

The Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 66:10-14C
<i>Response</i>	Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 66:1-3, 4-5, 6-7, 16, 20
<i>Second Reading</i>	Galatians 6:14-18
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Let the peace of Christ control your hearts; let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 10:1-12, 17-20

The 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C gives us another example of a passage that's unique to Luke's gospel. In other words, if we didn't have the Gospel of Luke, we wouldn't know about the existence of this mysterious group of 70 disciples that Jesus appoints and then sends out on a mission to proclaim the kingdom of God. It's something that's only here in the Gospel of Luke. It's a really, really important passage. So today we're going to look at Luke 10:1-12, 17-20, and this is the mission of the seventy or (in some translations) the seventy-two (and we'll get into that) Disciples. Who are they? What do they mean? What are they appointed for? What do they mean for us today as we look at the Church? So let's just read through the text and then we'll unpack it together in light of its Old Testament background.

After this the Lord appointed seventy [or in some manuscripts, seventy-two] others, and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to come. And he said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and salute no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be to this house!' And if a son of peace is there, your peace shall rest upon him; but if not, it shall return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages; do not go from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you; heal the sick in it and say to

them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off against you; nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near.' I tell you, it shall be more tolerable on that day for Sodom than for that town.

Now it skips down to verse 17, and it says this:

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."¹

Okay, a lot going on here in this passage. The first thing I would say about it is that if you're familiar with the mission discourse of the Twelve Apostles (so for example in Matthew 10, when Jesus sends out the Twelve and tells them to cure the sick and to cast out demons and to preach about the kingdom of God, and that he's sending them out as lambs in the midst of wolves), you're going to notice a lot of parallels. So the mission of the seventy and the mission of the twelve parallel one another. They clearly have the same kind of apostolic and evangelistic function and mission that the earlier mission of the Apostles has, of Jesus giving them the authority to cast out demons and proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God as he sends them out two by two into the various towns and cities surrounding them.

So that's the first point. This is a similar mission discourse to that of the Twelve. However (obviously), there's a big difference, which is that it's not the Twelve but this group of the seventy, which only Luke tells us about. Now, as soon as I say "the seventy", you get into the question of, "is it seventy or seventy two?" Now the Revised Standard Version here has seventy, and then in a footnote it has "other ancient manuscripts read seventy two". The New American Bible says "seventy two". So you might be wondering, "Well, wait. How many disciples is it?" The answer is we don't know. This is one of those discrepancies in what scholars call text criticism, the comparison of ancient manuscripts. When there are discrepancies in an-

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

cient manuscripts, at some point an error crept in where one scribe wrote one thing and another scribe wrote another thing, and there's a discrepancy between the various copies of the New Testament that we have from antiquity. Now this one is actually not a very big deal, it's pretty easily explained if you know your Old Testament. So a couple of points here. First, there are very reliable ancient Greek manuscripts that have the number seventy here. So *Codex Sinaiticus* and *Codex Alexandrinus*, these are two ancient copies of the New Testament in Greek that are considered very reliable, very authoritative, from the 4th Century A.D. They have seventy. Other copies of Luke, like *Papyrus 75* or *Codex Vaticanus*, have seventy-two. So the ancient manuscript evidence is kind of equally divided and so (as you might expect) scholars are equally divided about which ones more original. And in this case though, I don't think we actually have to decide on the original (although I have my opinions), because they mean (basically) the same thing if you know the Old Testament background.

