

Matthew 28.16-20

When I was asked, several months ago to lead these Bible Studies, I decided I wanted to stimulate some thinking about mission, and I wanted to engage with each of the Gospel writers, sharing something of their specific insights. Today, appropriately since we are celebrating St Matthew's Day – it is Matthew's turn, and if we are thinking about mission then it is right to explore these final verses of Matthew's Gospel, firstly because these verses, brief though they all, also draw together all the threads woven into the fabric of Matthew, from chapter 1 onwards, but also because they have, for many people, a special role in mission thinking, so much so that they are often called 'The Great Commission' – the commissioning by Jesus of his disciples for worldwide mission.

Interestingly enough it is only in the last couple of centuries that these words have been viewed in this way. It is thought that it may have been William Carey who first began to use them as a biblical text to underwrite the expanding missionary movement at the end of the 18th century, but certainly since then this text has been widely understood as a justification for western missionary endeavours. For example words closely linked to this text in Matthew 28 were engraved on the front portal of Partnership House in London, the CMS building where until fairly recently a number of Church of England mission agencies, and indeed the Anglican Communion Office, used to have their headquarters. As a result taxi drivers and others going past the building use to nickname it 'Go Forth house'.

If I look back over my own Christian history it was probably the spirit of the commission set out in Matthew 28 that originally fostered my interest in World Mission, and led my life down pathways which has included working for both the major Church of England mission agencies, CMS and USPG, as well as for the international Anglican Communion Office. Yet it is probably also true that over the years I, like a number of other people, have come to feel a bit uncomfortable about these words of Matthew 28, they smack too much somehow of Christian imperialism, a vestige of colonialism. Certainly many – though not all – Christians in

Africa, Asia and Latin America can find these verses problematic. On the surface they seem to present us with a vision of a Christ who is all powerful, up there, effortlessly directing the troops of his spiritual army. One of the pictures on the sheet I have handed out has something of that feel to me, the picture called Christ of the New Covenant which depicts a powerful figure whose feet barely seem to touch the earth. So I find myself torn, on the one hand, quite sure of the importance of what has been called 'the uncanceled mandate' for mission entrusted to the Church, yet also wanting to take seriously the reservations of Christians in the non-western world about the way this expression of the mandate has sometimes been understood.

If I am honest I sometimes have to work quite hard at trying to appreciate Matthew's Gospel as a whole, for I am instinctively much more of a Mark person or a John person. A colleague of mine Angela Tilby once wrote a critique of Matthew which was a brilliant example of scholarly damning by faint praise. She commented that 'Matthew lays the foundations for a Church sanctioned morality which has been enormously influential, creative and damaging.' And she pithily summed up the Gospel by describing it as 'an authoritative gospel, a gospel for popes, prelates and priests.' On the surface at least that is what Matthew's mission Commission can also feel like – tasking the popes, prelates and priests who have viewed themselves as the successors of Jesus' first apostles with gathering a core of obedient and docile laypeople in all corners of the earth.

Yet Matthew repays a deeper exploration. For when you do you find there are some wonderful twists in his tale – in which he deliberately seems to be subverting the orderly and organised and rather 'powerful' picture of Jesus he is giving us. Take the genealogy for example with which he begins his Gospel. It looks so organised – every thing so neatly set out – 14 generations times three making up the ancestors of Jesus, a neat number pattern and word pattern too – for the numerical value of the Hebrew word for 'David' is exactly 14 – and so one of the messages of the genealogy is that Jesus' role as the kingly Son of David is written into his family history. Yet if we look more carefully we discover four women inserted in the genealogy messing up

the nice structure. And what women and what a message! In a witty poem the biblical scholar Michael Goulder summed up what Matthew is seeking to share with us by mentioning these particular four, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, in Jesus' family tree:

Exceedingly odd,
Is the means by which God
Has provided our path to the heavenly shore:
Of the girls from whose line
The true light was to shine
There was one an adulteress, one was a whore.
There was Tamar who bore –
What we all should deplore –
A fine pair of twins to her father-in-law;
And Rahab the harlot,
Her sins were as scarlet,
As red as the thread which she hung from the door;
Yet alone of her nation
She came to salvation,
And lived to be mother of Boaz of yore;
And he married Ruth,
A Gentile uncouth,
In a manner quite counter to biblical law;
And of her there did spring
Blessed David the King
who walked on his palace one evening, and saw
The wife of Uriah,
From whom he did sire
A baby that died, oh, and princes a score.
And a mother unmarried
It was too that carried
God's son, and him laid in a cradle of straw,
That the moral might wait

At the heavenly gate
While the sinners and publicans go in before,
Who have not earned their place
But received it by grace,
And have found them a righteousness not of the Law.

