

Sermon 16 September 2018

Matthew 28:16-20

This short commission to the disciples carries a far-reaching message, not just for the disciples, but for us all. It also succinctly sums up the three-fold message of Matthew's gospel.

Firstly, *'I have been given complete authority in heaven and earth.'* As if he hadn't made this quite clear throughout the three years of his ministry, he reaffirms the fact that his heavenly Father has anointed him as his representative on earth and this authority will now extend to life eternal. He is the 'one', the chosen one. Shades of Neo in the Matrix! And so Jesus far surpasses every other human being, and the titles bestowed upon him – Saviour, Almighty One, Redeemer, Great High Priest, Son of God, King of Kings, Immanuel (*will refer to this shortly*), Son of Man, Messiah, Majesty, Head of the Church, the list goes on – are justified and deserved.

Secondly, *'Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all my commands.'* This, of course, refers to us. And just in case there is any doubt on this, look at his choice of words – *'make disciples of all the nations'* (that is Jews and Gentiles alike), and then, *'teach these new disciples.'* I find this so very interesting and to be such a definitive statement in terms of his expectations of us. Jesus expects us to be his disciples; that is the challenge he throws out to us, and I use the word *challenge* because it is very much a challenge. He expects us to carry on the work he began and then handed down to his band of disciples. Perhaps he doesn't expect all of us to heal the crippled but he does expect us to bring healing and comfort to others through love and compassion. He does expect us to be his role models in our unsettled and directionless world where values appear to be flying out the window and disappearing into the fading sunset.

Let me tell you a story. *A young man named Bill wearing a t-shirt and old jeans, with long hair that obviously hadn't come into contact with a hair brush for some time, walked into a church where a service was under way. The congregation in contrast were very well-dressed, middle-aged and quite conservative.*

Bill walks down the aisle looking for a place to sit. The church is full and he can't find a seat. By now people are looking a bit uncomfortable, but no one says anything. Bill gets closer and closer to the pulpit, where the minister is about to begin his sermon. When he realises there are no seats, he just squats down on the floor. By now the people are really uptight and there is a degree of tension in the air.

About this time the minister realizes that from way at the back of the church one of the elders is slowly making his way towards Bill. The elder is in his seventies, wears a three-piece suit, and is very elegant and dignified. As he reaches Bill the church is utterly silent, all eyes focused on him, everyone wondering what he is going to do. With great difficulty the elder lowers himself to the floor and sits down next to Bill, just so he won't be alone. The congregation chokes up with emotion.

When the minister gains little control, he says, 'What I'm about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget.'

This little story encapsulates much of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. It is about humble service; it is about caring; it is about getting alongside someone and making an offering, a gesture on their terms, not ours; it is about role modelling.

The third message emanating from our gospel reading is contained in the words, *And be sure of this, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.* The promise of Jesus's continuing presence with the disciples and with us, their successors, brings to fulfillment the name 'Emmanuel', which we referred to earlier. Emmanuel means 'God is with us', and was given to Jesus at conception. *Look! The virgin will conceive a child. She will give birth to a son, and he will be called Emmanuel (meaning God is with us)* Matthew 1:23. This is itself a direct quote from Isaiah 7:14. As I said before, to be Jesus's disciples in the world is a massive challenge, so it is of great comfort to know that he is with us as we do battle with the alien and opposing forces aligned against us.

Our short gospel reading is known as 'The Great Commission.' It is a commission directed at us all to do our very best to uphold the values of our Christian religion through our acts of kindness, unselfishness, thoughtfulness and encouragement.

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