

“In prayer and peace” a sermon based on Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20, preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 3 July 2016.

Sometimes we want to keep people at arm’s length.

When I first went to the United States I was startled to find on letterboxes the sign, “no solicitors”. Having been a solicitor, I was affronted!

My father was a confirmed atheist, but whenever he saw two people walking up the path, who looked like Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses he became a convinced Catholic. He thought that telling them he was a Catholic was the only way to withstand their approach.

To him, church people were hypocrites. And yet, week by week he and my mother would welcome Grace Walker into their home. Grace and Bill lived a hundred metres up the road, in a white weatherboard house with a verandah around it.

Grace and my mum were friends. They did things together my mother would not otherwise have done.

They would go out to the West Coast together, parking the car at the top of the hill, and walking all the way down the steep sandy track until they got to the beach and then they would walk along the black sand beach.

My father thought church people were hypocrites, but he said little about Grace Walker who was an elder and taught Sunday School and belonged to the fellowship.

Then when I was an age, Mrs Walker asked my mother if Kerry would like to go to Sunday School and my mother asked me, and I said yes.

And after a year or two my attendance was such that Mrs Walker asked me what I would like for a Sunday School prize, and I said I would like the book Tom Sawyer, and she bought it and at Sunday School prize-giving she gave it to me.

Grace died when we lived in Sydney, and I came back and took her funeral because, in the words of the reading today, she went ahead of Jesus Christ, and prepared me to see him when he came to me.

Over time my mother turned towards Jesus Christ.

By a wonderful coincidence, Grace's great great nephew is one of the children who comes up the aisle for our talk each week.

But church people were hypocrites. Perhaps except for Rod Parsons, one of my father's best friends, a butcher. They went fishing together in the Manukau Harbour - schnapper and flounder - and on the river whitebait.

Rob Parsons helped my father with work around the house, and they exchanged vegetables and fruit and borrowed tools from each other. Rod and Meryl Parsons were Methodists. Rod Parsons went ahead of Jesus Christ, and my father got as far as agnosticism before he died. It's a long journey from atheism to agnosticism.

You can smell them, can't you, full-on sales people, including the religious ones.

They tried to get my parents to Church or to join this group or that group, but my parents didn't want a bar of it. "You'll never get me there", my father said firmly to one fervent minister.

But people who came without any thing to sell or market or promote ... people who came as receivers and givers, as friends, who picked plums off our trees and grapes off our vine, who helped trim the hedge or support my father when my mother was sick, who saw in my parents and in our home what was valuable and significant and loving, they prepared the way for Jesus Christ.

People who were concerned for my parents as people, not in order to help themselves or their organisation.

There were people who prayed for us. I believe Grace Walker prayed for me and for my parents.

Jesus sends out the seventy ahead of him to every town and place where he himself intended to go. And because the harvest is plentiful and the labourers are few, he said, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Ask the Lord of the harvest – pray.

Just recently, I was visiting in the hospital. I met Mark Chamberlain, the priest at Holy Name. We talked briefly and then two or so weeks later he came over to my study and asked if he could pray with me. So that is what we are doing each week. Since our conversation in the hospital, I imagine I figured in his prayers, and so he came to me.

Sent ahead. Led. Appointed.

I don't know what happens when you pray, but often, for me, people flood into my prayers.

The people with whom I interacted during the day, the people I wonder about, what is happening with them, and sometimes, people I haven't seen for a while, who I realise I haven't seen for a while.

Prayer seems to fill our minds with people. At the most inconvenient times, in the middle of the night when I am trying to count sheep, I see people. Prayer does that.

Yesterday, I watched a man at the market, just for a minute. He was talking on a cellphone, and people kept bumping into him and walking around him, and he kept apologising. Because he wasn't noticing people around him. He was absorbed in the person at the end of the phone, away from where he actually was. It seemed to me the opposite of praying.

Praying makes me notice people, the people with whom I interact.

Martin Buber said the word pair *I-Thou* describes the world of relations. This is the "I" that does not objectify any "It" but rather acknowledges a living relationship, a living relationship with a thou.

So we regard people not as its, not as objects, not as people to be conquered or judged or improved or berated, but as thou. Prayer attends to people as rich, complex, images of God.

When Jesus appoints seventy others and sends them ahead to every town and place where he himself intends to go, and when he says, the creation is abundant but the workers are few, and he says, therefore ask God to send workers into the harvest, I think our appointing comes in prayer, in the faces that appear in our praying, in the people that appear in the middle of the night, in the people we notice when we stop, when we pause, when we pray.

We are sent to those people, and we are not to take our baggage with us.

"No purse, no bag, no sandals", he says. No baggage. Baggage gets in the way of I and thou. Well, the baggage of mixed motives. We need more labourers. Well, said Jesus, pray about it. Give it to God. Don't let it get in the way of I and thou.

The baggage of putting people right. They aren't living quite right, aspects of their behaviour, parts of their living. I really need to tell them. Well, said Jesus, pray about it. Give it to God. Don't let it get in the way of I and thou.

The baggage of telling our own story. I had something like that happen to me. Or yes, you remind me of the time when ... Or you remind me of my mother or my father or the person who did this or said that, and I find myself relating to you as if you were them.

“Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals, and greet no one on the road.”

Just I and thou. Throw the baggage away. Just eat what is set before you. Just the kingdom has come near to you.

A week or so ago, a person I know asked me what faith had to do with today. How was it relevant, he asked, genuinely, quietly. How did the kingdom of God come near? We had been talking together, casually, for a few weeks, so we talked about what Jesus might say about Donald Trump and Brexit.

A woman next to me on an aeroplane asked about faith and I asked her what she did and what was happening. She told me about a wonderful new step in her life. And the conversation eventually led to how people were precious, made in the image of God, not numbers or cyphers or units in an economy.

Who is appearing in your praying? Who are you thinking about when you pause? What blessing of peace, of I and thou, are you being invited into?

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