In the Old Testament the number seventy has a significance that's tied to the priestly elders that Moses appoints during the time of the Exodus. So you might recall in Exodus 24, when Moses is establishing the old covenant, he chooses 70 elders (the Greek word there is *presbuteros*) to act as (basically) mediators, priestly mediators, between God and the twelve tribes of Israel, and they come up the mountain of Sinai with Moses to offer sacrifice on behalf of the people of Israel. These seventy elders, later on in the book of Numbers 11:16-30, Moses takes these elders and he appoints them to help him administrate and govern this massive number of people as they're traveling through the desert. You might remember, in the book of Number 11, Moses is basically up to his neck in administration. He can't possibly do all the work that it entails and his father-in-law Jethro says, well, appoint seventy men to assist you to govern the twelve tribes of Israel. When he does this (this is important), the spirit comes down upon the seventy elders and they're anointed to lead the people of Israel. They are with Moses at the Tabernacle, but what happens is two other men outside the camp, their names are Eldad and Medad, neither one of those very popular names in later Christian tradition, also receive the spirit, even though they're outside the confines of the group that Moses has gathered. So what happens is, from the book of Numbers, an ambivalence (or an ambiguity) arises. How many elders were there? How many priestly elders were there at the time of the Exodus? Well you could make the case that it was seventy (on the basis of Mt. Sinai), but you could also make the case that there were seventy two elders on the basis of the book of Numbers. Both are true, right? What matters, though, is that in both cases, the seventy (or seventy two) represent a priestly hierarchy of appointed

leaders underneath Moses and then the twelve phylarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel.

So seventy is a number that's significant for the elders of Israel, but it gets even better because seventy and seventy-two are also symbolic in another place in the Old Testament. In the book of Genesis (not a lot of people know this, but it's important), Genesis 11, there's this long table (or genealogy) of the sons of Noah (Shem, Ham and, Yaphit), where it goes through all the nations that are descended from Shem, and Ham, and Yaphit. Most modern people just skip over it because it's boring, because we don't care about genealogy. In the ancient world, they didn't skip over it, they actually read it very carefully. It was called "the table of nations", and it was seen as a catalogue of where all the different peoples in the world came from. What's fascinating is if you look at the Hebrew copies of Genesis 11 and you count up the names of the nations, guess how many nations there are? Seventy nations. Now in the Greek Septuagint it was translated a little differently and if you look at those copies, guess how many gentile nations there are? Seventy-two. So a tradition arose that the number 70 (or 72) represented the number of gentile nations, the number of peoples that there were, so to speak, in the world. So some traditions in Judaism would see the world in terms of the twelve tribes of Israel and 70 (or 72) gentile nations. By the way (while I'm at it), this is also what's behind the Septuagint. Why do we call the Septuagint the Septuagint? Well, because of a Jewish tradition that 70 Jewish translators went to Egypt and translated the Bible into Greek, the language of who? The nations; the gentile nations. So the "seventy" is the translation of the Jewish scriptures that can be read by the nations of the world. And it's not just a coincidence that it's seventy elders. While I'm at it I might as well throw this in too, guess how many members of the Sanhedrin there were in Jerusalem? Seventy. So seventy has a number of symbolic layers of meaning that are associated with it from the Old Testament.

So if you're Jesus and it's the 1st Century A.D. and people are saying you're the Messiah, and you've gathered not just a group of twelve around you, but also you appoint seventy other disciples around you, what are you doing? What are you saying? What's the implication of that act? Well, it's not just that you're the new Moses and there's a new Exodus, but something much more. You are setting up a priestly hierarchy of appointed leaders underneath you, not just to bring the good news to the twelve tribes of Israel, but to bring the good news to all the nations. So it's an implicit act of claim of authority on Jesus' part, it's an implicit establishment of a priestly hierarchy on Jesus' part, and it's also an anticipation of the fact that

the gospel's going to go not just to the twelve tribes of Israel, but to all the nations of the world. And if you might have missed that connotation of the seventy, I bet the seventy members of the Sanhedrin (when Jesus was alive) didn't miss the point. They would have gotten the point, because at the head of the seventy members of the Sanhedrin was the one high priest, so seventy plus one, the high priest. And Jesus isn't a member of the seventy or the twelve, he's above them. So he's making himself like a new high priest.

