

THE VISITORS

'He ... sent them out in pairs on a mission.' Mark 6: 7

They came the day we buried old Benjamin. There were two of them, a man and a woman, peasants like ourselves, shabbily dressed and unremarkable. At first, occupied by the ritual of mourning, we hardly noticed them, but as the sun went down and they were still here, hospitality demanded that we offer them refreshment. There were murmurs that they had stayed because there was always food to be had at a burial. Friends who had come from a distance needed sustenance for the return journey, families needed consoling.

'We come in peace,' they said, and to be fair they ate very little, although it seemed they had travelled further than anyone that day. Afterwards, the men gathered under the tree in the centre of the village and repeated to each other memories of old Benjamin's life. The two strangers were still there, standing back respectfully enough, just out of earshot but watching us until it was too late for them to move on that night, and room had to be found for them to sleep.

When we rose at dawn next morning to begin work in the cool of the day, we expected the strangers to leave. There was no sign of the woman, but the man came out with us to the fields and toiled as hard as any with good will. At midday we rested and shared our bread with him, which again he ate sparingly, no doubt seeing how little we had. When we went home the woman was there too. She had spent the day gleaning in neighbouring fields.

After a few days we ceased to feel suspicious of them. Indeed, we began to be glad to have them with us. The man worked hard with the strongest of us and the woman helped the other women with the cooking and baking the bread. Sometimes she gathered herbs she found in the fields and was skilled at making medicines to relieve pain and even heal the sick. Both of them would sit with the old people and listen patiently to the stories most of us were tired of hearing.

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One evening when some of us relaxed together under the big tree, an elder of the village called to the man inviting him to join us. To our surprise, the woman came over with him, prompting the elder to ask whether this was the custom where they came from.

The man replied, 'Our friend who sent us has taught us that men and women are equal in the sight of our Creator, and should be treated so.'

Someone laughed and said, ‘Does your friend not know that there is no silencing a woman once she is allowed to talk?’

The man said gravely, ‘Our friend welcomes many women when we meet, and values their insights above many, for he says they only speak when they have something sensible to say.’

This produced murmurs that this would make all wives think they could speak freely, but since the woman sat quietly no more was said about it that evening. Next day the woman found a wild fig tree by the wayside and gave the ripe fruit she had picked to the village children. This caused resentment among those who saw, and there were cries of, ‘Are you mad? Who gives valuable food to a stranger’s offspring?’

The woman smiled and said, ‘If your child asked for a fig, would you give him a stone?’

‘But those are not our children,’ came the reply. ‘They are merely village brats who have just eaten something someone more deserving should have had.’

‘Such as yourselves?’ she asked, and as they made no answer she went on, ‘Our friend says that it is children who are deserving because they do not think themselves important. He believes that the nobodies of this world matter just as much as great men who lord it over us. When it rains, he says, it rains on everyone’s crops, and the sun shines just as brightly on everybody’s harvest.’

By this time more had gathered and someone declared that surely it was only good people who prospered. ‘Our friend,’ the woman told him, ‘says that the Giver of all good gifts has no favourites but loves us all equally. We are all children of the one Parent, however undeserving.’

This seemed to please all except one man who asked the assembled company whether they were going to stand around all day listening to a woman.

‘Yes!’ one man cried out, so that everyone turned to look at him. He was not tall but he drew himself up to his full height as he answered: ‘I for one shall listen to her, for she has persuaded me I have as much right to a full stomach as Caesar himself.’

Later that evening the same man called the strangers over to arbitrate in an argument he was having with a neighbour. ‘You both appear wise,’ he said, ‘so maybe you can judge which of us is in the right before we settle our dispute with blows.’

‘Let me tell them my side of the story first,’ said the other man, ‘so that they can judge fairly.’

But the strangers shook their heads. ‘Our friend judges no one,’ said the man, ‘so nor do we.’ The woman added, ‘We came to you in peace because he is a man of peace. He taught us to love our

neighbours as we love ourselves, regardless of who is in the right.’

‘But if we both did that – ’ began one of the men, ‘ – we should have no quarrel!’ finished the other.

They looked at each other. Then they both laughed. Suddenly everyone was laughing. The argument had evaporated.

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That night Benjamin’s son called everyone together, men, women and children, under the big tree where he addressed us all.

‘These two strangers have become a great blessing to us,’ he began, ‘and I have been reminded of things my father Benjamin told me concerning his father. My grandfather, Simeon, was a man of great faith who believed with all his heart that the prophecies of salvation from Israel’s oppressors would be fulfilled in his life time. My father and his friends all took this with a pinch of salt, especially as Simeon extended these hopes to include the gentiles. Well, he wasn’t getting any younger and there was no sign of any avenging army on the horizon coming to win a mighty victory over their enemies. But one day when he was already very old he made the pilgrimage up to the Temple in Jerusalem. On his return home he looked ten years younger and was like a different person. They thought he must have had a vision. He told them that while he was praying there a mother came in with her baby son. My grandfather became certain there was something special about the child. He took him in his arms to bless him and experienced suddenly a great sense of fulfillment such as he had never known before. It was, he said, as if he had been the one to receive a blessing.’

There were murmurs of surprise at this: after all, a child being presented in the Temple would be less than eight days old – hardly counting as a person, let alone one who could bestow a blessing. Then one of the strangers spoke up: ‘We can believe that. Our friend says that an old person who is prepared to learn from a seven day old child is a person fully alive, because that person is aware how we all share in the life of the one Parent of us all.’

‘That,’ said the young man, ‘was exactly how they said my grandfather seemed when he came home.’ He was silent for a moment. Then he added, ‘A few days later he died peacefully.’

At this there were cries of: ‘Even though the old man’s hopes of salvation had not been realised?’

‘Ah,’ said the young man, ‘they asked the same, but I think that they had it all wrong. On his death bed, my grandfather called his family round him and told them that he was convinced that the child he had held in the Temple was the one who would fulfill all the prophecies about the saving of Israel. He believed he had been allowed to live long enough to see this begin. Then he closed his eyes and

the breath left him. My friends, I am ashamed to say that I too thought the old man had been rambling but at least he had died happy.'

He turned suddenly to our two visitors and said, 'That is, until you both arrived. Now I see that my grandfather may have been right.'

There was a ripple of astonishment among his hearers, and someone blurted out, 'But where is this avenger who will free us from Roman oppression? Where is this saviour of the world?'

The young man replied, 'I think he may have been that child in the Temple. And I have become convinced it was that child my grandfather met there who grew up to be the friend our new friends have told us about.'

At this there was muttering among them that no one had noticed any armies come to vanquish the Romans and restore the nation.

But the young man went on, 'I believe my grandfather saw in that child a quite different sort of rescuing, another kind of hope. He saw strength in weakness, power in powerlessness, well-being in a community where justice and peace reign, where people are merciful and love each other, walking humbly with their God. I think that is the salvation the prophets foretold and that is what we have learnt from our two friends coming here. I believe that their friend who sent them is our friend too, and that he is none other than the one who was that child in the Temple in Jerusalem.'

Gladness crept into our village that night as we began to understand how much well-being this message brought us. But to our sadness, early next morning our friends prepared to make their journey home. We begged them to stay, but they said that they had work to do in other places and must take their message of hope and goodwill to others. We all wept and embraced them as we sent them on their way.

'Tell your friend that he is our friend too,' we said. 'Through you he has gladdened our lives. We shall not forget you.'

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