

You're history

The Christian parents of Lindsay, a five year old, were amazed to hear her telling her little friend about Jesus. The children were sat on the back doorstep of the house and so the parents tiptoed up to the window to hear and see better.

Lindsay told her friend that if she believed in Jesus and prayed he would forgive her sins and she would go to heaven. The little girl was convinced and prayed. When she had finished praying, she looked up at her friend and asked, "Will my mummy be in heaven too?"

Lindsay thought for a moment and then replied, "Yes, if she believes in Jesus. But, if you don't want her there, don't tell her about Jesus!"

Well, this morning we're starting a series which will run on our fifth Sundays, a series on mission. Mission is absolutely central to the life of the Church – mission overseas and mission at home, why? Because if you want to sum up the Christian life in two words it would be "worship" and "mission".

Before I was ordained I had the immense privilege of working for two mission agencies; the Church Pastoral Aid Society (CPAS) an agency who help to equip the Church for mission in this country and SAMS, the South American Mission Society who were a mission agency equipping the Church in South America and Iberia to share the good news of Jesus. Perhaps you never knew that and it is to my shame and embarrassment that I perhaps not talked about it as much as I should have. So I know how easy it is to become distracted from the mission imperative of the Church.

So I want us to first of all grasp the incredible fact that everyone here is the product of mission.

Mission is not something that we can leave to others or rule out of our agenda because our own personal faith is the result of God's Holy Spirit and a historical line of men, women and I dare say a few children telling us and our spiritual forebears the good news of Jesus Christ. Have we any right to end that process in our generation?

You see, there is a myth, I think often an unconscious myth that Christianity is western, it is like football, or bowler hats – it originated here and is as British as fish and chips or a cup of tea.

Now, in one sense that's true because chips aren't British, are they? Potatoes originated in the New World, America and tea? Well, you don't find tea plantations naturally growing in Yorkshire do you? Tea came to this country from India. Likewise Christianity did not originate in Canterbury, or York, or Westminster, Christianity (as we are seeing in our series on the whole of the Bible) originates from the Ancient Near East as God calls his people and then through them blesses all nations through the life, sacrificial death and rising to new, eternal and glorious life of Jesus; the Son of God.

It all took place in and around the area on our world maps called Israel. So Christianity is as British as chips and tea because it was imported into this country and adopted by a huge number of people.

So how did that come about and how does that relate to us? Well, we need to go back to the end of Matthew's Gospel; Matthew 28:16-20 – the Great Commission to see its beginnings.

And what I want us to see is that our faith comes from the historical mission of the Church; God's people in all their weaknesses and inadequacies, trusting in Jesus and sharing the faith they have.

So, the first thing we need to flag up is that the Great commission comes after the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is perhaps easy for us to take those simple facts for granted, but in truth it's an uncertain time for the disciples, rumours abound, persecution looks certain, the security of life following the Christ have been stripped away. Jesus, had been arrested, crucified, buried but was now alive again. Their faith didn't make sense to the world around them, and, quite frankly, it didn't make sense to them either.

Let's be honest about this the disciples were not a group of middle aged professionals who had dealt with this kind of thing on a management training course. Matthew 28 reminds us that the 11 remaining disciples go to the mountain in Galilee, but some of them still doubted – even when Jesus is there in front of them and they are worshipping him. Some of them go along with the others out of a sense of duty, but with no real expectation that anything is going to happen, or anything is going to change.

Ever come to church and doubted that Jesus is alive? Ever felt guilty that you just don't seem as sure about your faith as other people do? Ever use that as an excuse not to talk about Jesus? Sorry, but these verses remove that excuse – if the eleven disciples had taken that route then you would not be here, you would not be saved. So thank God they still spoke up!

You see, the church is called to have confidence in God and confidence in the message of the risen Christ, think how differently the disciples must have returned from the mountain from when they went up there.

What is it that would energize them? What would prepare them for the birth of the Church at Pentecost? It is their encounter with the risen Lord.

We cannot expect that same kind of meeting, that same face to face commissioning as the 11 disciples and we will come on to how we too can be energized in a few moments. But what we need to grasp is that Jesus is alive!

The most amazing headline the world has ever known and ever swept under the carpet is our fantastic message of hope and life and forgiveness. We are not in ignorance like some of the disciples, the fact is that Jesus is alive and we know that he is alive to reconcile us to God. That should give us confidence as we strive to be messengers.

Jesus command, then, for each of his disciples to spread the message of the Gospel is a command with authority. Most of us feel a little uneasy about doing things without the right authority, we need to know that we've got a green light to do something. Well, when it comes to sharing the Gospel, Jesus begins his commission by stating what authority he is issuing it under and it is the authority of God. Only God has all authority in heaven and earth and that authority is what Jesus issues the Great commission under.

As we share the Gospel with other people, it's a great comfort (and an inspiration) to know that it's not just our idea or that of the disciples, it was God's idea that all nations should know of his saving grace through Jesus.