So if you look on one of the handouts that I have for The Mass Readings Explained, it's based on a hierarchy that's based on the Old Testament. So in the Old Testament you had Moses, and then next to him you had Aaron, and then you had Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, the three who go up the mountain with Moses, and then you had the twelve tribes and the seventy elders. So one, three, twelve, seventy; Moses, Aaron, Aaron and his two sons (the three), the twelve tribes and then the seventy elders. Jesus, in the New Testament, what does he do? He's at the top (Jesus is number 1), Peter is above the twelve (but he's a member of the twelve), then you have the three (Peter, James, and John), just like Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, then you have the Twelve (the Twelve Apostles), and then only Luke tells us that there's a fifth group, and it's the seventy disciples. Now is that a coincidence? Did Jesus know that he was setting up a hierarchy of priestly groups with symbolic numbers that echo the exodus of Egypt? I think so, I don't think that's a coincidence. It's fascinating because when people think about Jesus...I can't tell you how many times I've read this in books, "Well, Jesus didn't establish a priesthood, he didn't establish a ministerial priesthood, he just had groups of followers and disciples and they all kind of banded about the countryside. There was no organization to it." Nothing could be further from the truth. You would only think that if you were ignorant of the Old Testament. Any 1st Century Jew who knows the scriptures knows that if this guy's walking around Judea and he's got himself at the top, he's got these three guys that are intimate with him, he's got twelve, and then he adds seventy to it; everyone knows what he's doing here. He's setting up a new priesthood. He's setting up a new hierarchy of consecrated men to rule over a new Israel, in which he himself acts not just as king, but as the high priest. So the seventy are extremely important because they reveal this implicit hierarchy of Jesus' disciples, which is going to constitute a new priesthood that's centered not on the Jerusalem Temple, but on Jesus himself, not on the sons of Aaron, but on the Apostles and the appointed disciples of Jesus.

With all that in mind, now all of a sudden, this makes sense, because if you go back to Luke 10, what does it say? Verse 1, “After this, the Lord appointed seventy others.” Notice that. They don’t just volunteer, they don’t choose themselves. They’re appointed and they’re sent out by Jesus. Second, notice he sends them out two by two into every town and place where he himself is about to come. That is very important. Especially for us today, it’s often the case that diocesan priests administer on their own, they’re by themselves. But Jesus, when he set up the apostolate of the original acts of evangelization, he never sent people out by themselves. He always will send them out two by two, as co-laborers in the harvest. And I think that’s just significant just on a human level, that he doesn’t ever send someone out alone. They always go out in pairs. You’ll see this in the book of Acts as well. Peter and John evangelized together, Paul and Barnabas, Paul and Silas will pick up together too. There are always teams of apostles going out and bringing the good news together. Priscilla and Aquila, you even have men and women (husband and wife) teams who go out and evangelize together, more than one person; they’re not by themselves. So second, in that context, when Jesus says, “the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few”, he’s specifically talking about appointed evangelists; people who are set apart. There are lots of different people who believe in Jesus, who follow Jesus, but these disciples are being consecrated to mission, to go out and bring the good news.

The third element there, notice that they have power and they have authority. They are given authority by Jesus to cast out demons and to preach the kingdom of God. That’s the same power and authority we saw that was given to the apostles in the mission of the Apostles. And this authority is so real that if the town rejects these missionaries who are coming to them, it brings judgment upon them. That’s pretty heavy. Unfortunately the lectionary cuts out a key verse here in Luke 10:16. It’s unfortunate that this wasn’t there, but I think that it’s important for understanding the seventy, because it’s in the context of their mission that Jesus says, “He who hears you, hears me. He who rejects you, rejects me, and he who rejects me, rejects him who sent me.” Now that is probably the strongest statement of apostolic authority in the New Testament or in the Gospel (or at least one of the strongest here), because what Jesus is saying is that when he appoints someone and he sends them out to proclaim the gospel, to hear them is to hear him, and to reject a duly appointed emissary of Jesus is not just to reject Jesus, but is ultimately to reject the Father as well.

