

Luke 10: Agents of Something Bigger

7 year old Stefan was watching Rocky 4 this week. And he said – “Boxing is a sport isn’t it?” Yes. “Well, it’s completely different from tennis.” He is learning a lot about sport at the moment – for obvious reasons:

It was over the line! It was over the line... it was over – the – line. Last Sunday, for about 3 minutes, for the first time in this world cup, the England team started playing football. 2 great goals – one of which the referee didn’t notice! Still ... it’s only a game. It’s only a game.

And if you thought that was bad, on Friday night – Ghana. The only African nation to make it through, the hope of an entire continent, battling, battling, battling with Uruguay. And finally, thankfully, they get their goal in the last minute of extra time – and what happens? As the ball is making its way merrily towards the back of the net, a striker punches it with his bare hands. The winning goal is taken from Africa, and they are given instead, only a chance of getting the winning goal... Still, it’s only a game.

But then, a game is simply a way of seeking fulfilment by achieving a goal in accordance with a set of agreed rules. Games are not restricted to sports.

We all know, don’t we, that today’s gospel reading is all about mission. About Christian Mission: Jesus sends out the seventy, so we too must be sent out to announce that the kingdom of God has arrived. But wouldn’t it be nice if Luke told us the stories of what a few of these pairs encountered? When they arrived in a city, what did they say? What was their message? Why were they being sent out as lambs among wolves? What did these companions say to one another as they went their merry way? Did they have any idea that we’d be hearing about it two thousand years later? At the time, relatively speaking, it must have felt like it was just a game.

Or maybe not... Were they being sent to convert everyone to Christianity? Probably not, because there are several elements of the Alpha course that haven’t happened yet. No death, no resurrection, no Pentecost to name but a few. Were they saying, “become Christian so that you can go to heaven, otherwise, when judgement day comes, you will be sent to hell?” I suspect that the message these followers actually preached was as different from “the gospel” as we traditionally understand it, as boxing is different from tennis.

At a time when everyone knows Rome is evil – Jesus is not sending out the disciples as wolves among wolves – he is sending them out as lambs. Not to go and fight violently – but to give themselves sacrificially.

These people were speaking the message of Jesus – and the message of Jesus was this: that Israel is rushing headlong into a national catastrophe. Growing discontent with Rome, accompanied by the belief that we are God’s chosen people in this promised land, had convinced countless thousands that when the Kingdom of God comes, the Romans would be expelled and Israel would be top dog! Seeking fulfilment by achieving a goal in accordance with a set of agreed rules : a game. That is what the coming of God’s kingdom looks like.

So, when Jesus and his followers pitch up, announcing that Jesus is coming – what are they told to do at the towns that do not welcome them? To wipe the dust off their feet. If you stop and think about that for just a moment – it is a massive insult. This is the promised land!

Every rock and every river, every stone every stream, every grain of sand and every speck of dust. And when you wipe the dust from your feet – what are you saying? You are saying that this ground is cursed! This is not the promised land – if you reject the One who made the promise.

As you read on, this becomes clear. The most infamous pagan cities of Sodom, Tyre, Sidon – cursed by Old Testament prophets. And yet, it will be more bearable for these cities than for the Jewish cities who presume themselves in God’s favour. The Roman war machine will rase them to rubble. Unless the Jewish people abandon their drive to bring in the kingdom of God by violent rebellion against Rome. The message of the seventy, sent as lambs among wolves – is that the kingdom of God has already come!

Now, if you are one of the guys sent out with this message – what do you feel like? Would you really have this great sense that the second person of the Trinity has commissioned you with a divine task and granted you supernatural power? Really? Or, if you were one of these people, would you feel – in some sense – like it was just a game? It’s worth remembering that these seventy followers, are all among those who desert Jesus in the end...

However they felt, they come back and see Jesus, rejoicing. Rejoicing that demons submit to them, rejoicing that they are actually tasting victory. And the conversation that follows gets to the real heart of this reading. Jesus says, “I watched satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.”

Again, traditionally, we automatically link this to ancient Jewish mythologies about the origin of satan. But there is no reason for this. The idea of a triple decker universe – with nice people in heaven at the top, nasty people in hell underneath, and everyone fighting a cosmic battle to grasp at people on earth in the middle ... you are not going to find anyone in Jesus’ day believing that! The word for heaven – is the word for powers beyond your reach, powers which control the fate of the world.

So when satan falls from heaven – it is not that the archangel Michael has beaten him in supernatural combat. It refers to satan, striking horror into people’s lives, like a bolt out of the blue! When disaster strikes – it is not just some game between people. There is a cosmic dimension to what happens here. Satan falls on his enemies in all his fury. It is the same language that is used when king David’s bodyguard attack people – it says that they ‘fall upon’ them. To fall on someone is to attack them, to strike them – out of the blue.

Heaven is not just the place where God and his angels live. In scripture, it is infinitely more than this. It is confirmed further, when Jesus says - “I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

Again, this does not mean that we’re guaranteed a place in heaven when we die. It is rather – you people, though you may feel like this is only a game – you are agents of something bigger: Your names are written in heaven – you are part of this cosmic struggle – agents of something bigger.

Now, the moment we talk about cosmic struggles and spiritual warfare – the mind races to severely retarded religious maniacs playing supernatural power games. By alerting us to the spiritual significance of what we do and who we are ... this is not as though we could put on a

pair of supernatural spectacles that will show us demons, who would otherwise be invisible, demons and angels interfering in our lives. We do not suddenly become aware of angels and demons that surround us constantly.

It is rather getting a sense that there is a whole dimension to what happens in our lives and in this world, that is cosmic. The joy that we sometimes feel in the presence of another person, in a conversation, in something hum drum and down to earth – can actually be a genuine glimpse of paradise. Equally, the pain that one person can inflict upon another is not just like in a boxing match where I hurt you, or a tennis match when I beat you. It is not just a game. When one human being seriously hurts another, I see satan fall like a flash of lightning from heaven. When one person shows an act of genuine love towards another, I rejoice at what God has revealed to us.

And the question it leaves us is this: do we really believe that the stuff we do, the conversations we have – trivial though they may seem, the way we behave, the choices we make – that they are just a game: that they are just ways that we seek fulfilment by achieving goals in accordance with some rules. Or are we agents of something bigger?

For better or worse, is there a cosmic dimension to the things we do on a daily basis? And if there is – whose agents are we? In our lives, in our dealings with other people, in the decisions we make of career, of spending, of working and resting and playing – do we see satan fall like lightning, or do we see Jesus giving thanks to the father?

In the little conversations that we have, the notes we scribble, the emails we click, the texts we send, the phone calls we make ... whose agents are we?

In the commitments we make, in the time we use, in the money we spend – whose agents are we?

In the politics we treasure, in the goals we pursue, in the hopes we strive for – whose agents are we?

We are about to celebrate communion. I mean, look at it. When you look at it from beyond, it's a ritual – in the strictest sense of the word – it's only a game. We call it Lord's supper. And if anyone invited me for supper, and gave me a piece of diced bread and a thimble full of grape juice – I'd wonder what on earth I'd done wrong. It's as different from a real meal as boxing is from tennis.

But this way of celebrating communion reminds us of one thing: that in this act of eating and drinking, the cosmic dimension is much bigger than the physical. When we eat and drink here, we are agents of something bigger than this bread and this wine.