

My reflection on the gospel begins with two very different people: the actor Lee Marvin and Bobby Seagull who shot to fame on university challenge along with Eric Monkman.

In his book "The Life-Changing Magic of Numbers" Bobby Seagull makes some fascinating observations about numbers. For example, we have 10 fingers so most societies use a decimal counting system. However, there are exceptions to this rule. There are tribes in the Amazon for whom once you get to 2 the next number is "many". There is a Tribe in Tanzania who only go as far as 3. In Papua New Guinea there are no less than 900 different counting systems. One of these systems uses base 27 as they count on 27 different body parts. So the number 50 for the is 1 person and the left thumb given that the left thumb is used for 23.

But given that we use base 10 why do we have 12 or 24 hours in a day?

We need to go to Babylon for the answer when they use base 60 from where we get 360 degrees in a circle and the hours of the day which go back to an earlier time and is counted on the 3 joint of your fingers (but not thumbs).

So in the ancient middle east 12 was an important number and has come to have special significance. We give a special name for twelve – a dozen. More interestingly for us, it is a very significant number in the Bible, used around 187 times. Think about the twelve Minor Prophets of the Old Testament, Jacob's twelve sons, the twelve tribes of Israel, twelve governors of Israel appointed by Solomon, and Revelation's tree of life producing twelve fruits.

And, of course, the twelve disciples become apostles.

Jesus' primary followers were an unusual group and this is where we get to Lee Marvin, and the "dirty dozen" the 1967 movie of the same name. Based on a true story and framed against the World War II D-day invasion, it portrays a special military operation designed to kill high-ranking Nazi officers. The American high command ordered an unorthodox officer to select a twelve-man squad for a mission with a very high probability of failure and the likely death of most of the combatants. Surprisingly, the officer did not go after the best soldiers in his outfit but instead visited military prisons. Among those he chose were thieves, murderers, and scoundrels. The commander took them apart and molded them into an effective team. Later, the wisdom of his selecting this "dirty dozen" became clear as their criminal skills proved perfect for the demands of the risky mission. In the end, this highly unlikely, rag-tag band of brothers got the job done, and the audience cheered the demise of a dreaded enemy.

Of course, I am not condoning criminal behavior, but the story presents an interesting plot about a dozen men whom the world did not regard with honor. They seemed ill-suited for such an important task. However, as the story goes, in the right situation, with a unique sort of guidance, they became heroes in the midst of an assignment that demanded an unconventional solution.

Another unconventional leader, in a more extraordinary era, called together his own unremarkable dozen to take on the most momentous mission of all time. This story, told in today's Gospel reading, is not about a "dirty" dozen, but about an equally unique and unorthodox one.

When Jesus picked out his twelve, he didn't ask for any particular academic qualification and probably didn't ask for references. He was almost cavalier in his attitude to who he asked to follow him. Spiritual insight or proven ability were not what was looked for. He didn't seek the brightest and best but the ordinary. One was young and inexperienced One was a fanatical Jewish Nationalist. Several argued among themselves about who was the greatest disciple. Many of them had grown up in the back of beyond. Matthew was a despised tax collector. Peter denied even knowing Jesus when the chips were down. And then there was Judas – the betrayer.

Looked at rationally Jesus seemed to have gone out of his way to find the least likely bunch of people. And yet he trusted them to go out and spread the Kingdom of God. He sent them out to do the very work he had been doing and for them to continue after he was gone.

The mission on which Jesus sent his twelve was at least as risky as that of the "dirty dozen." He described it in familiar imagery as going out "like sheep into the midst of wolves." He warned them of the likelihood of their being flogged and "dragged before governors and kings" as a result of accepting Jesus' call to mission. In the most frightening of Jesus' warnings to his dozen, he suggested that the field of spiritual battle would be one in which "brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death," and that others would hate them for following Jesus.

Perhaps Jesus knew better than to invite experienced leaders or exceptional examples. He needed down-to-earth, vulnerable, and ordinary people – a kind of dozen who were representative of the general population and understood their pain and fears. Furthermore, who else would have had the courage or naivete - or the foolishness - to join such a band of brothers on such a dangerous mission?

The important lesson for today is that we Christians of the 21st century *are* the current “dozen” for Jesus. Of course, the dangers we face are seldom as dramatic as those faced by Jesus’ apostles. Still, remaining faithful in following Jesus remains a formidable task. But there is hope because we bear significant resemblance to the commonplace apostles.

Both the Officer played by Lee Marvin and Jesus in the first century saw in their dozens a potential that they themselves not see.

God’s perspective is that what needs doing in the world requires ordinary people, like most of us. God’s work requires the very experiences we have had at work, or at school, or at play or raising a family, or doing whatever is normal for us – all of which we can use to help others. God needs today’s “dozen” to utilize a great variety of gifts and skills and experiences to continue the task Jesus gave to the disciples. To proclaim the good news to those who do not know God and not necessarily by words but by living out the Gospel values of loving our neighbors as ourselves, bringing about justice and peace, providing for those in need.