So I bring that up because in our day and time there can be a somewhat blithe, disrespectful attitude toward the successors of the Apostles, who are the Pope and the bishops, and the presbyters that the bishops commission. So members of holy orders who are duly ordained, when they preach the gospel to us, the authority that they have to preach, to be sent out, is coming directly from Christ himself. And this is why in the history of the Church, schism, breaking in the body of Christ, rejecting the authority of either the Bishop of Rome or of the other successors of the Apostles was always seen as such a grave act, as a grave sin. Because according to Jesus, if you reject the authority of the one that he has commissioned to preach, you're actually rejecting him, and you're not just rejecting him, you're rejecting the Father. I bring this up because in our day and time, we become, in the wake of the protestant reformation in the last five centuries in the western world, we've just become so used to schism and people setting up their own churches and breaking away and founding a new church — I mean there's a new church founded every day on every corner — that we don't even think of schism as a problem. It's just part of the world we live in. But Jesus here in Luke 10 clearly envisions a situation in which those to whom he appoints to preach the gospel will be listened to as if they're listening to Christ himself, and that they won't be rejected either, because to reject them is to reject Christ. In other words, what he envisions is a unified Church. Oh, I have a good way of summing it up. He envisions one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church. We often don't think about that when we look at the marks of the Church. It's not just that it's one, it's not just that it's holy, it's not just even that it's catholic (and universal), it's that it's apostolic. It's rooted in the authority that Christ himself gives to the apostles that he sends. So that's kind of implicit...now I'm doing all this but this verse isn't actually used in the lectionary today, so I'm kind of getting ahead of myself, but I thought I'd add it in because it's important that that verse takes place in the context of the commissioning of the seventy. So they're a real group with real authority, they're just a little mysterious and a little obscure because they're only mentioned here in Luke.

Finally though, the last element of the gospel that's really interesting for today is when they come back and they're exuberant because of the power that they have over Satan. So they're just thrilled because they're casting out all these demons in the name of Jesus. And when they say this, Jesus says something fascinating. He says, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from Heaven". Now what does that mean? There's two (at least two) ways of interpreting this. One interpretation is that Jesus is (in a sense) revealing his own pre-existence. In other words, when he's talking about the fall of Satan, he means I was there at the original fall of the angels at the

dawn of creation. So don't get too excited (so to speak), because this shouldn't surprise you (in other words) that the demons are subject to you, because I was there at the beginning when I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning. And you'd see a reference to that kind of Jewish tradition in Revelation 12, which describes the casting out of Satan from heaven. Nowadays scholars incline toward a different interpretation, which is a visionary interpretation in which Jesus is saying to the apostles, I could see spiritually what you were doing in a historical sense. I saw the demons falling from heaven as you were casting them out. I saw Satan being overcome in your exorcistic activity. That's a possible interpretation. I don't think we can rule it out, but it seems to me that it doesn't quite grasp the gravity of Jesus' words. I'm inclined more to the first interpretation, primarily because of the singularity of Satan as an individual being in 1st Century Judaism, and of his fall as a particular event. If he had said, "I saw the demons falling like stars from heaven", if it were plural, it would make more sense that he'd be applying that to just the exorcistic activity of the seventy rather than to some primordial fall of Satan. But it's one of those things that's open for debate. In either case though, when Jesus goes on to say, "I've given you the power to tread on serpents and scorpions", he doesn't mean that the apostles can go into the desert and they don't have to worry about getting bit by a scorpion. Although, we'll see something like that happen in Acts where an actual serpent bites Paul and it doesn't harm him, but in context here he clearly means serpents and scorpions as symbols of the demonic forces over which the seventy now have power. But he tells them, "Look, don't worry about it. Don't get so excited about exorcisms. What really matters is that your names are written in heaven." That's the true cause for rejoicing.

Which leads us to the Old Testament, and the Old Testament reading today might seem somewhat disconnected. You might think, "Hey, it's going to be from Exodus 24 or Numbers 11, about the seventy elders", but it isn't. It's just a vision of that resurrected joy and the new creation, Isaiah 66:10-14. This is Isaiah's vision of the New Jerusalem. And listen how he describes it:

"Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her,
all you who love her;
rejoice with her in joy,
all you who mourn over her;
that you may suck and be satisfied
with her consoling breasts;
that you may drink deeply with delight

from the abundance of her glory."

For thus says the LORD:

"Behold, I will extend prosperity to her like a river,
and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream;
and you shall suck, you shall be carried upon her hip,
and dandled upon her knees.

As one whom his mother comforts,
so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice;
your bones shall flourish like the grass;
and it shall be known that the hand of the LORD is with his servants,
and his indignation is against his enemies.