(© Michael Goulder)

Such a four are of course being seen as appropriate precursors for Mary, whose own irregular situation as the unmarried mother of Jesus Matthew explicitly notes.

Now back to the end of the Gospel and that Great Commission for mission. It is no accident that it is given on a mountain. Matthew indeed makes much of mountains – he seems to have a clear case of what I call the ‘nearer my God to thee syndrome’. Important things need to happen on mountain tops – not least because it reminds us of Jesus’ role as the new lawgiver on a new Sinai. As we journey through this Gospel there is one mountain after another – first of temptation, then of teaching and preaching, then of healing and feeding, then of prayer and transfiguration, then the point of entry into Jerusalem and visions of the future, and then finally this mountain of mission. And as we go up and down Matthew’s mountains we begin to discover how we need to interpret each in terms of others. So we shall shortly discover is true with this one.

But first a cryptic note that comes near the beginning of the passage – Jesus appears to them as a kingly manifestation of God – that is implied by the words ‘they worshipped him’ since for both Judaism and Christianity it is quite clear only God alone can be worshipped, and yet ‘some doubted’. Matthew for all his love of certainties is honest enough to acknowledge this. But these doubters are not excluded from those who receive the Commission a verse or so later. I think that this is a vital note for us in any reflection on mission. It says to me that mission is not to be carried out necessarily by those who are totally sure of themselves, that they possess the only truth, the truth which they are going to pour into empty vessels –

the people to whom they are sent. Rather those participating in Christ's mission acknowledge that they don't necessarily have all the answers, that they too are learners and seekers who may well have doubts and questions as well as faith to share as they make the journey of mission. My own beloved teacher, that great man Bishop Kenneth Cragg once put it like this, 'Mission is not about the claims that we make but the discoveries we enable.' Something of that feel is shown I think by the picture on the upper left of the sheet – which has an interesting history. It was commissioned for a hospital in Sweden near the beginning of the 2nd World War. The cloud half obscuring the sun is a symbol of the darkness that the war was casting over Europe. The naked people kneeling before the risen Lord speak not only of the suffering inmates of the hospital – but also the many millions made vulnerable by the war in Europe. It is these people who are being sent out to do his will by the Christ figure standing on the mountain of flowers. And then that Christ figure: you can see how he contrasts with the fair haired – typically Nordic – people standing before him. The Swedish artist Bror Hjorth felt it important to reject the stereotype of the fair haired Aryan Jesus which was the norm at the time, not only in Germany but also in countries like Sweden which had also been impacted by Nazi racial policies. He was severely criticised by his contemporaries as a result. You probably have noticed the marks of the nails in the feet and hands of Christ – I will return to them in a few minutes.

But now let us move on to the next verse.

'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything or all that I have commanded you.'

Mission for Matthew is disciplinmaking. That is very clear. And Matthew means what he says: the word 'disciple' has the specific sense of one who has been instructed or trained. One of the important insights that Matthew offers us is that evangelism and Christian education belong together, which is perhaps something that in parts of the Anglican world we need to recover. And it is also surely important that those who

are entrusted with this commission to disciple have themselves specifically just been called disciples, rather than say apostles. As disciples making disciples, they are not being invited to create a hierarchy of difference.

Grammatically the verbs baptising and teaching are participles, and thus subordinate to the main verb in the sentence which is the verb meaning 'make disciples'. So Matthew is telling us that baptising and teaching, are jointly part of what it means to make disciples. Reading them in this way is an affirmation that sacrament and word, baptising and teaching, belong together, and together contribute to discipleship.

