

The Kingdom of God is near
Luke Chapter 10 verse 11

**Sermon preached by The Reverend Stuart Veitch at Carrs Lane Church on 23rd May 2004,
at a service to mark the 70th anniversary and last reunion of the Seventy Club**

I imagine that the reading from Luke Chapter 10: verses 1 - 11, read to us by Patricia, is familiar to many of us. Modern translations get it wrong of course, they translate the number of disciples as 72, not 70! Patricia carefully selected a 'correct' version. I imagine too that it was the same reading that was read at the inception of the 70 Club. It starts with the sending out of the 70, a similar task to the one Godfrey Paine undertook 70 years ago. What a tremendously courageous step that must have been!

But as we have come together today to say 'Goodbye' to the last official body of the 70 Club, let's focus on the last words of the same reading: the Kingdom of God has come near.

These words are part of a judgement on those who refused to hear the gospel. Jesus was saying "You turned down the offer of the Kingdom of God, nevertheless the Kingdom of God has come near".

When I was a child, towards the end of a meal I was offered a desert. I was too timid to ask what that meant, and thinking it would involve plates full of sand, I said no, only to be surrounded by people with jellies, blancmanges and trifles; whilst I had none. The Kingdom of God had come so near, but I had refused the offer. Jesus was addressing people who had similarly refused the offer.

But these words of Jesus, The Kingdom of God has come near, have a deep meaning. Jesus was intimating that through the mission of his disciples, the Kingdom of God was brushing up against people, whether they knew it or not.

Did that not happen in our lives through 70 Club too, that brushing up against the Kingdom? Or am I seeing things through rose-tinted spectacles, as one can so easily do after all this time? No, I really do believe that in all we did together, something special was happening.

What we probably remember most is the fun and laughter. There was a long tradition of that, despite the fact that we were 'church', where such things were not supposed to happen. My father told us of a very early 70 Club holiday, when he and Ken Corley and other founder members went off to stay in a cottage near the coast somewhere, and were told by the Leader that there were rules, one of which was that the cottage front door would be locked at 10 pm each night. So at 10.00 pm they were duly locked in, and a little later quietly got out of the first floor bedroom window, which was also at ground level, because the cottage was built into a hill, and off they went for an illicit midnight swim, and their leader never knew!

The tradition of fun was typified more recently by Brian Hands, and his jokes, many of which have been immortalised in a booklet "Here's to me... and my wife's husband". Joke No. 313: "Notice in Church Hall: Will ladies responsible for making tea, kindly empty teapots and kettles and then stand upside down in the sink".

But it was not just the fun: there was something else hidden away amongst all the laughter.

When we were decorating someone's living room and we'd find that they were providing the wallpaper, bought at a Jumble Sale: 2 rolls of yellow, 4 of pink and 1 of black, it was not just the paint and paper we fixed, there was something about fellowship too; the Kingdom of God had come near.

Many Club members visited the Blind School, travelling out to Lickey Grange each Monday evening; it was not just their eyes and sight that they gave them, there was something about fellowship too; the Kingdom of God had come near.

When the Concert Party went to old peoples' homes, it was not just the slap-stick sketches, nor the fun with pianos whose keys stuck down, so whilst Brenda was pressing the notes down, I was pulling them up; it was not just the entertainment, there was something about fellowship too; the Kingdom of God had come near.

We took with us a sense of the Kingdom of God being near, as if we were being sent out by Christ, even if we didn't realise it, because our lives were so busy with the hurly burly that is so typical of young people.

Jesus said it was in the little things, like feeding the hungry, visiting the lonely, and clothing the naked, that the Kingdom of God comes amongst us. Whether in our social life on Wednesdays, or the dances we went to together at weekends, or the community work we did together in the week, 70 Club was a place where the Kingdom of God came near.