Okay, so what does this have to do with the seventy in the New Testament? Seemingly nothing at first glance, but for that one word, "the wealth of the nations shall be brought into her." So I think the connection here lies with the fact that unlike the earthly Jerusalem in the old covenant, which is set apart for Israel (primarily), in the New Jerusalem of the Eschaton, of the Messianic age of Salvation, it's not just Israel that's going to flow into Jerusalem to worship the one God, but the wealth of the nations, the gentiles, will bring their tithe to the city of the everlasting God. So if the seventy represent Jesus' eventual mission to the nations, it's fitting then that the Old Testament reading for today would be about the city of the nations, the New Jerusalem, where Israel and the gentiles will gather together to worship the one true God, which is what Psalm 66, the Responsorial Psalm for today tells us. "Let all the earth cry out to God". The good news isn't just for the twelve tribes, it's for all the nations of the world.

Now in closing, I'd just like to end with two key elements from the living tradition. The first one is from St. Bede, who was one of the few Doctors of the Church who lived in what now, today, we call England, or the island of Great Britain. Bede wrote a number of commentaries on the Bible and he wrote one book on the Tabernacle. In that book he makes very explicit this connection between the seventy (or the seventy two) and the order of the ministerial priesthood. Listen to St. Bede's words:

[J]ust as the number of the twelve apostles marked the beginning of the episcopal rank, it is apparent that *the seventy-two disciples*, who were also sent out by the Lord to preach the word, signify in their selection the lesser rank of the priesthood that is now called the presbyterate.²

Now note that, it's something very important. In contemporary Catholicism, we often talk about how the Apostles were the first priests and that the priesthood is rooted in the Apostles, and that Jesus ordains the Apostle's priests at the Last Supper. That's all totally true, but it's important to remember that in terms of the levels of Holy Orders, the Apostles aren't just the first priests, they are the first bishops, because in them, like in the bishop, resides the fullness of apostolic authority. The fullness of the priesthood is in the bishop, who is the successor to the Twelve, the Apostles. And yet, in his public ministry, Jesus appoints a second level within the hierarchy of the seventy disciples, which all the way back in the 7th Century (at the time of Bede; although he lived into the 8th Century), already back in that time, Bede is saying, no, actually the Twelve are linked in a distinctive way with the episcopate (with the bishops), and then the seventy are tied to the priesthood. Now you might be thinking, "I've never heard that before Dr. Pitre, that seems a little odd, is that your own idea? Is that Bede's idea?" Well, actually, no, it's the Church's idea, because if you look, even to this day, in the rite of ordination for a priest, when a deacon is ordained to the second level of Holy Orders, which in Latin is *presbyterate*, the order of presbyters, which in English we call the order of priests; listen to the words of the official Roman Rite of Ordination, when a man is ordained a priest. When a man is being ordained by the bishop, this is what the Church has the bishop pray:

*In the desert you extended the spirit of Moses to seventy wise men who helped him to rule the great company of his people. You shared among the sons of Aaron the fullness of their father's power, to provide worthy priests in sufficient number for the increasing rites of sacrifice and worship. With the same loving care you gave companions to your Son's apostles to help in teaching the faith: they preached the Gospel to the whole world. Lord, grant also to us such fellow workers, for we are weak and our need is greater.*³

² Bede, *On the Tabernacle*, 3.112; trans. A. G. Holder

³ *Rite of Ordination of a Priest*, no. 22; trans. ICEL

It's fascinating, isn't it? So, in the actual rite of ordination, the bishop speaks in the name of the apostle, and he says just as you gave the twelve apostles seventy disciples to assist them in proclaiming the gospels, so give presbyters, so give priests to me as a bishop now, to help me proclaim the gospel to the whole world, to all the nations.

And so, in closing then, if anyone ever says to you, "Well Jesus didn't establish the priesthood", bring them back to the Gospel of Luke 10:1-19. The whole passage on the seventy disciples is crucial for seeing that the origins of the New Testament priesthood, the New Testament *presbyterate*, the new hierarchy of the new covenant, isn't some medieval invention, or even an invention of the early Church in the 2nd Century, but the new priesthood goes back to Jesus himself, who not only establishes the hierarchy of the Twelve, but of the seventy disciples.