

Matthew 28:16-20 – Sermon for 10am

Our reading from the end of Matthew's gospel this morning is what we commonly call "the Great Commission" in Church circles – it's the bit where Jesus lays down really succinctly for his friends and followers what they need to do and why. It is one of the most commonly quoted bits of the bible, but also it can be quite controversial.

It is controversial because it makes completely stark the Christian faith's position on what we call mission and evangelism – the spreading of the Christian message to introduce more people to faith in Jesus. This is Jesus's final message and the mission that he leaves us with. Unashamedly, we are a missionary people.

So let's just deal with the controversy first. This commission has been deemed controversial in various ways for the last few hundred years and I just want to clear the ground. Firstly, the Church hasn't covered itself in glory in history with forced conversions, the crusades, and so on using this commission as its driving motive. Historically, there are mistakes made on a grand scale for which there can be no excuse and really our only response is to make sure this doesn't happen nowadays. Sounds simple, but it's not – we may not be into forced conversions, but we need to be careful of how our charitable giving to help refugees and asylum seekers walks the line between being unashamedly Christian-sourced, but equally available to those who are not Christians so we don't pressure people to convert to receive aid. What seems innocent can quickly turn manipulative.

Another area of controversy is the missionary element of our reading. Seeking to introduce people to being disciples and followers of Jesus has been challenged since the Enlightenment when faith began to be pushed into a personal sphere of life. Christians are told to keep their faith to themselves since it has no place in the public square. Politicians draw lines between their faith and their politics and those who "do God" in public are told they should keep their beliefs out of it. There's loads that could be said, but our instructions from Jesus in this reading and elsewhere don't really allow for this very modern distinction. Everyone enters the public square with a set of beliefs and a worldview which colours what they do and say and to deny this is to deny the reality of being human. Our mission from Jesus isn't just related to the private, personal arena.

The third area of controversy is that this Great Mission that Jesus leaves us with is a narrative which people say it's "OK for you but not for me", and to push against this very post-modern thinking is deemed aggressive and oppressive – 'Who are you to tell me what to believe, thinking you know better than me?' This is the world we live in, and Jesus didn't tell us to batter people into submission or manipulate or pressure them into God's Kingdom; but he did tell us to make disciples, unashamedly and unembarrassedly. How we do that in our post-modern context may look different from the past, but actually, in a world where my story is as valid as yours, we can be totally open about our Christian narrative and how that changes the way we view the world. Sure, we cannot force it upon other people, but we can explain why it is so attractive that God loves us, died for us, died to right the wrong in our world, gives hope, gives meaning, and gives a chance to really live for something that matters – it's a really attractive message and one we shouldn't be ashamed of.

So ground clearance over. The bulldozers have been in and we can now look at the reading without worrying about all the hang-ups we might bring to it.

The eleven closest friends of Jesus went to Galilee, a back-water in Israel and together they set out in the morning to climb together the mountain that Jesus had told them to go to when he miraculously appeared after rising from the dead. It all seemed a little like a dream as they began to ascend, a little out of breath, on the dusty and rocky path. As they passed rocks and boulders they remembered sitting on them a few years ago, listening to Jesus give his instructions for living – ‘blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek’, and so on, echoing in their ears. How very different life had seemed back then. And as they drew closer to the summit, their reminiscing and fisherman banter quieted as they each began to wonder if anything would happen next. Perhaps it was all a dream or a hallucination and their bubble was about to burst when they all got to the top, had a picnic and nothing happened. Perhaps they were all about to embrace disillusion and go their separate ways, back to their old lives, which had become such a distant memory.

When they saw Jesus, they worshipped him. There he was in the distance. The relief, the excitement of seeing their friend again, miraculously, against all odds; coupled with the vague nagging doubt. Perhaps he was a trick of the light, a mirage, a result of the heat and the exertion of climbing the hill. But he drew closer. It really was him. The same old Jesus, but changed too. The same lightness of touch but with an earnestness of purpose. What could they say, other than to worship God? Who were they to live to see so many miracles?

And so we come to the Great Commission itself. Jesus doesn't just tell his disciples what to do but begins with a statement of authority. This mission isn't just a nice idea or some human invention. It is God's initiative. Jesus comes with God's full authority over everything in heaven and on earth. There is nothing outside the sphere of Jesus's authority; God's authority.

