Kirriemuir 050715

2 Cor 12: 2-10

Mark 6: 1-13

This time last week – give or take a bit of time change – I was at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Salt Lake City, Utah. Our day began at 7am in temperature which was already over 80F with a walk of the bishops against gun violence. The terrible shootings in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charlotte, South Carolina, were an act of savagery but also an abuse of hospitality. A young man sits among the worshippers and accepts their hospitality. But that same hospitality makes them vulnerable and helpless in the face of his murderous cruelty.

And the irony is that out of their vulnerability – out of the suffering which came to them through their open hospitality – has come the most extraordinary witness to the power, the forgiveness, the love and the grace of God.

Today’s readings in the Epistle and Gospel are about that vulnerability and about the place of hospitality at the centre of Christian life.

St Paul talks about the ‘thorn in the flesh’ which has been given to him ‘to stop him from being too elated’. What Paul is having to learn is that, however strong he wishes to be in the Gospel, it is important that he is in touch with his own vulnerability. He wishes it could be otherwise and he appeals to the Lord about it. But the answer is that God’s grace is sufficient – that power is made perfect in weakness.

So the message is that self-sufficiency may seem commendable and admirable. But if we are about commending the grace of God, then vulnerability and dependence on the grace of God are far more effective.

Jesus tells how he experienced a lack of hospitality among his own people. He is amazed by them and by their wilful unbelief. They are impervious – not open to relationship with him. They are blinded and blanked off from him by a fixation on the fact that they know who he is and where he comes from. So all he can do is to lay hands on a few sick people and heal them.

But then he does something which is entirely relevant to us in the church of our times. He sends out the twelve, two by two. He gives them authority to act in his name. Most of all he orders them to take nothing with them so that they are dependent on the welcome and the hospitality of those whom they meet. If they are not welcomed, they are to pass on. If they receive a welcome they are to minister in his name.

The things which inhibit us from acting in this way are almost too obvious to need mentioning. First of all we have our own stuff to look after – sustaining a congregation these days is a big challenge. You have one of the most beautiful and historically important church buildings in our diocese – and you are working hard to renovate and restore it. If you weren’t nobly doing that, the diocese and I would be pushing you to do so.

But inevitably we end up being more inward-focused than we should be. We wonder about people ‘out there’ in the community beyond the church – in what we generically call our ‘secular society’ To talk about bringing them back to church doesn’t make much sense because most of them have never been there. But equally, to say that they are not open to an encounter with the grace of God is also mistaken

This week’s Church Times newspaper has ten pages on mission. A snippet from Bishop Pete Broadbent, Bishop of Willesden, says that we should ‘get outside our building. Mission is now centrifugal not centripetal. The old ‘come to church and discover the mystery’ stuff has less traction when people won’t darken the door. Do festivals and acts of kindness in the community. Be known’

So in terms of today’s readings, we might say – Get out there. Make yourself dependent on the welcome and hospitality of the community. Be interested in people and learn about what concerns them. Represent to them the healing grace of God – and see what happens.