

GOSPEL CONCLUSION

THE UNIVERSAL MISSION OF THE DISCIPLES OF THE RISEN CHRIST

Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.

¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

¹⁹ 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,

²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

Jesus commissions his disciples

In this, Matthew's final scene, the crucified and risen Jesus entrusts his disciples with the mission of continuing his redeeming work in the world.

Matthew writes according to a classical pattern found regularly in the Hebrew Scriptures in scenes portraying a divine commission. The account of God's sending Moses on a mission to Egypt, for example, conveys a similar sense of majesty and power. We find also a similar reverence accompanied by hesitation and doubt. Moses receives a similar assurance: 'I will be with you' (see Exodus 3:1-16). Another example would be the account of God's commissioning of the prophet Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 1:1-10).

Jesus' final words: 'I am with you always' echo Matthew's explanation of the promise found in Isaiah: 'They shall call him Emmanuel - which means "God is with us"' (1:23). Jesus' disciples are being sent to make disciples of all nations. They will not be acting on their own for God will be with them in Jesus 'always, to the end of the age'.

Matthew has consistently portrayed Jesus as the Messianic king of the Jews. However, from the beginning of his Gospel Matthew has indicated that Jesus is for 'all nations'. In his prologue in which Matthew presents the key themes of his Gospel, we see 'wise men from the East' searching for Jesus, and when they find him they pay him homage and offer him their gifts (2:1-11).

Jesus chose to begin his mission in 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (4:15), and his revelation was for all those dwelling in darkness. Though, as a matter of fact, his ministry took place in his own country and therefore to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (10:6; 15:24), people flocked to him from Syria, the Decapolis and the territory beyond the Jordan (4:23-25).

Jesus was amazed at the faith of the Gentile centurion, and commented: 'Many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness' (8:11-12).

He responded, too, to the faith of the Canaanite woman (15:21-28) and told his disciples that they were to give ‘testimony to the Gentiles’ (10:18). Everyone and anyone can be a disciple of Jesus, but they must become like him: a child of God, open in joy to receive their Father’s love; trusting, humble, serving, not judging, forgiving, giving their life for others, even when these others do not or cannot respond in love.

Throughout the gospel, but especially in the previous section, we have seen people locked in their sin, betraying Jesus, denying him, judging him, making fun of him, deserting him, doubting him, washing their hands of him, accusing him of blasphemy, crucifying him. He laments their response but does not cease to reach out to them in love and to hope for their conversion (23:39).

He is giving his life, not for a remnant, a church, a select group, but for ‘many’ (20:28) - as many as are willing to listen and to look (11:4-5), and not be scandalised at what he does or at who he is who reveals God (11:6). He is the poor man who has nothing of himself and who accepts all from God (11:7), who can do nothing of himself but only in obedience to his Father’s will and in the power of the Spirit of love given him by God (3:17). Anyone who accepts the invitation to follow him in this trusting obedience is his ‘brother and sister and mother’ (12:50).

The one who gives rest is the one who is ‘gentle and humble in heart’ (11:29), the servant of the Lord: ‘Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick until he brings justice to victory. And in his name the Gentiles will hope’ (12:18-21 = Isaiah 42:1-4).

He is the promised and hoped for Messiah who brings about the reign of God, healing the blind, causing the deaf to hear and the paralysed to walk, and welcoming all into the sanctuary of communion with God (21:14). He is the bridegroom (9:15) and he invites everyone to the wedding banquet (22:9). ‘All the tribes of the earth’ (24:30), looking upon Jesus giving his life in love upon the cross, find themselves faced with a revelation, a grace, an invitation, a choice. His blood is poured out for the multitude (26:28), and all (27:25) are judged by how they relate to him there.

Matthew’s conclusion is set in Galilee, where Jesus’ own mission started (4:12) and where he first called his disciples (4:18-22). He promised that he would meet them there (26:32; 28:10). Fittingly also, the scene takes place on a mountain. From a mountain the devil offered Jesus ‘all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour’, if only he would fall down and worship him (4:9). Jesus refused and now we find him given all God’s authority. It was on a mountain that he first instructed them about what it would mean to follow him (5:1; 8:1). This is the mountain of prayer (14:23), the mountain where Jesus nourishes the people with bread from heaven (15:29), and the mountain where he is transfigured in glory (17:1,9). From this mountain, they are to enlighten the world (5:14).

The Mission of the Church

In a liturgical gesture of prostration, they bow down before him (28:17), recognising him as their Lord, for in him they have encountered the action of the Lord God redeeming them from all that enslaved them. The wise men, too, had prostrated themselves before him (2:2,11), as had the leper (8:2), and the Canaanite woman (15:25). Throughout the gospel the disciples and others recognised God's authority in Jesus' words (7:28), and in his deeds as he commanded the sea (8:26-27), cast sin aside (9:1-8), built *his* church (16:18), fed them in the desert (14:15-24; 15:32-39), and made God present among them (1:23; 18:20; 28:20).

Their response, even here at the end, is accompanied by doubt (28:17), for they are still walking in faith, not in vision, and, though they have looked upon God revealed in the Son of Man, crucified and giving his life in love, their journey of faith has not yet reached its goal. They are still people of 'little faith'. They still need to be forgiven, and called and called again.

