

## Making Disciples

*Psalm 8; Matthew 28:16-20*

At the end of Matthew's story about the life of Jesus, He meets His disciples, in Galilee. It is the land of the Gentiles, the non-Jews, the place that was on the margins, where His work began. Jesus speaks to them. Matthew doesn't give a report about the disciples or a comment about the coming of the Holy Spirit. Rather Jesus tells them, with His own voice, about His commission – what He wanted them to do and to be, and His promise that whatever happened, whatever the future was going to hold, He was going to be with them, and those others who would follow Him – with them always.

They were to go out, not only to other Jews, but to all the people of the world, as far as they were able, and tell them as much as they could, and show them as much as was possible, about why Jesus matters. It is a very human group of disciples that met Jesus – though it is only eleven. Judas has gone. They came as they had been told, they worshipped, but some doubted.

They were there, they worshipped, but they were still not sure. It is to that incomplete, confused, messed-up group of humans that Jesus gives an astonishing responsibility.

The task is outward-looking action. Go, make disciples, baptising, teaching – all verbs, requiring action. The task is given with all authority on heaven and on earth, so this Earth matters, and all people matter. It is a task given to them as a community, no matter how incomplete and uncertain; inviting others into the community of believers. To learn, to be baptised, to share in the work, to question, to hope.

The responsibility is vast – to all nations, on behalf of the mystery of God. Teaching obedience to everything that Jesus commanded. It is given to this small, flawed group. Crucial is the promise

that concludes the passage and the gospel. They are promised God's presence to be with them.

Always.

Peter, James, John and Andrew are thinking, 'But hang on a minute, Jesus, we're just fishermen.

We're not trained for this work. We've let you down, denied you. We're not the brightest and best.

It's not really for the likes of us. It's embarrassing. Couldn't people just come to us?'

Jesus said: "Go and make disciples...I am with you always."

Thomas is thinking, 'But I've still got questions, and yes I come to worship, and sort of believe. But

it's not really for the likes of me. I don't know enough. People will see through me.'

Jesus said: "Go and make disciples...I am with you always."

Philip is thinking, 'It's really for the leading disciples, I'd need at least Andrew, and he doesn't say

much, and I say less. I'm just a bit-part player. I can't be the one You need.'

Jesus said: "Go and make disciples...I am with you always."

Matthew, or is it Levi, is thinking, 'You can't really mean that a tax collector, an accountant, a

money man, is going to be the right person. They'll think I'm at it, only interested in the finances,

getting money together. I'm not all that imaginative, I prefer the safety of numbers and figures,

and not speaking out loud. I've no presence.'

Jesus said: "Go and make disciples...I am with you always."

James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Bartholomew, and Simon the Cannanean, or was

it the Zealot, and whichever of these might also have been known as Judas the son of James, not

the Iscariot one who is already dead, were thinking, 'We're not sure He even knows our names.

We've said little or nothing at all for three years, we're walk-on parts, walkers on the road, we're

eaters and drinkers in the Upper Room, we're sleepers at Gethsemane, we're shadowy ones on

the edge, making up the numbers. You must be joking, Jesus.'

Jesus said: "Go and make disciples...I am with you always."

And when word filtered back to all His other followers and friends and family: Mary His mother, and Mary Magdalene, and Martha and Mary, and Lazarus, and Joanna, and Susanna, and the woman at the well in Samaria, and Jairus whose daughter was healed, and the formerly blind Bartimaeus who could now see, and the seventy evangelists who'd already gone out to say something about Him, and Nicodemus, and Simon of Cyrene, and Joseph of Arimathea, and the grateful Samaritan healed of leprosy, and the widow with her mite, and the penitent tax collector in the temple, and His brother James, and His other siblings, and Zacchaeus, and the women healed of a blood disorder, and the man with the epileptic son who was healed, and Legion, without his demons, and Peter's mother-in-law, and Zebedee, and James and John's pushy mother, and all the rest were thinking, 'That's us off the hook, blink and you'd miss us in the Jesus story. We're cameo roles, local colour, but not headliners. He can't possibly mean us to do anything.'

Jesus said: "Go and make disciples...I am with you always."

We keep a Congregational Roll, with all the names of Church members on it. The never-miss-a-Sunday people; the come-when-we-can-people; the communion-Christmas-Easter-only people; the end-of-the-month-jam-baking-and-making-stall people; the choir people.

Jesus said: "Go and make disciples...I am with you always."

We keep a baptismal register, every child and some adults baptised are in it going back decades, and their parents or supporters. Most of whom we never see again.

Jesus said: "Go and make disciples...I am with you always."

The funeral people, who need a bit or a lot of help in a tough time, but who often drift away when the crisis is passed.

Jesus said: "Go and make disciples...I am with you always."

And others who come for the music; or because they've found a safe place to be; or because the coffee's good (remember to make an appropriate donation!); or because they're visiting the area; or they're watching online; and the people paid to be here; or the people who can't stand the minister but come anyway as a vote for Jesus; or people who hang on every word that wonderful minister has to say (maybe not that many people). And have I missed anyone out?

Jesus said: "Go and make disciples...I am with you always."

It's Trinity Sunday, but I don't think this Bible passage is given today as a reason to give you dense and convoluted theological sermons on the nature of the Triune Godhead and how they all relate to each other.

Jesus said: "Go and make disciples...I am with you always."

It's Communion Sunday, but I don't think this occasion is one today to go into the mystery of the sacrament and how Jesus is physically present, or spiritually present, or we are simply remembering through the bread and the wine.

Jesus said: "Go and make disciples...I am with you always."

Jesus spoke to that little band of confused and disoriented disciples on the mountain in Galilee, gave them an apparently impossible task, 'go and tell the people of the world about Me.' And then told them, "I am with you always." When you do that, for Me, I'll be there.

Is He not saying the same to us today? At the recent General Assembly there was some hard swallowing of difficult facts, relating to numbers attending, or not attending, and finance coming in, or not coming in. Of too many buildings for too few people. It's a tough time for the Church, not because of hostility or aggressive secularism, but because of people not knowing, still, what we are about, what we do. Not that we're special, we're very ordinary; but we have something,

even a glimmer of something, that helps us try a little more; gives a focus to things that we can do together; comfort that we can hold on to; hope that we can find.

Jesus said: "Go and make disciples...I am with you always."

Nobody else is going to do it for us, to our families, friends, colleagues, neighbours. There are no magical people in Presbyteries or 121 who are going to fix it all for us – because they're ordinary like us and have the same issues. It's up to us.

Watching Sheena McDonald's thoughtful half hour BBC programme on the General Assembly last weekend she finished with this: "Is the Church of Scotland showing signs of being in the last chance saloon, or is it in the vanguard of finding new ways of sharing hope, resilience and good news? Yes, and yes."<sup>i</sup>

Jesus said: "Go and make disciples..." Scared, embarrassed, unsure? Bet your life! But He also said, "...I am with *you* always." So, like those first followers on the mountain in Galilee, let's try, and see what happens next.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Sheena McDonald, General Assembly 2023, BBC programme, 28/5/23