

## Matthew 28: 16-20 Sermon

Today's reading is known as the Great Commission. It is yet another post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to his followers, but this time it is on top of a mountain in Galilee. There are echoes in the text that can be easily missed, which remind the reader of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus taught his followers how to live, as well as echoes of Mount Sinai where God told his people how to live. There are also echoes of the universal nature of the Gospel message as Jesus instructs his disciples to meet him in Galilee, an area known for its gentile population, and further textual clues about this universal mission in the Greek words that are used when Jesus tells them to make disciples of all 'nations'. At the end of the reading, there's an Emmanuel moment – where Jesus promises to be with his disciples always, reminding us of Christmas time and the birth of Emmanuel.

All this, we will have to let go in passing this morning since it's all very technical and complex. You'll know that today is Trinity Sunday, and therefore the reading for today is one which mentions the whole of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Scholars used to think that this was a later addition by the early Church to read back into Jesus's words what they wanted to find, but the more recent scholarship overwhelmingly believes these are Jesus's actual words. Again, though, I'm not going to focus on the Trinity today, other than to say that it is important. Without the doctrine of the Trinity we are polytheists who worship and angry God who killed his Son in his wrath – whereas what we actually worship is a God who sent himself, in the person of the Son, to die for the sake of creation. Very different.

Instead, what we will concentrate on this morning is the difference the actual commission makes. For Jesus, all authority – that is, the weightiness of heaven and earth has been given to him – and therefore his commissions his disciples. The commission is famous – probably most of you can recite it off by heart.

The way the Greek works, however, is that there are three verbs – go, make disciples, and baptize – but the main one which governs the rest is the making of disciples. The 'going-ness' is assumed and the baptism is part of the disciple-making. Overall, the translation might therefore be better as follows: 'As you go, make disciples of all nations (especially the gentiles), and as you do that, baptize these individuals into the fellowship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them what I've told you about how my followers should live.'

And then finally, Jesus says that as they go, he will be with them – even until the end of the age and the advent of the next – the time when Jesus will return and live with his people, ruling in perfect power and authority.

And that's it really. That's what we need to know.

For us, the commission has become familiar and dare I say it, dulled. But for the disciples, this was radical. They were used to living in a paradigm where Israel was to live as a light to the world so that if the world wanted to know God or be blessed, it knew where to look and could come and join in. The Jewish people were meant to be a light to the nations and a blessing to creation. They were the centre of gravity, embracing those who came to God through them.

In the Great Commission Jesus turns this on its head. It's as if the polarity is reversed. His disciples, the people who follow him, would be flung out into the world making disciples, baptizing and teaching. The fact we are here is down to us being the inheritors of this missionary commission.

The making of disciples, isn't just making converts. It is baptizing, and teaching. And the teaching isn't just abstract theology, but its teaching obedience to Jesus. I think theology is really important, but in the end, theology does two things – it helps us to know God, and it helps us to obey God.

So. Breathe. There's tons in this passage.

But if I were to ask one key question, it would be this:

*If Jesus commissioned his followers to make disciples, by going into the world of non-believers, baptizing and teaching, then how does our current paradigm of church-going fit into it?*

If the terrifying part of this for the disciples is that it reverses the polarity from expecting people to join them in the Promised Land, and instead to leave the Promised Land to make disciples, then what does that mean for us? If Jesus gave this commission to each and every one of his disciples, then what does it mean for each and every one of us? Are we able to teach others, or do we need taught ourselves, and if so why? What would it look like for us, collectively and individually, to adopt this commission as our own? What are the issues that adopting the Great Commission raises for you?

As you try to unpack this, you might want to do so with someone nearby. Have a couple of minutes to chat...

Now that you've had a chat about it perhaps you'd like to think about what difference it will make to you and how you live this week? Will it affect what you choose to do and who you choose to meet up with? Will it affect how you prioritise? Will it affect how you seek to disciple yourself as well as how you seek to disciple others? What would that look like?

Again, maybe take a couple of minutes to chat this through.

As we draw our thoughts together, let's hear the words of Jesus:

As you go from here, make disciples of all nations (especially those who do not know God), and as you do that, baptize these individuals into the fellowship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them what I've told you about how my followers should live.

Amen.