And somehow it is in response to this authority that Jesus commands his friends to make disciples. "Disciple" is an odd term if you aren't used to it, but really just refers to someone who follows someone else, wanting to become more and more like them. It is a mentoring in a really whole-of-life way. It's a relationship that sees the teacher giving money to the poor, and so gives money to the poor. It sees the teacher praying God's blessing upon people and so prays God's blessing on people. In lots of ways, it's really simple. As disciples of Jesus, we really just do what Jesus did and what he commands his followers to do.

Because Jesus has all of God's authority, the mission is to go and make more disciples – more Jesus followers. This isn't a command to make more Westerners. It's not a command to go and persuade people to do what we do, but instead it's a command to go and show Jesus to people, all people, so they can follow him too. In this way, it isn't aggressive, oppressive and colonial to a post-modern ear. I'm not telling people what to believe, I'm showing them a man to follow - a man who has all of God's authority and his backing in his mission to create disciples.

For Jesus, creating disciples includes baptizing and teaching to obey. Can I just say that baptism is a really important element of our Christian life as a church and as individuals and if you haven't been baptised, please come and talk to me about it! I know some people find the thought a bit embarrassing, but we can work through that. Baptism is about being identified as a member of God's family. It's about saying that you've moved into that space where you are following Jesus through thick and thin, and it's about making promises that we can all celebrate as a church family and help you to fulfil. Quite similar to a marriage service in some ways, except that baptism is what the Church calls a "sacrament", which is a bit of a strange term, but basically means a way of receiving God in a special way. Why wouldn't you want that?

The other thing about this baptism is that, for Jesus, it doesn't require perfection to qualify. Just as with a marriage vow, I'm not saying I'm the perfect husband, but instead I'm saying that I'm going to honour this marriage to the best of my ability through thick and thin. So with baptism, I'm not saying I'm the perfect Christian, but I am saying that I want to follow Jesus, whatever happens, even if I make mistakes along the way. This is what being a disciple means.

The other aspect of making disciples is teaching them to obey everything that Jesus has commanded. Again, in our culture, we don't like the idea of obeying and see it as totalitarian. However, here we have Jesus's friends being sent to teach what Jesus taught them on the very mountain that they were standing on a couple of years earlier. And then to teach what Jesus had shown them through the way he lived his life from that moment until the present. We have a message of looking after the poor, being humble, following God faithfully with what little we have, honouring God and others before ourselves. This is not a totalitarian message, but one shot through with love right to the core. This is not a message of division, but one of love for all others.

But it's not a fluffy message of "loving each other". It's also a commissioning love which loves other people too much to leave them without a knowledge of Jesus Christ and what he has done for us. It's a love which openly says that the Christian narrative is so good that we believe it is good for everyone. This is our Great Commission. Because of Jesus's cosmic and divine authority, he calls us to go and make disciples by baptising them and teaching them his way - God's way.

This can be scary, although if you ask me, I don't think it should be nearly as scary as we make it. We swallow all the cultural issues I put to bed earlier and so feel embarrassed or timid about announcing that there is a better way to live and a better story to align ourselves to. But even if we are scared, Jesus is with us, even to the very end. We go to make disciples because of his authority, and we go knowing that he goes with us. The authority of God is with us, the Jesus who we are pointing people to goes with us. We aren't committing some social gaff of pointing to ourselves as someone to be followed, but instead we humbly tell the story of Jesus, who is with us, and who has all the power and command of God in him.

In these terms, the Great Commission is a fantastically exciting project. It is one which we can be confident about. It is one which contrasts with all the religious extremism around us. It is one we don't have to be embarrassed about.

Back on the hill, I wonder what the disciples felt like after being so commissioned? I wonder what they said to each other next? I wonder if they sat down over their picnic and made some sort of a strategic plan or whether they all ran off to just start telling people. Whatever they did, my bet is that they were inspired and excited, even if they were a little daunted. This commission cost most of them their lives in the end. It was that essential and it was that inspiring. They went to their deaths because of the authority of Jesus, but they went there with Jesus close by them every step of the way.

Then Jesus came to them. He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. So you must go and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And you can be sure that I am always with you, to the very end."

This is your commission too, every one of you. Amen.