But it was not just the club for which this was true. It was true for Carrs Lane Church too. Any church activity can enrich the church to which it belongs. **Of course** 70 Club did not belong to the church! What was true, was that we always met at Carrs Lane, they didn't charge us much, and the Chair was always the Carrs Lane Minister; Michael Hubbard in my time. It was also true that when we had to raise money and ran a Bangola, when we made and sold things, (do some of you remember the little red engine production line Michael Hubbard set up in the 70 Club room?), it was largely the Carrs Lane folk that filled our coffers. Yet we were stoutly independent, our relationship more like a partnership than belonging to the church. It is true therefore, that the Church was taking a risk, 70 Club's attachment could have been broken at any time, but that gave club members a feeling of freedom; yet in a sense, that freedom made for an even stronger bond between the club and the church. I remember a Church Meeting in the Lecture Hall of old Carrs Lane, when we were advising the church that we were going to buy a house to house some of our members, and to be the focus for our social work, (and we would develop a partnership with Christian Aid and work with Margaret Selby, though we didn't know that at that time), and old Judge Carr reached for his cheque book, he couldn't wait to support what we were doing. That typified the relationship between the club and church members.

And many of us were nurtured by this church. Carrs Lane had a long tradition of serving the city, partly through direct action, like the Counselling Centre, and partly by positively affirming the work of its individual members in their fields of work and interest, such as education, the medical world, the civil service, commerce and industry, social services and the voluntary sector. In all these areas, the Church wanted to encourage a real sense of the relevance of the gospel. So 70 Clubbers, as well as many others, were encouraged to go out to serve the Kingdom of God in the world beyond the church's walls, so that people in our community could say that the Kingdom of God has come near.

Meanwhile we had to climb all those steps! How ever many were there? I was too young to bother to count them then, but I bet if I'd been climbing them now, I'd know just how many there were! We climbed up to our magnificent 70 Club room, spacious, even if not a wonderful décor, and if we were early enough, we'd cook tea, and then perhaps play a game of 'table tennis', that's what you called it if you took it seriously like Geoff Grey, 'ping pong' if you didn't. Of course that clubroom has long gone: all has changed. It's like the world in which we live, full of change. Indeed how much the world has changed since 70 Club began, seventy years ago! Is it because we're older that change seems greater? Not entirely, I think. Yet despite all the changes, we are still sent out into our community to reveal the Kingdom of God. Our contemporary world still has to face similar issues, the focus on status, the focus on materialism, the fear of the loss of security, lots of loneliness (despite mobile phones), family stress in its many forms, and the many injustices facing minority groups, women, and the poor; all these issues are still very real today. We live in a world that needs the Kingdom of God as much as ever. It is, I believe, an eternal truth, that as long as the world exists, there will always be a battleground between the forces of good and evil, and Christians are commanded by Jesus to be in the front line of this battle.

So we old 70 Clubbers can look back with great affection on our 70 Club days, and thank God for them. 70 Club was NOT just a marriage bureau, though thank God it was that too. It was also a place where the Kingdom of God came near, by sending us out. And that is still the rôle that old 70 Clubbers and all Christians have to play, living within our Christian communities, but being sent out. We are still Christ's hands and feet in this world, He still depends on us. See how George Macleod expresses this thought:

No Other Plans

There is a very old legend, and all legends that persist speak truth, concerning the return of the Lord Jesus Christ to heaven after His Ascension.

It is said that the angel Gabriel met Him at the gates of the city.

"Lord, this is a great salvation that Thou hast wrought," said the angel. But the Lord Jesus only said, "Yes". "What plans hast Thou made for carrying on the work? How are all men and women to know what Thou hast done?" asked Gabriel.

"I left Peter and James and John and Martha and Mary to tell their friends, and their friends to tell their friends, till all the world should know."

"But, Lord Jesus," said Gabriel, "suppose Peter is too busy with his nets, or Martha with her housework, or the friends they tell are too occupied, and forget to tell their friends - what then?"

The Lord Jesus did not answer at once; then He said in His quiet, wonderful voice: "I have not made any

other plans. I am counting on them."

Christ is counting on you and me.

So go out from this place, and from this Christian community, to the world in which you live. Go out in the spirit of the 70 Club, which will never be irrelevant, and never be extinguished, and you will find that the Kingdom of God is near you, wherever you go.

Amen

**(Sermon preached by The Reverend Stuart Veitch at Carrs Lane Church on 23rd May 2004,
at a service to mark the 70th anniversary and last reunion of the Seventy Club)**