

Year A, Proper 1, 14th June 2026

Who remembers seeing the film *The Dirty Dozen*, starring among others Lee Marvin, Charles Bronson and Donald Sutherland?

Based on a true story all 12 were convicted murderers, either facing a death sentence or life imprisonment in a military jail; they were offered a chance of redemption – and potentially their freedom – if they were willing to volunteer for a mission to assassinate high ranking German officers ahead of the D-Day invasion. It was a mission that had a high chance of ending in failure.

Where on earth is he going with this, you may well be asking yourselves

Well 12 is an important number . It even has its own name – a dozen. The word comes up almost 200 times in the Bible. Think of Jacob's 12 sons, the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 minor prophets and of course Jesus's 12 disciples, who are the subject of today's Gospel reading.

And there are similarities between the 12 disciples and the Dirty Dozen. In the film there was no question of calling in say 12 Scots Guards for such a mission – they wouldn't have been the right people. Similarly, there was no question of Jesus choosing 12 of Israel's most learned rabbis to proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. In both situations the obvious choice would also have been the wrong choice.

It would be fair to say that in their own contexts, both the Dirty Dozen and 12 disciples would not have been regarded with honour. Far from it. Yet in the right situation, with the right guidance, those unorthodox choices were able to succeed where more conventional choices would have failed.

Jesus didn't care that his Twelve didn't have the right qualifications. He didn't want special people, he wanted ordinary people who had the same sort of failings that we have – egotistic, slow on the uptake, folding under pressure. Rather than 12 experienced leaders or 12 extra-ordinary people, Jesus wanted down-to-earth, vulnerable people who could identify with the pain, the fears and the struggles of their compatriots.

And Jesus didn't hide away the realities of how difficult his 12 would find their mission. He spoke of floggings, of being dragged before governors and kings, of brother betraying brother. I suspect Jesus knew he needed people who were both foolish enough and naïve enough to accept such an invitation.

But none of that mattered because God is not like that. He is always loving, always on our side, always wanting the best for us, always ready to help when we ask. Mind you, that doesn't mean there won't be a few shocks and surprises along the way. Take the alternative Genesis reading that we didn't have this year, when the angel catches Sarah laughing after he tells Abraham that he's going to become a father for the first time in his late 90s. Even her relatively basic knowledge of biology meant Sarah knew that wasn't going to happen. And of course she laughs again a year or so later when it turns out to be true.

That reading talks about blessing, but we need to be careful about how we understand blessing. If we think of a blessing as a sign of God's favour, I think we may be barking up the wrong tree. Sarah eventually had a child when she thought that blessing had passed her by, but was she favoured more than all those women who down the years have yearned to have a child but for whatever reason were unable to bear a child? I don't think so.

Has someone found favour with God because they have sailed through life with no problems at all? Where does that leave the rest of us?

No, God's blessing should not be thought of as having our prayers answered in the way we hope for. Rather the real blessing of God is his presence with us. God blesses us by being with us on our best days **AND** on our rubbish days, because he is always with us, whether we feel his presence or not. He is with us in our successes **AND** our failures. God's blessing is about his goodness, his faithfulness

I wonder how blessed the disciples felt when Jesus sent them out on their evangelistic mission, telling them to take no money, no overnight bag, no spare clothes, not even a staff. Nor could they accept money, a speaker's fee as it were, to pay their way. Why was that? Because they had received so much from Jesus. You received without payment, give without payment. How's that going to work, there are bills to pay, families to support; you can imagine them saying to themselves. Yet we know that it did, that when they returned they regaled Jesus with stories of all the healings they done, all the miracles they had seen.

The challenge to them, as it is to us, was, quite simply 'Are you ready, willing and able?' For the most part we could legitimately say we are never ready nor able, even if we are willing. The problem is that it is never that simple, is it? I don't know about you, but in our family, the start of the search for people in games of Hide and Seek is 'Coming – ready or not.'

And God's command to us is Go – ready or not. We may not think we are qualified to be God's hands and feet, or feel able to tell people with any confidence that the Kingdom of God is near, or to make God credible in a world that puts more and more credence in my feelings and my truth. All I can tell you is – God begs to differ, and God knows better than you or me.

To the disciples' credit they didn't use their unreadiness to try to get out of going at all – in contrast to Moses who came up with all sorts of reasons initially why he was unsuitable to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

And when they went, trusting in God's presence while at the same time definitely not feeling ready or qualified, the results amazed them, if not Jesus, because they were willing to make God believable and credible.

And of course this mission was, if you like, a dry run for Pentecost when the disciples were ready and able as well as willing.

At the moment, when Christianity seems to be on the decline – in the Western world at least – we worry that not only are the labourers, ie us, few in number, but so is the potential harvest. That's not true says Jesus, the harvest is plentiful. Which is why Jesus was such a labourer. It wasn't because he thought it was a way of earning the Father's approval, but rather because he saw the need and had compassion. Works do not lead to faith, they grow out of our compassion.

Paul, Peter and James are very clear about it – works on their own do not earn us our salvation, that is the gift of God, and are ultimately unsustainable. Yet faith without works is not enough. That's like standing on the sidelines and leaving the actual work of harvesting to any and everyone else.

The truth is lots of people are looking for God, for a spiritual dimension to their lives, they just don't think the Church offers the answers they are seeking. And sadly there may be some considerable truth in that. Over the years the Church generally hasn't covered itself in glory in all sorts of ways, so we need to find other ways of telling people that the Kingdom of God is near.

In Romans, Paul gives his Christian audience guidelines rather than specific rules as a way of coping with the changes and chances of this fleeting world as Compline puts it. Setbacks will occur, but when we reflect on them we can learn from them. So suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character which in turn results in hope. As one commentator suggests, salvation may be free, but that doesn't mean it comes cheap.

Yes, we are called to profess hope in a world that is hurting beyond belief. But hope is more than blindless optimism. We have hope because we have a heavenly Father in whom we can put our trust in all circumstances, good and bad.

Putting our trust in a faithful and loving God, a God who is always present with us, has never been the gateway to an easy life, but it is the gateway to coping with all its downs as well as its ups.