

Do you remember the time you learned to ride a bicycle? This will be a more distant memory for some of us. We watched other people doing it – they looked so capable, so confident but it looked so difficult. What if I can't stop, what if I fall off?

*First slide*

Then we were persuaded to try it. Maybe we started with stabilisers but eventually they had to come off. Or maybe, as in my case, someone helped. They hold the saddle, walking along beside us, stopping the worst of the wobbles, encouraging us to keep trying.

*Second slide*

Then we finally set off on our own, the wobbles stopped, we steered, we stopped, we didn't fall off.

*Third slide*

I thought of that process as I read our Gospel reading for today, back to when I was learning, when I was watching my children do it, watching my grandchildren do it.

We watch, we are shown, we do. *Series of slides 4,5,6*

From the time that they had been with Jesus they saw him in action as he declared 'The Kingdom of heaven is drawing near'.

*Slide 7*

But he didn't just do this with words – he proclaimed it by what he said but also by what he did.

He not only taught, he healed the sick. There was no medicine as we know it in those times in Palestine. People saw health as a sign of God's blessing – sickness was seen as a sign of God's displeasure.

So people who were sick felt that God was distant. People who were healthy didn't want to get what they had – you steer clear of people God is unhappy with. If you had something like leprosy, or were very distressed you were driven out of the village. You were left totally alone – God didn't seem to want you and other people definitely didn't want you.

So when Jesus went and touched people with leprosy, when he went to people who were distressed, he was saying 'God loves you, God wants to welcome you into his Kingdom.'

In our reading, Jesus is sending the disciples out to do as he did

*Slide 8*

Tell everyone that the Kingdom is coming – not just by words but by what you do. He sends them to the same people he reached out to, to those who were sick, to those people other people did not want to know – and in healing them they not only dealt with their physical sickness, but also that sense of being cut off – cut off from other people, cut off from God. They would know that God has come close.

That is what Jesus asks of us – that we would do what he does in the situations we find ourselves in.

Two years ago I was in Lebanon, seeing work being done by Tearfund among refugees from Syria. The man in charge told us that when the refugees started arriving in huge numbers at their door, they made a conscious decision: ‘We were called to serve before we were called to preach’. So the Church began to develop a programme, providing shelter, food, education for those in the makeshift refugee camps – with no strings attached. People experienced love, unconditional love – and hearts are opened to who loves them, to the God who loves them. The Kingdom of God draws near – even in the desolation of ruined cities and refugee camps.

We don’t have to go to refugee camps to touch hearts and lives that are hurting. Maybe someone they love is sick, maybe they are worried about their job, maybe they are from overseas and don’t always feel welcome.

When people are worried they can feel very alone – we can be the ones who break through that isolation, who bring love, bring hope.

St Francis once said: Preach the Gospel at all times – and, if necessary, use words.’

We don’t do this alone. Jesus, before he left his disciples, as he sent them out into the world to make disciples of all nations, assured them, ‘I am with you always, to the very end of time.’

May we be ones in whom, and through whom the Kingdom of heaven draws near to someone this coming week.

