or the death of a friend or partner, or maybe the ongoing pandemic playing on your mind, you have felt every bit as desperate as he was.

In these times and in all times, turn to God. He is trustworthy and true and will never leave you; not today, not tomorrow nor in the age to come.

Let us pray:

God of love

Even in our darkest times you surprise us with grace,

*In our lives this coming week help us to know we are bearers of your love
and hope,*

This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.