Today we take a break from Matthew as we celebrate Luke the Evangelist. Luke was Greek, he was a doctor and the only known Gentile author in the bible. He was also a companion of Paul as in verse 11 in his letter to Timothy, Paul says that there was only Luke who stayed with him as he was in imprison.

Both readings have similarities as they both are speaking words of encouragement to those going out in the 'harvest field' to do the work Jesus began and Paul continued, prior to them both waiting for their impending execution.

I'll speak more about Luke in a bit but first I want to look at today's gospel reading where Jesus sends his growing following of disciples out on a wider mission as he sends out 70. There was symbolism to the number 70 - as there was with most things Jesus said. It would have made sense to Jewish people as in the Old Testament it was the number of elders chosen to help Moses with the task of leading and guiding the people in the wilderness, (found in Exodus 24:1). It was also the number of the Sanhedrin - who were the Supreme Council of Jews - and it was thought at the time to be the number of nations in the world as found in a long list in Genesis 10.

The departing instructions Jesus gave were simple; go out, travel light, don't carry any baggage which were the same instructions given to the 12 he'd earlier sent out - but on a bigger scale. Wherever you were offered hospitality, respect it, work selflessly and don't try to find benefits out of it for themselves.

The 70 were not any better qualified than the 12 as they were equipped with the same knowledge of Jesus power and authority and it was down to their own resourcefulness and vision as how they would reach out to people.

Jesus proclaimed that, "The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few" and encouraged them to keep praying that others would be added to their number, "Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into the harvest."

And then a warning of the opposition to come, to be alert and committed to the task as they were to go, "like lambs into the midst of wolves."

That's what it can feel like being a Christian in the world today, with persecution being rife in countries were Christians have become the minority. We hear the calls that God doesn't exist and we're fools for believing he does. But where faith is strong, we are assured that we can go out and pray in Jesus' authority and power for others to know the truth and know the difference Jesus makes in our lives.

This was what was so important to Luke and to Paul who both shared a common goal of souls being harvested for Jesus. Luke's gospel was universal gospel as he wrote that Jesus was for everyone, with no exclusions. All could be saved and all were welcome in God's kingdom. He wrote about the people Jesus mixed with, especially those who were generally thought of as 'unclean,' the real dregs of society. And his heart was for all to know that Jesus was a friend of the outcasts and the sinners and nowhere in any of the other three gospels, is this found as much. It was essential for Luke to share this message that all could be saved, whoever they were.

One example was in the account of John the Baptist when the gospels all quote Isaiah 40, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" but it's only in Luke that this is extended to include, "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." In all four gospels, Luke is the only writer who envisioned the unlimited and all-encompassing love of God so explicitly.

I found this verse in one of my books about Luke, and it sums up all that he strived to express at the heart of his gospel. It's from a hymn written by a theologian and hymn writer, Frederick Faber, who had Luke in mind when he wrote it.

"There is a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea. There's a kindness in his justice, which is more than liberty. For the love of God is broader than the measures of man's mind; and the heart of the eternal is the most wonderfully kind."

AMEN