And then to touch on that phrase 'teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you'. When we seek to discover exactly what Jesus has commanded the disciples in this Gospel – it seems to be primarily the Sermon on the Mount, which is in turn summed up in the two fold Great Commandment, to love God and one's neighbour. So the Great Commission leads us to the Great Commandment and the two belong together. As the great South African missiologist David Bosch said 'It is unjustifiable to regard the "Great Commission" as being concerned solely with "evangelism" and the "Great commandment" (Matthew 22.37-40) as referring to "social involvement".'

Though I have only been able to mention these points briefly I think they are all crucial for the life of the Church.

However there is something else I want to mention, which links into our understanding of Matthew's Gospel as a whole. And that is that there are a lot of alls in this verse. And there is one other point in Matthew's gospel where the words 'all' and 'worship' (which we have had in the previous verse) come close together. It is on Matthew's first mountain – the mountain of temptation. The place where the devil promised Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them – if Jesus would only bow down and worship him. There is another link too for both mountains speak of authority or power. These parallels between Jesus' experience on that mountain of temptation and this mountain of mission seem to be deliberate. In both cases the

nature of power is clearly the key question. In both cases there is a universal thrust indicated by the word 'all' and in both cases question of appropriate 'worship' is raised. The parallels point to contrasting understandings of Jesus' mission and ministry as the Son of God. On one mountain the mountain of temptation Jesus – and perhaps we – are being offered the devil's method, the devils' strategy: rule from above, by political force if necessary, dominate all the kingdoms of the world. If he chose that way Jesus could impose God's kingdom and justice by means of political power and avoid the scandal of the cross. But that was not the way for which Jesus opted. So instead there were those other mountains to climb where Jesus taught and prayed and healed – and eventually there was the cross itself to climb on. And it isn't until all this has happened that we can finally arrive at this last mountain to meet a Jesus still bearing the wounds of crucifixion – where another alternative strategy for mission and ministry is offered. On this mountain the disciples –and we – are being commissioned for ministry and mission – as we have observed remarkably some of them, and perhaps us too, still fearful and doubting, and sent out for their and our work.

Will they and we be travelling alone? Absolutely not. Once again we need to turn for a moment back to the beginning of Matthew's Gospel. Just after that deliciously subversive genealogy, as the coming birth of Jesus is announced we are told 'And his name will be called Emmanuel, God with us.' This assurance of God's presence with human beings has been like a gentle heartbeat running through the pages of the Gospel until it rings out here once again in Jesus' words 'I am with you till the end of the age.' It is with this promise 'I am with you' resounding in their ears that the disciples are sent on mission. So the mission of Jesus is to reveal and embody God's kingdom by reigning not 'from above' as the devil suggested, but as 'Emmanuel', the crucified and risen one who is 'I am with you'. And what in turn does that mean for us in our mission and ministry. I draw on a comment from Jacques Matthey, a great and gentle Swiss pastor who was until recently responsible for the mission work of the WCC.

‘Because God has chosen to reign among people as an incarnate Emmanuel, he will only reach all Gentile nations if disciples reach them and if Christian communities live there in clear reference to the Nazarene and his teaching. This is what Matthew 28.16-20 expresses. But he will only reach the nations if the bearers of the Gospel of the kingdom, the evangelising disciples, come as poor, exposed, defenceless men and women, [themselves] living *with* and not above those to whom they bring healing.’

I love the depiction of Matthew 28 in the series of pictures of Jesus Mafa, from the Cameroons – with Jesus presented in the context of an African village. You really do have the sense that this Jesus and those he is sending out – know what it is to be alongside rather than above those to whom they minister.

And yet there is one more surprise for us. One final radical twist in Matthew’s tale – which perhaps parallels the twist of that subversive genealogy with which the Gospel opened.

Jesus, ‘Emmanuel’, promises to be *with* his disciples throughout all time. But where can we find and see him today? Matthew himself directly and explicitly provides a startling – and shocking? – answer. For in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats told in Matthew 25 we discover that we are being offered the opportunity to see Jesus in some very unlikely places – in the faces of our brothers and sisters who are sick, strangers, hungry or thirsty, imprisoned whom the disciples of Jesus may choose – or refuse – to honour or minister to. ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, or naked or a stranger or in prison? Truly I tell you, just as you did to the least of my brothers and sisters – so you did it to me.’ And so we are sent on mission to find Jesus himself in the faces of those to whom we believe we are sent.

This is the treasure, the mystery, that awaits us at the end of the many mountains of Matthew.