So it is that, as at the transfiguration, Jesus approaches them (28:18; see 17:7). Earlier he had instructed them on what was required of them to carry on his mission (10:1-42). Now he actually commissions them to begin. The author of all, God, has given all authority to Jesus, and so he can invest these his 'brothers' (28:10), his 'disciples' (28:7,16) to 'make disciples of all nations' (28:19). The promise made to Abraham that 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18) is to be realised now, through Jesus the son of Abraham (1:1), by Jesus' disciples.

Jesus is the one who brings to fulfilment in his person the destiny of the covenant people, Israel. He is called out of Egypt (2:15; see Hosea 11:1). He is the beloved Son in whom God delights (3:17; 17:5; see Genesis 22:2; Psalm 2:2; Isaiah 42:1). He is the suffering servant of the Lord (12:18-21; see Isaiah 42:1-4). In him all the nations of the earth are blessed (Genesis 12:3; Jeremiah 4:2; Sirach 44:21). All the nations put their hope in him (12:21; see Isaiah 42:4).

The mission of his disciples is, therefore, to all the nations, including, of course, Israel. Those who faithfully follow Jesus form with him the true people of the new covenant, the renewed Israel. The mission of the disciples is to teach everything that Jesus has commanded: heralding the good news of the kingdom of God (4:23; 9:35; 24:14), and baptising people as Jesus himself had been baptised; for salvation is possible only through the outpouring of the Spirit of God that descends upon us and is welcomed by us.

Matthew incorporates here the liturgical formula used in his community when baptising. The church calls upon God as 'Father', sharing in the childlike trust to which Jesus was faithful. The church calls upon Jesus as God's Son knowing that 'there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). The church calls upon the Spirit of love that Jesus shared with his Father, believing that only the outpouring of the Spirit of God which filled the heart of Jesus can fulfil the longings of the human heart.

The seed of God's word is sown in every heart, for everyone is a child of God, made by God and made to experience communion with God and therefore with others in love. The risen Jesus is the sower and it is the breath of his Spirit, the Spirit of God that he welcomed so beautifully, that breathes the life of God throughout the world.

Some know this and so can keep alive the memory of Jesus, his words and his deeds. These are his disciples who form the community of the church and whose mission it is to keep the real Jesus, the Jesus who was crucified and who was raised to life by God, before the eyes of the world.

Disciples are at all stages of faith, following Jesus at a distance, like Peter (26:58), or, like the women, looking on from a distance while he dies on the cross (27:55), and sitting opposite the tomb (27:61), and then faithfully carrying out the mission entrusted to them (28:9). Some know of him, even think of themselves as his disciples and call him 'Lord, lord' (7:21; 25:11), but they do not know the real Jesus, and when they see him as he is, 'so marred is his appearance' (Isaiah 52:14), they betray, deny and desert him. This reaction is not necessarily definitive: we can repent; but if we do not, he cannot recognise us as belonging to his family (7:23). If our hearts are hardened, if we refuse to give up our ego, our pride, if we refuse to give our life in loving and obedient service, then we are only using him for our own satisfaction; we are not learning from him to be meek and humble of heart (11:29); we are disciples only in name.

Some may never know of him, but they know him because their heart responds to the impulse of his Spirit, and they are faithful to what they see and hear in secret. They will be surprised when the Son of Man appears to them, and they will recognise him and he them. He will call them to enter into the fullness of the communion with God which they have shared with him without realising it as they visited the sick, and clothed the naked, and set prisoners free by their transcendent love: a love inspired by him, though they did not know it (25:37-40). The kingdom of God is already experienced by such people who are 'poor in spirit' (5:3), and who remain faithful to the impulse of Jesus' Spirit in spite of the hardship and persecution that can come with it (3:10). People like this have entered God's kingdom though they may not belong to Jesus' church.

The church keeps before us the image of the crucified and risen Jesus. It is made up of sinners who have been forgiven and who share this forgiveness with others (5:21-26; 6:12; 7:1-5; 18:20-35), knowing that the perfection to which they are called (5:48) can be achieved in them only by the Father who calls them. We must unclog the spring and work to remove the obstacles that prevent the stream finding its way to its destined end. We must work at that, and it calls for constant vigilance and repentance (5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23-24; 21:31). But the spring itself flows from the heart of God and bursts into our lives through the Spirit of love that we see reflected in the heart, the eyes, the words, and the deeds of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Mission of the Church

We are in process, mourning, learning to be meek, hungering for justice, learning to be merciful, and pure in heart and to work for peace. Thanks to God's faithfulness, we will know the blessedness that Jesus knew and we are sustained by the promise that we will see God (5:4-9). But the communion for which we long remains an object of striving (6:33), as we pray for the definitive coming of him who loves us (6:10).

For each of us personally, the seed is planted now. The harvest can be expected only when we stand before the Son of Man (13:43; 26:29). In the meantime, the community of Jesus' disciples is to continue preaching the gospel. The seed sown in each generation and in all the cultures of the world, helps us to put a word on the inner word that stirs our hearts, and to put a face on God: the face of Jesus. In the words of Paul:

For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

– 2Corinthians 4:6

For while this continues there is hope that our eyes will be opened to see and our ears to hear; there is hope that we will be freed from our paralysis and move towards fuller communion with God and so with creation; that the tempests will be calmed and the demons exorcised, and our hunger assuaged day by day as we respond to the mysterious longing.

The word of God is too powerful for us, and overawed like the disciples we wait for Jesus to touch us and to encourage us not to be afraid (17:8). He alone can do this, and he is speaking to each of us, indeed to every man and every woman now and to the end of our days, and to the end of the days of our children and our children's children, for ever (28:20).