

Sermon 10th March

How easy is evangelism? How easy do you find it? If you knew that next week you were to spend the whole week doing some sort of mission, I wonder how you would be feeling today? Perhaps some would be excited, and would be relishing the opportunity, others however may be feeling quite the opposite and there would be a sense of dread and fear that would be prevalent.

I have to confess that this was more my experience, when as part of the Cornhill course I am doing, a small group of us were sent to a Catholic school in Tunbridge Wells (in Kent) to spend a week doing bible based RE lessons, assemblies and lunchtime testimony events. I think it was one of the hardest things I have done, to go into a secondary school and speak to 11-16 year olds children about Jesus.

Even if you are one of the people who find yourself naturally drawn to Evangelism, even you, probably wouldn't say that you find it easy!

I wonder why we find evangelism difficult. Why is it something that we shy away from? Why am I such a reluctant evangelist?

I can think of a number of reasons. Perhaps we have lost our confidence in the message? Perhaps we see more of the weakness of the message of the cross than its power to change lives.

Or perhaps we assume that people will not be open to talking about Jesus.

Maybe we have listened too long to the very strident voices of our time, Dawkins, Hawking, Hitchens and the rest, who would tell us that God is in fact dead, that Jesus was not a historical figure but a made-up story, that talk of heaven is all nonsense... and we begin to feel that our beliefs do not stand up to intellectual scrutiny.

Perhaps we don't want to look odd or stupid or feel awkward and different.

Maybe it is because we don't want to come across as pushy or to speak out of turn.

Maybe we doubt our own testimony- do I really have a living faith that I can share with my neighbours or friends, or is it just more religion?

Well, I don't know if any of that resonates with you, but you can be sure that if it does, you are not alone here this morning. During the week I had in Tunbridge Wells I battled with most if not all those things at some point in the week. However, the passage we are going to be looking at this morning in Matthew 28 really helps us with these difficulties. It also challenges us in a pretty big way. You see, although we can agree that it is difficult and we can share our fear, we cannot stop there, Jesus does not give us that option! Disciples of Jesus, will be, are commanded to be, disciple-making disciples. We are all involved. Some may have a particular gifting, but all of us are included in the commission or command to go and make disciples.

So let's read the passage now before we look further at this issue.

Read.

Last week Simon spoke to us about unity from John 17 and Jesus then was speaking to his disciples before he went to the cross. But we have pressed the fast forward button since then, and by Matthew 28, Matthew has recorded that Jesus has been crucified and has risen from the dead. So before I give you my three main points this morning, just look at who the commission came to. Here were the eleven disciples, gathered together to see Jesus. The risen Jesus. Jesus who had been dead and had lain in the tomb for three days, they now saw Him and they worshipped Him. They worshipped God's King, who has conquered death. But... But what? But some doubted. Despite the evidence before their very eyes, some doubted. They could see Jesus there, standing in front of them, but some doubted.

I have to say that this is a great comfort to me. I am definitely in the "some doubted" group of disciples. And yet it was to these doubting disciples who at the same time were worshipping Him, that Jesus gave this great commission. He entrusted the message of His kingdom, the good news of salvation, the message that was to change the world, the message of eternal life, he entrusted that message to these doubting, worshipping disciples. So, I think we can be very encouraged by that. The success of the message does not depend on us, on our abilities or strength but it does depend on the power of the living God. The fact that we have doubts does not **disqualify** us from being involved with making disciples nor does the fact that we have doubts **excuse** us from being involved with making disciples.

But notice with me three things from these verses, when it comes to making disciples:

1. We can be confident in His authority
2. We can be clear about the task
3. We can be certain of His presence

We can be confident in His authority,

Look down with me at verse 18 and 19.

All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me, therefore go and make disciples...

All authority, He is the kingly ruler who Matthew has written about. The account of this commission follows closely on the heels of the resurrection for a reason I think. It is to underline to us that here is the one who has authority, here is the death defeater, Jesus has put death to death by his death and has risen from the dead to prove that this is true. So He has defeated the ultimate enemy. There is no greater enemy to be defeated and because he has done it, we can be absolutely sure that all authority is His.

So what does this authority mean? What are the implications?

I think three things briefly:

Firstly He has the authority to command us to GO to all nations, He is our Lord and Master, and we submit to this command.

Secondly, his Lordship, his authority is over All. He is Lord! His rule is universal. So He is Lord in your office. He is Lord in your home, He is Lord in your school or college. He is Lord of all the nations. There is no place, no country, no area of life, no thought or desire of the heart where Jesus is not Lord.

