

## THE SEQUEL

Deuteronomy 31:1-8  
Matthew 28:16-20

This morning we talked about how we have been well served by witnesses to Jesus' resurrection - the original witnesses, and those who have borne witness to us that Jesus still lives and is still active to transform people. We talked too about how we are called to be witnesses, and about what kinds of witness our lives can be - circumstantial, witnesses of character and living eye-witnesses.

We are here today, as Christians and witnesses to Christ's resurrection, because there has been an unbroken line of witness from the church ever since that first Easter Day. And this evening we read about how it all began.

It begins with Jesus on a mountain, commissioning his disciples. It begins with strong echoes of Moses, on a mountain, commissioning the people of Israel. Way back then, God was sending the people into a land, to be exclusive, to drive out the foreign influences, to learn to be his people. And Moses promised that God would go with them. He would go with them as a people, and he would go with them as individuals - as he promised Joshua in particular. Moses was commissioning the people to come out from among the nations, out from among the Gentiles.

Earlier in Matthew's gospel we have seen Jesus send out his disciples to do his work over Judea. And at that time he commissioned them to go only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." It was the last time God would tell his people to be exclusive.

Now, on a nameless mountain in Galilee - on a mountain, that's important in Matthew's gospel, that means something significant is going to happen - on a nameless mountain Jesus gives his followers a new, a great commission. They are to go to make disciples of the Gentiles. The mission exclusive to Israel is over; for good or for ill, it has run its course. Now God sends them out to the whole world, to all the people they had been taught to keep themselves away from. They are to go to the people they had been taught to keep themselves away from: the implication is obvious to a respectable and often middle-class church.

"Go!" says Jesus. Only he doesn't. In the original Greek what we have is not an order at all, but rather what linguists call a participle. It really has the sense of "As you are going..." Jesus knows that his disciples will never be able to stand still in one place. In the early church wave after wave of persecution made that certain. And even if it didn't, the heady discovery that all sorts of people welcomed and responded to the news about Jesus has always kept his followers moving.

"As you are going, make disciples..." It's not a task we have to set out to do on specific occasions - I'll make disciples today, and tomorrow I'll make a cake. As you are going says that it is something that we are to do in everything else that we do. It's always to be there, as a focus of our life.

That's the best way to bear witness in any case. People are rightly suspicious of those who put on a special voice, or a special attitude to talk about their faith, and then go away and live like anyone else. As we are going we are to make disciples. As we are going we are to show what it means to us that Jesus is alive, show it by how we obey everything that he has commanded us. We are to show it in how we love our enemies, how we pray for those who persecute us. We are to show it in how we treat others, how we are slow to judge and quick to forgive. We are to show it in how we use our time and our resources.

And just as Moses has promised the people of Israel that God will be with

them, so Jesus promises his friends that he will be with them as well.

“I will be with you.” We often repeat this promise, taking comfort from it like a large, warm blanket wrapped around us, keeping us cosy and protected. But this was Jesus’ last commission to his disciples. He wanted them to feel comforted, yes, but in the old-fashioned meaning of the word, which includes more than an element of challenge. There is a part of the Bayeux tapestry which shows King Harold and his troops. In it you can see quite clearly that Harold is poking his sword at his soldiers’ reluctant backs, urging them forward. And the words underneath are usually translated as “King Harold comforted his troops!” I am with you always can have that element of comfort too.

Remember, it is in Matthew’s Gospel (Chapter 25) that we find the parable of the sheep and the goats, where Jesus says that he can be found in the least of these - in all those who are in need. Jesus is with us and can be found in unexpected places. And so the Great Commission is also a great challenge.

It is a challenge then and a challenge now, but we have the comfort (challenging comfort) that previous generations have taken up the challenge and run with it already. In a sense you could say that the church is the sequel to this commission.

The venerable American preacher, Fred Craddock, tells of going to see *Star Wars Episode 1, the Phantom Menace* with his grandsons. This is the film that made the original *Star Wars* films into episodes 4,5 and 6. The grandsons understood all about this, but Fred knew only that the *Star Wars* films involved a character called Luke Skywalker. The film began, and the well-versed audience began to applaud for the entrance of two Jedi. Fred was mystified. He whispered to his grandsons, “When is Luke Skywalker going to appear?”

“He hasn’t been born yet.” came the reply.

Fred said, “Well, I had the name Luke Skywalker, and he was a good guy.”

The grandson whispered back, “That was in episodes 4.5.and 6; but now we’re going to have 1,2 and 3.”

Later, after the film had reached its mystifying conclusion, Fred said, “Isn’t that rather strange, having episode 1 after 4,5, and 6?”

“O, Gramps, this is a prequel. It’s before the others.”

And Fred goes on, “That is when I began to feel at home, because that’s the way the Bible is. You know the end before the beginning. The resurrection shines back through every story, including the birth story. The light of the resurrection is on the manger. You know the end before the beginning.”

After all, if it weren’t for the end, the beginning wouldn’t have been important; it would never have been written. We read the Bible, we read about the resurrection, about the Great Commission, and we can say “This is the prequel. I know the sequel.”

One scholar, N.T. Wright, has said, “The single most striking thing about early Christianity is its speed of growth. In AD 25 there is no such thing as Christianity: merely a young hermit in the Judean wilderness, and his somewhat younger cousin who dreams dreams and sees visions. By AD 125 the Roman emperor has established an official policy in relation to punishment of Christians.... Why then did early Christianity spread? Because early Christians believed that what they had found to be true was true for the whole world. The impetus to mission sprang from the very heart of the early Christian conviction.”

Yes, and this has continued to be true. There are churches everywhere; from

grand cathedrals to brick and stone buildings like ours; there are concrete buildings and plasterboard buildings; there are grass huts, igloos and open spaces. Everywhere in the world you go, there is someone reading the Bible and worshipping God and learning about Jesus. That's the sequel. We are part of the sequel.

As we go, in our going, we live as Jesus' disciples, and in doing so we seek to bring others, not just to believe, but to be transformed by Jesus, for that is making disciples.

And the prequel is what we have read this evening. The prequel is Jesus on a mountain in the north of Galilee with his eleven disciples.