



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Seventy-two"**
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Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Isaiah 66:10-16
Second Reading Galatians 6:14-18
Gospel Luke 10:1-12,16-20

When our Lord sends out seventy-two followers in today's Gospel, it tells us a couple of things. First of all, it reminds us that there were more than twelve men who followed Jesus. Sometimes we get stuck with that magic number 12, particularly since most religious art seems to show only the inner band of Apostles surrounding Jesus. True, we sometimes hear about crowds- like at the Feeding of the 5,000- but most of the time it's just 12 trudging along the highways and byways with the Master...and always men! The 72 others (without mention of gender, by the way) show that Jesus' hard work actually had some effect in winning a few more than 12 special guys to join the movement.

Now, it is important to remember when dealing with numbers in the Bible that all is not as it appears. Rarely are figures given without some other, symbolic, significance. 40 days and 40 nights, or 40 years in the wilderness signifies a long time. Even the 12 Apostles echo the 12 Tribes of Israel. And that's the case with 72, as well. Ancient Jewish wisdom taught that besides the Chosen People of the Jews, God created either 70 or 72 other races. To say that 12 Apostles are sent out means that all of Israel was being invited to be part of the Kingdom of God that Jesus had come to bring. To say that 72 others were sent, well, that meant that the same offer was being made to the whole world!

Having 72 disciples on the road, rather than 12, is also a little bit embarrassing for us. With the magic number 12, one can imagine that the work of following Jesus and sharing the Good News with the world is a specialized vocation- something only for those with particular skills and a particular calling. In other words- it's something for someone else other than me! Having 72, especially if that number may be symbolic and represent a whole lot more people, suggests that I may not be able to get off the hook in being a follower of Jesus myself. Yes, St Paul mentions that not all are called to do the work of apostles and evangelists, but there are a whole lot of other jobs out there for the followers of Jesus, and they might involve non-specialists, those without seminary training, and most certainly those without plastic tongue-depressor collars around their necks!

The sending out of the 72, and particularly their return after their successful tour, tells us something else about the nature of mission. These folks are very happy with the effects of their mission: healing the sick, announcing the advent of the Kingdom of God. "We could even exorcise evil spirits!" they crow. They are very pleased with themselves indeed. Jesus, like a proud father, shares their joy but then he warns them: "Don't get cocky, kids. 'Rejoice that your names are written in heaven'". In other words: the real success is not what *you* do, but what God is doing in you: the salvation that God is working through your work both for yourselves and for others.' Before he sent them out, Jesus told the 72 to ask the 'Lord of the Harvest' to send out the workers- the entire project was God's doing, not theirs. That is an important point to remember, especially for those in the Church who start to think that success is the result of *their* skills, *their* efforts and *their* charisma alone. Be wary of church leaders who advertise their ministries like a brand under their own names.

Jesus also warns the 72 that they are being send out like lambs among wolves. That's not a very attractive job description, but it's what I would say to anyone who really wants to get involved in the mission of the Church, ordained or not ordained. But Jesus did something else that is important- in fact *vital*- to remember: it says that he sent the 72 out in pairs: 36 teams, not just individuals. That is both a lesson and a comfort for us. The lesson is that the Church should never abandon its workers to the horrors of loneliness or despair. If Jesus knew that and did something about it,

why don't we when we put men and women into churches where they have to serve in professional isolation? And the comfort is that we are not expected by God to do the work of the Church alone. That is an important aspect of the Christian Church, and it is the greatest benefit of being an active part of a congregation. It is never presumed that a Christian is going to live and work as a single unit, fighting sin and the devil all alone, but rather as part of a team- almost a family- perhaps *closer* than a family.

We can be thankful that our parish contains *more* than the 72 people mentioned in today's Gospel. Now all we have to do is make sure that the number we do have are all really followers of Jesus. If they are, then we should expect some pretty amazing things at Holy Trinity as the Spirit gets to work in us: the casting out of the evil spirits of despair and pride, the healing of sickness both physical and spiritual. Satan himself will not stand against us and our witness here! Or did you think those things only happened in the Bible or long ago, or far away? No, indeed, 72 was the number of the peoples of the earth to the ancient Jews, and somewhere in that number are the races and peoples of our congregations, being sent out, two by two, to work in the rich harvest of our friends, our families, and even total strangers in Manila: those who need to know that God loves them and that Jesus saves them, and that the Holy Spirit can empower them to do wonderful things. Be advised, followers of Jesus: you are being sent!