North Kildonan United Church

13th February 2022 *~Rev. Don Johnson*

"The Twelve Apostles"

Psalm 1 *I Corinthians 15: 12-20* *Luke 6: 17-26*

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Our gospel reading begins with Jesus surrounded by a substantial crowd of people seeking healing, as well as a number of his disciples. Unfortunately the lectionary leaves out the names of twelve very significant individuals, people we should know about. In the verses just before today's passage we find this:

"Now during those days Jesus went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor."

These twelve men, these twelve apostles, will be the closest male disciples of Jesus and after the Resurrection they will be leaders in the establishment of the Church and in spreading the gospel throughout the known world.

So, if we were artistically minded and wanted to paint a picture of the scene described by Luke, how might we do it? We would start with Jesus in the centre, with the Twelve Apostles close in front of him. Then there would be a wider group of disciples behind the apostles and on the sides and behind those disciples would be people from Judea, Jerusalem, Tyre and Sidon.

Why is the order so important? Why is the general public, those who are seeking healing but aren't disciples, why are they in the back? Quite simply, the sermon Jesus preached that day was intended primarily for the Twelve and the other disciples. The people from Judea, Jerusalem, Tyre and Sidon were not the target audience for Jesus.

Imagine, if you will, that this is basically the first day of training for these hand-picked followers of Jesus. Yes, they had heard him talk about the Kingdom of God as he explained the scriptures and they had certainly seen him heal people. Simon Peter for one remembered how Jesus healed his mother-in-law. How much of it they fully understood, we are not sure.

Of course Jesus might have been seen as just one of many preachers and healers in those days. Some preachers called for violent revolution while others urged people to retreat into the desert, still others advocated supporting Herod and his regime. All these movements, these preachers, all were seeking God.

But now was the time when God would reveal God's very self through Jesus. God was doing a new thing, a fresh renewal of faith and scriptural understanding and worship and mission, all led by Jesus. And if they were going to play their vital role in this, the Twelve needed to understand what the gospel was really meant. They needed to catch a vision of what God's work looked like.

They would have heard a summary in today's sermon, a code based on Israel's great scriptural codes, four promises and four warnings, four blessings and four woe to you curses.

Jesus offers a radical version of Israel's codes. His is an upside-down code, a direct challenge to the wisdom of the day. As Jesus told the synagogue attendees in Nazareth, God's promise of good news for all people is being fulfilled. The poor, the hungry, those who weep, those who are hated: they are blessed. In God's kingdom, the old injustices that made people poor and hungry, sad and rejected, that old world way will be turned upside down.

As Mary, Jesus' mother, sang when she heard she was to bear the Saviour of the world: *"He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."*

This upside-down world needs to be turned right way up, turned towards God's justice and God's will. That's why Jesus wanted the Apostles and the other disciples to hear his teachings. These four blessings and four woes are sort of like the Coles Notes of the gospel, clear summaries of the radical, life-giving message Jesus was proclaiming. The status quo that holds some people down and elevates others is not God's way. Rather, throughout Luke we see a God who has pledged to act on behalf of the poor and the marginalized. 'The preferential option for the poor' is how liberation theology sums up this understanding of God's compassion.

On one level, Luke's Beatitudes are shocking. Four times 'blessed' is used. In this context blessed is the equivalent to saying to a friend congratulations upon winning the lottery. When you think of it, it's outrageous to congratulate the poor on being poor, the hungry on being hungry, the weeping and the reviled on being in the condition they are in. Similarly, it seems foolish to declare unfortunate (which is what woe means) the wealthy, the well-fed, the laughing and those who enjoy a good reputation. We would think these to be perfectly desirable.

But perhaps the point is this. In his commentary, Howard Gregory says: "*The poor and the hungry know the reality of their situation. They are totally dependent on God and therefore are disposed to entrust themselves to God's care and mercy, which is the foundation of grace and a right relationship with God. The rich, on the other hand, are disposed to take comfort in themselves and their resources, thereby finding it more difficult to trust themselves to the mercy and grace of God."*

One other point. We are all familiar with the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. It's safe to say that Luke's Sermon on the Plain doesn't hold the same attraction for most people, but that does not in any way diminish its value. Peter Eaton, in his commentary makes a very interesting point. He writes: *"While in Matthew Jesus teaches on a mountain, in Luke Jesus is 'on the level'. He is speaking not just 'on the plain' but* plainly*. If the truth is to be trusted, then this is the best news of all. We can trust Jesus to be absolutely 'on the level' with us every step of the way, telling us the truth of our lives as he sees us, rather than as we portray ourselves at parties. There comes a time in most lives when this sort of truth is the only truth worth the candle. We hear this truth only through our participation in a community – the community of lifelong partnerships and families, the community of the Eucharistic fellowship, the community of those who pray and discuss Scriptures together, the community of service, the community of mutually committed members."*

If we were able to sing together, the natural choice would be #702 VU

1 When a poor one who has nothing shares with strangers,
when the thirsty water give unto us all,
when the wounded in their weakness strengthen others,
then we know that God still goes that road with us,
then we know that God still goes that road with us.

2 When at last all those who suffer find their comfort,
when they hope though even hope seems hopelessness,
when we love though hate at times seems all around us,
then we know that God still goes that road with us,
then we know that God still goes that road with us.

3 When our joy fills up our cup to overflowing,
when our lips can speak no words other than true,
when we know that love for simple things is better,
then we know that God still goes that road with us,
then we know that God still goes that road with us.

4 When our homes are filled with goodness in abundance,
when we learn how to make peace instead of war,
when each stranger that we meet is called a neighbour,
then we know that God still goes that road with us,
then we know that God still goes that road with us.

Amen.