

The 12 disciples and their sending out by Jesus

Although Jesus had 12 primary disciples, He also had a wider circle of 70 disciples, and all Christians may properly be called disciples. A disciple simply is one who learns from another as his or her teacher. There were only 12 apostles. To qualify as apostles, it was necessary to have seen Jesus and to have been an eyewitness of His resurrection and to possess the power and authority to perform miracles in Jesus' name. They were all chosen directly by Jesus or by the Holy Spirit. These qualifications are clear to us when we read how Matthias was chosen to succeed Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:12-26) and how Paul defended his apostolic office (Galatians 1:11-24).

It is interesting to note that of the twelve disciples two were named Simon; two, James; and two, Judas (Thaddaeus is also referred to as Judas). Most of the Twelve had been Galilean fishermen. Only Judas Iscariot was from Judea. (Iscariot means "man of Kerioth," a Judean village).

Most of the twelve apostles left no written records; yet as a group they are well represented as authors of New Testament books. Peter wrote two epistles; John wrote a gospel, three epistles, and Revelation; and Matthew wrote this gospel. We have plenty of firsthand information to know exactly what the apostles believed and taught.

As far as we know, most of the apostles died as martyrs. Tradition tells us that Peter was compelled to watch as his wife was put to death and that he was then crucified upside down (at his own request, because he considered himself unworthy of dying as Jesus had died). It is said that Andrew was nailed to a slanting cross and that he suffered there for three days before he died. James the Elder was the first to be martyred. He was beheaded by King Herod Agrippa I. Nathanael supposedly was flayed (skinned alive) and then crucified head down. James the Less supposedly was hurled down from the pinnacle of the temple and then beaten to death with clubs. Judas Iscariot committed suicide.

Only John lived to a ripe old age and died a natural death. He lived about one hundred years, but he spent his final years as an exile on the island of Patmos. While he was there, he was granted the privilege of seeing some wondrous revelations. According to Jesus' instructions, he recorded them for us in the book of Revelation, which very appropriately is positioned as the final book of the New Testament.

In today's Gospel, we find Jesus sending out the 12. "These twelve" were hardly men who could be expected to change the world. For the most part, they were uneducated, unsophisticated, weak in faith, and slow to learn. They could accomplish their mission only through the authority and power of their Lord. The gospel message they were to proclaim was more than just a statement of fact. It was a powerful, living message, which the Holy Spirit could use to produce saving faith in the hearts of people who heard it. So it was very important that the disciples would carry out Jesus' instructions accurately and proclaim His message faithfully. Then they would not and could not fail. So Jesus proceeded to give them very clear and specific instructions.

Jesus sent them out two by two (Mk. 6:7) so that each could support and encourage his partner. He told them not to go to the Gentiles at that time but to concentrate on the lost sheep of Israel. Jesus came to redeem the whole world, and later He told His disciples to preach the gospel to all creation and make disciples of all nations. Jesus did not love the Gentiles less than the people of Israel, but the disciples had to start somewhere, and they needed a plan to follow. It made sense for them to start

among their own people. They could more easily relate to them, and all their lives they had been taught to avoid unnecessary association with Gentiles. Even after they understood that the gospel was intended for Gentiles as well as for Jews, they found it difficult to invite Gentiles into the kingdom of God. For the time being, they had their hands full trying to reach the lost sheep of Israel, for the majority of the Israelites were such lost sheep. Religious leaders like the Pharisees and the Sadducees led people astray because they departed from the truths of God's Word and taught their own traditions and philosophies. God's true prophets were regularly despised, persecuted, and rejected by their own people.

"The kingdom of heaven is near!" (Matt. 10:7). That was the essence of the message they were to proclaim. It was the same message John the Baptist and Jesus had preached. They were to call people to repentance, to warn them of the consequences of continuing in their sins, and to assure them that God was carrying out His promise for the redemption of the world. The long-awaited Messiah had come. Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God and that promised Saviour. There is no salvation for sinners except through faith in Him. The momentous events of Jesus' passion, resurrection, and ascension would take place in their midst in the near future. The kingdom of heaven was near indeed!