Third, we are sent out with a purpose. What is it that motivates you? What gives you a purpose in the morning? It could be like the family who arrived in a loaded up estate car pulling into the last campsite space left.

As soon as the wheels stopped four children leapt out of the car and began feverishly unloading gear and setting up the tent. The boys then rushed to gather firewood whilst the girls helped their mother set up the camping stove and utensils. A nearby camper marveled at this display of activity and said to the children's father, "Wow, that's a pretty impressive display of teamwork." To which the father replied, "Well, I have a system, after the long journey here, no one goes to the toilet until the camp is set up."

We all need some kind of purpose to focus us on a task and Jesus doesn't just send out the disciples off with a vague concept of what to do. It's a very true saying that if you aim at nothing you usually hit it with remarkable accuracy. No, the Disciples of Christ are people with a purpose. We are sent out to make disciples of all nations, to spread the Gospel, to share the Good News and unlike the little girl at the beginning, we have no grounds to be selective about who we tell.

Disciples are what the church building should be full of. Not perfect people, but people who are from different backgrounds, people who get it wrong from time to time, people who doubt and ask questions and struggle and feel inadequate, but people who are hungry to be with God, people who will follow Jesus and risk all for him, people who in their darkest hour will still do what he says and be disciples.

And those disciples are to make more disciples who are to be baptised – who are to make a public profession of what they believe; Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, their acceptance of God's authority in their life and to publically show how they have moved from death to life. That baptism will show graphically how they have had their sins washed away by Jesus and are now committed to live by the power of the Holy Spirit within the support and love of the fellowship of believers – the Church.

And thirdly our purpose is to teach. Now if the thought of lecturing in theology, or devising teaching plans fills you with dread, then relax. What we are to teach is Christ's teaching and we have two great aids; the Bible and God's Holy Spirit.

We are called to be witness of who Christ is and to share our faith, to explain what we know and share it with the world around us. We are not called to be academic geniuses before we do that. The 11 disciples on the mountain certainly weren't – God knows our strengths and limitations, after all, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, he made us and so he works with those. We are to share our knowledge and experience of God's living Word: the Bible, but it is God's Holy Spirit who does the converting, so relax – trust him!

And because Christianity needs to begin simply in an interested heart and mind and grow from there, it's something we can all be involved in.

And this third point; that God equips us, leads us onto our final point, that we are sent out on this mission with support

Now you may have been sat there wondering why I have said all that I have this morning. After all the great commission was to the 11 disciples and has no relevance to us today. Some of us are called to share our faith some of us aren't. And why do I keep using the word "we" instead of "them" when I talk about the disciples?

Well, unfortunately (or fortunately), verse 20 torpedoed any argument that Matthew 28:16-20 is merely addressed to the eleven disciples with Jesus 2000 years ago at that moment in history.

Had Jesus merely been speaking to the original group of disciples he would have assured them that he was going to be with them until they joined him again, or perhaps a little more vaguely, “until the task is complete”. Instead Jesus says, “And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.” Or literally, “until the completion of this present age.” In other words the great commission with the promise of Christ’s presence with all those who carry it out is on going until he returns in glory.

Now Jesus has not yet returned in glory and those 11 original disciples have long ago died and so the task continues to be handed down to the following generations of disciples – and where did we say that the disciples of Jesus should be found? Well, they’re the church, we are the church, we are the disciples being commissioned by Jesus 2000 years ago.

But isn’t it Good News that God does not expect us to carry out the evangelism of the world on our own? I know its Good News for me! Jesus promises to be with us, and we know that the promise of the Holy Spirit for all Christian disciples is kept - God always keeps his promises and he sent his Holy Spirit to live and work in Jesus’ disciples starting on the day of Pentecost. God has equipped us mightily to do his work.

So on these fifth Sundays we have and increasingly will focus on the mission work God calls us to be involved in as individuals and as a church, but the big point we need to grasp hold this morning is that our personal faith is directly traceable back to Jesus’ great commission to his disciples after his death and resurrection.

We are not Christians because that’s what British people are, we are not Christians because it’s just there in our DNA, we are Christians because someone obeyed the great commission and told us the good news of Jesus and someone told them and someone told them.

That message spread through the years and across the globe. It goes all the way back to first century Palestine and it connects with us here today. Because it does not stop here with us, we are part of that ongoing commission until Jesus returns.

We need to be a missionary congregation (as every congregation should), each with each and every one of us sharing the Gospel with confidence, authority, purpose and in the support of Christ.

When I worked for the South American Mission Society I would often be invited to a church to preach in the Sunday service. As I climbed the steps into the pulpit having been introduced as a speaker from a mission society, I could see people's eyes glazing over as they thought to themselves, "I can switch off now, this isn't for me."

The first thing I did was challenge every congregation not to think that because Jesus' great commission is for all his followers, everywhere, forever. It might be that you are called to Peru, or maybe to Peterborough; both will be challenging.

But the call to share the good news is still there because it is Christ who has given us this task to go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything he has commanded us. But be encouraged, because surely He is with us always, to the very end of the age.

Amen