

Matthew 28:16-20

Our reading from the end of Matthew's gospel this morning is what, in church circles, we commonly call 'the Great Commission'— it's like Jesus' parting task for his friends as he prepares to leave them. I've talked about it before at St John's, but I since it's come up again, I wanted to focus on it particularly in the context of lockdown.

This reading 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. Unashamedly, therefore, whether we like it or not, we are a missionary people. The whole message of the four gospels that tell us about Jesus and his life, death and resurrection, is called 'Good News', and it is this Good News of Jesus that we are called to share with people.

Just before anyone gets worried that their religion is a private affair, Jesus commanded his followers to go and spread the Good News, making disciples – more followers of Jesus – all over the world. The picture here is of some amazing news that just bursts out of us and enables others to follow Jesus too. It's good news that just needs to be shared. Think of something amazing that you just *had* to tell someone – it's like that. It's just telling people some news which has amazed us, and in due course will amaze them.

And it's not even complicated. It's a one-sentence mission. As Christians we have complicated the really simple task of telling someone else about Jesus who has excited us first. It's saying that I choose to follow Jesus for whatever reason you do, and then inviting the other person to follow Jesus too. It's as simple as introducing two of your best friends and allowing them to get to know each other.

In our reading, 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, there on the mountain, 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?

It's in this context that our reading comes 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 helping people to follow Jesus. Baptism is a really important element of our Christian life as a church and as individuals and if you haven't been baptised, please 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.

The other aspect of making disciples is teaching them to obey everything that Jesus has commanded. In our culture, we don't like the idea of obeying. 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 a message shot through with love right to the core.

This is 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, in our context, I'm genuinely not sure why. 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.

So bringing it back to today when we're in lockdown, the church is shut, and baptisms are cancelled. Does this put the great commission on hold I wonder? Did Jesus say to his friends, when cultural and environmental conditions allow, Go make disciples?

Obviously not - that's crazy. There are no qualifiers on this commission to pass on the Good News of Jesus, make other Jesus-followers, and teach them more about Jesus and what living like Jesus requires. It is as much a commission for now as it was before lockdown. How we talk about Jesus may change – it may rely less on formal services and more on praying together and talking to people on the phone, on Zoom, or in the street as the opportunity presents itself. But this is probably what Jesus had in mind anyway (OK, maybe he didn't envisage Zoom)!

As followers of Jesus who love him and want to model our lives on him, we will pass on this Good News of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and why that matters in lockdown. It does matter, and it is relevant, and if it matters and is relevant to you, why shouldn't it be relevant to others? If it is great news that Jesus has come as God's plan to save the world from its inevitable decline and set it on a path to glory, then why not tell others. If it is great news that death is not the end, even a death from Covid, then why not tell those who are scared and grieving. If it is great news that whatever happens to me today, I am safe in God's hands, then why not share that sense of security with others so they can feel it too. If it is great news that I have made mistakes, and particularly during lockdown these mistakes haunt me, but Jesus gives me a way to true forgiveness and a clean slate, then why keep that chance of forgiveness to myself.

The great commission calls us to share with those we love the life-changing, world-changing news of Jesus. In lockdown, out of lockdown. On Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, or any day. In season and out of season. We go and make disciples, inviting others to find in Jesus what we have found, baptizing them (when we can), and teaching them more about Jesus, as we all learn more and live closer day by day. Amen.