Thirdly, he has the authority to change lives by His power. It is God who opens blind eyes. He has the authority to call people and transform people into lifelong disciples of Christ.

Let me try and illustrate this- I have brought along my cheque book this morning and I am going to write a cheque for John for £200 pounds. So here we are John, here is the cheque for you... now, let me just give you the pen and if you could sign it at the bottom for me. Thank you so much.

So, John now has a cheque for a nice sum of money, but it is of no use at all. Why is that? Well of course, it has the wrong signature at the bottom. It doesn't come with my authority. It doesn't work does it!

And so I think sometimes we forget, that as we take the message of the gospel, as we go into all the world and make disciples, the message doesn't come with our authority. It comes with His. The message is wonderful as it is challenging, but it isn't our message, it's His. It doesn't depend on us, it is not our persuasive words that make the difference, it is His authority that makes the difference. We may feel scared, hesitant, foolish even, but it doesn't depend on us... lets not try and sign the cheque ourselves, Christ has all the authority.

But secondly,

We can be clear about the task.

Jesus makes the task clear to us- Go and make disciples. Its interesting to notice the language that he uses. He doesn't say here: go and preach, he doesn't say, go and do evangelism, he doesn't even say go and make Christians... but he does say go and make disciples and I think this is both interesting and significant. Perhaps when we think about the great commission, we think about people converting and becoming Christians, and that is certainly part of what this means, perhaps it is predominantly what this means, but it is not **all** that it means. I wonder if we have lost an appreciation and an understanding of what it means to be a disciple. There is an element of learning together, coming together to see Jesus, journeying together as we follow Him. It is an on-going work, it is not just about people becoming Christians, it is also about them growing and maturing in their faith, understanding more clearly the life of discipleship that we are called to.

Let's look back to the beginning of Jesus ministry when he first calls the disciples to follow Him. John records the events for us in his gospel in chapter one. The first thing that happens is that John the Baptist sees Jesus passing and says to his own disciples "Look, behold, the lamb of God". And they begin to follow Jesus. One of them was Andrew and the first thing he does is he goes to find his brother Simon and says we have found the Messiah and, we read that "he *brought him to Jesus*".

The next day Jesus finds Philip and instructs him to follow. Philip does follow, but he also goes to find Nathaniel and says, "we have found the one who Moses wrote about, the one who was promised". Nathaniel is not impressed and says, "but can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And Philip simply says "Come and see". So even at that early stage being a disciple of Jesus was almost contagious!

They brought others to Jesus, come and see him, come and see for yourself... and perhaps this is what our disciple-making might look like too. Simply bringing others face-to-face with Jesus, letting them meet Him and ultimately become followers themselves.

So we are to make disciples, and we are to make disciples of all nations- it is an international/universal task. Jesus authority is not local or limited. There is no one, no one at all, who does not need to hear about the fact that Jesus is King, King of all the earth.

And so we are to baptise and to teach and to expect obedience. Obedience to Christ, again, because the teaching comes with His authority not ours, it is His Lordship that disciples are to submit to. And we are to teach everything that Jesus commanded.

And so what will this look like in practice? Well, it will look like us opening the bible together and looking at those commands of Jesus. It may be something we do one-to-one. It may be something we do in small groups. It will certainly be something we continue to do here on a Sunday morning. Whatever area we work in, whether it is in the Arch, or the youth groups, or Rochester court or amongst the homeless people, we will be looking for opportunities to open up the bible and listen to the commands of Jesus. Because it is through the word of God by the Spirit of God that people are brought from death to eternal life in Jesus.

The church here is already doing so much... there are so many opportunities, but perhaps if I had to pick up on one thing that we (and I say "we" because I do include myself) could do more of, it is the one to one discipleship. Is there someone in the church who you and I could open the bible with, pray with, share with and both be mutually encouraged and challenged? Why don't we try and do this with someone over the next few months.

I have been really enjoying reading some of the CS Lewis books with my boys over the last few months. We are currently reading *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. A few nights ago, we got to the bit where Eustace, who has been a troublesome, awkward chap, was changed into a dragon but was wonderfully freed and rescued from this by Aslan the Lion, even though, as we shall see, he didn't realise it was Aslan... (for those of you who haven't read the book or seen the film... Aslan the Lion is a kind of picture of Jesus). So I thought I would just read a little extract from the book which perhaps illustrates how Edmund – in a sense- makes a disciple!

"I think you've seen Aslan" said Edmund.

"Aslan," said Eustace. "I've heard that name mentioned several times since we joined the Dawn Treader. And I felt- I don't know what- I hated it. But I was hating everything then, and by the way I'd like to apologise. I'm afraid I've been pretty beastly".

"That's alright," said Edmund. "Between ourselves, you haven't been as bad as I was on my first trip to Narnia. You were only an ass, I was a traitor."

"Well don't tell me about it then," said Eustace. "But who is Aslan, do you know him?"

"Well- he knows me," said Edmund, "He is the great Lion, the son of the emperor-beyond-the-sea, who saved me and saved Narnia. We've all seen Him. Lucy sees him most often. And it may be Aslan's country we are sailing to."

So it is not complicated, just like Edmund there, it was simply about sharing His own experience... Jesus saved me, We've all seen Him, and we are sailing to His country!

As someone once said, evangelism is "just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread".

So we can be confident in His authority, we can be clear about our task,

But thirdly,

We can be certain of His presence.

We are not alone as we get on with this task, Jesus himself promises to be with us.

Let me remind you how Matthew starts his gospel and take you right back to chapter one, where we read that the angel came to Joseph, saying take Mary as your wife, she will give birth to a baby and you shall call him Jesus for he shall save His people from their sins. And then Matthew adds this editorial comment, where he says, "all this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet "The

virgin will be with child and shall give birth to a son and they shall call him Immanuel- which means "God with us".

God with us, prophesied so many years before, God with us- at the beginning, God with us at the end. God is with us! Jesus says "Surely I am with you, with you to the end"

We can be certain of His presence! Jesus did not leave us alone with this task, but as we read later in Acts, he sent His Spirit to empower His disciples to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. And so He is with us by His Spirit.

So we receive His power for the task. And because He is with us we can also be joyful and peaceful. In a sense, we can relax a little, and not get up tight about having the right words, always knowing the right thing to say at the right time. And because He is with us, we have a testimony. We have seen Jesus. He has the words of eternal life. And we live in a daily experience of His presence. We pray our way through the day, for He is with us.

I've spoken before of my love of hill-walking. And when you're walking on your own it can be a pretty lonely experience. But when you're walking with someone else, and they are reading the map and deciding which way to go, then it becomes a much more enjoyable and relaxing experience. You can stop worrying about climbing the wrong mountain (as I did once) and just appreciate the view. You are following someone who knows the way, who knows the route to take. They are with you. And you follow.

So as I finish this morning, let me try and apply this to us.

You know sometimes it can be a bit tricky to know how a particular passage applies to us, but I think this morning the application is obvious. As the Nike slogan says: "Just do it". Go and do it! Go and make disciples! If you're not involved, then get involved. Is there someone you could meet up with and pray with? Then get on and do this. Do you have a heart for youth work- then get stuck in. If you're not part of a discipleship group, then join one.

And let's aim to have a mindset of evangelism. Set your mind on evangelism.

I was really struck at college recently when we had a visit from Roger Carswell who some of you might know is an evangelist. So he told us, that when he was in his 20's, he set himself this task: that he would not let a day go by without speaking to someone about Jesus. And for the most part, he says he has managed to do this! He told us about how he would take every opportunity, to speak to people about Jesus, the man at the petrol garage, the person he sat next to on the train, the cold caller trying to sell him Sky TV or double glazing, somehow or other, he would find a way of speaking about Jesus.

What a challenge that is!

Clearly I have been thinking about this topic quite a bit over the last few weeks and months and often when I have to preach on a passage it really challenges me first and it was no different with this passage this morning. But what I found is that as I've thought about it more and allowed it to challenge me, I have begun to think of people I could speak to, begun to pray for opportunities, look for opportunities, pray for the people who I come into contact with. And if we give people time, and allow them to talk, they may begin to open up. So the window man who was there in our house recently, and had seen a number of Christian books around and on our shelves, began to talk to me about his exposure to the occult and his experience of Ouija boards and I tried, very imperfectly and hesitantly to say a little bit about Jesus who can be known and who knows us. And I began also to pray for him and to ask others to pray for him. And, if I am honest, to my shame, it felt pretty out of character to be openly talking about Jesus, but it was exciting and I want to do more of the same.

So lets think about opportunities we may have to speak about Jesus. People are probably much more open to chatting than we think they are. We certainly won't have all the answers to people's questions, but all of us can tell people about the Lord Jesus and encourage them to look at Him. There is no other Lord, there is no other King, he has commanded us to obey and He has promised us His presence. So Go, go and make disciples.