

MATTHEW 28:16-20
MAKING DISCIPLES

Do you know these men? There is no real reason why you should unless you move in certain circles; these are not men that you will see on the front pages of newspapers; they don't run banks, they are not wanted for any crime, but they are significant people for the job they do! Let me put you out of your misery! These 2 men are ambassadors: on the left is Sir Nigel Sheinwald, United Kingdom ambassador in Washington and on right Robert Tuttle, United States ambassador in London. These are not men in the limelight, but men who do an extremely important job in developing and strengthening the relationship between United Kingdom and United States. We have other ambassadors right across the world whose job it is to develop and strengthen these relationships with other countries. They don't look for headlines and we probably don't notice them at all, but if they were not there, our world would be a poorer place.

The key to the ambassador's job is that he represents his country abroad. The ambassador is the person who represents the United Kingdom in Washington so that when he speaks, he speaks not on his own behalf and not his own opinions, but he brings the view of our government to the United States. He is not really entitled to give his own opinion on any matter, but when he speaks to the United States government, he speaks for the United Kingdom; he represents the United Kingdom government wherever he goes. So he is important, not in his own right but because of who he represents. He represents the United Kingdom, the Queen, the government, the people and his office looks after the interests of the United Kingdom and its citizens in another country. The ambassador is our representative in the United States, commissioned, sent on our behalf.

"We are..." (2 Cor 5:20) Paul is originally talking about himself and the other apostles, but then whole Church became included. Paul saw himself as an ambassador for Christ in 2 ways: 1)that he was representing Christ in the world and 2)that Christ was speaking through him to the world when Paul preached a sermon. Paul was commissioned and sent by Jesus to tell other people about Jesus, to tell the stories of Jesus, so that these others might come to faith, come to believe in Jesus. So Paul, sent and commissioned by Jesus, becomes an ambassador for Christ. Through him and his ministry, other people come to know what it means to be reconciled with God, loved by God, forgiven, blessed. What was true of Paul then is true of the whole Church now: we represent Christ.

In this series of sermons on mission we have already said that mission is something that God does; that God's great plan is to bless people everywhere with grace, peace, love and that Jesus is the centre of that mission to the world. Because Jesus died and rose again the good news is for everyone, everywhere; so we have the responsibility to be a Church that shares the good news with everyone in our communities. Last week, we spoke about Church being sent; Jesus said "As *the...*" (Jn 20:21) Church is sent into the world, to be in the world, to listen to people, to understand what excites and disturbs people, and how people think of God and to then serve people in our community in whichever way is most appropriate. The Church is sent by God to continue the mission He has given us; we represent Christ and Christ speaks through us.

Today we come to the classic piece in the Bible where Jesus spells out for the Church what it is He wants the Church to do. What is our mission in the world? The piece at the end of Matthew 28 that we read earlier is called *The Great Commission* and in it Jesus tells His disciples what He expects them to do next. Jesus has been

crucified and has died, but is now raised from the dead and before He leaves for good to return to heaven, He appeared several times to the disciples to tell them what they should do next. This passage is one of these appearances. The disciples were delighted to see Jesus and they worshipped Him gladly most of time, though some still weren't quite sure of what they were seeing. Today we concentrate on what Jesus says to them: "*All authority...*" (Mt 28:18ff)

'Make disciples'. That is Jesus' command. 'Make disciples of people in all nations' and the other pieces go around that central command. To make disciples will require 'going' because people will not come to you; to make disciples will lead to baptism; to make disciples you will have to teach, but first and foremost the task is to make disciples. Jesus is speaking to eleven men who began as disciples and now Jesus wants them to make disciples of other people. Not only are they given task, but Jesus promised that He will be with them as they go about the mission He's giving them; He will not leave them helpless, nor leave them alone, but He will go with them wherever they go and will be with them always. Jesus commissions His Church to make disciples.

CS Lewis said something to this effect: the purpose of the Church is to draw people to Christ and make people to be like Christ. That is what being a disciple is all about. This comes at end of Matthew's gospel and most stories of Peter that we told earlier can be found in Matthew; the twelve were called to be with Jesus and to travel with Him and learn from Him. What were they learning? They were learning to love God and love one another. How were they learning it? By listening to Jesus teach and by watching Him in the way that He behaved. They were learning from Jesus and, much more, learning to be like Jesus. They were drawn to Jesus and they learned to be like Him. Why? Because Jesus is the image of the perfect human being. Do you want to see what the ideal human being looks like, then look at Jesus. The Church's mission is to draw people to Christ and then to make people to be like Christ. That takes a lifetime to learn

The Church does not always get this right. Ministers and elders were presented with set of statistics recently that would seem to tell us that no Church in Edinburgh is growing; every Church is in decline because the number. of people in membership is falling. Some are declining more slowly than others, but we are all in decline. There was a time when Church membership was the be all and end all; you joined the Church as a member in the same way as you joined the golf club or the bowling club; it was a sign of becoming a Scottish adult! There were certain things to do in order to join and once you were in Church as a sort of religious club, that was it; you were in; were expected to attend services occasionally and might learn something from the minister's sermons, but that was a bonus! That is not a church making disciples.

We have five core tasks in Juniper Green Church. One of these tasks we have called 'nurture' but we could quite easily have called it 'discipleship' because nurture is all about learning and growing as a Christian, becoming more like Christ, learning in our faith. It is a core task of Church, indeed *the* core task according to Jesus, that we make disciples. We're not simply in the business of getting more members, more people into the pews, but are concerned with the quality of people. Lots of people in our world simply want to get life right, want to have a good set of values, want to be able to make good choices for themselves and their families; the sad thing for me is that many people with these hopes and aspirations don't connect these hopes and aspirations with something that the Church does. Yet, making disciples is exactly about that and is exactly what the Church is all about; it is about Jesus shaping our values, guiding our hopes, helping us learn to be good human beings, learning from

the best human being that ever walked the planet. That is/should be core business of Church, make disciples.

There are three other things alongside making disciples:

- *Go* – the disciples were to travel, they were to take the good news of Jesus to other people in other places; within a few generations, there were people across the known world who were disciples of Jesus because the disciples had travelled. The Church has still to go; we have sat back for long enough and expected people to come to us; that won't happen much any more, or at least not in the same way; we have to work out ways of making contact with people in our communities to tell them about Jesus.
- *Baptism* – stands alongside 'make disciples'. Baptism is, amongst other things, a sign of our allegiance to Jesus; it is a time to profess faith publicly for ourselves or for our children; it is a time to declare our allegiance to Jesus.
- *Teaching* – the disciples were to teach people about Jesus and were to tell people what Jesus would teach. The apostles preached sermons; they wrote these things down and we have them in the Bible to read. By teaching people what Jesus said and did, they were allowing the words of Jesus to shape the way people thought. On Wednesday night a group of us met to discuss issues of gender in our society under the title of *Women, men and God*. Then we tried to allow the Bible's teaching to shape the way we think about these issues in our society; we were learning how to love God and love others.

Lastly, in order to make disciples we have to be disciples. Many of us in the room would say that we have a faith in Jesus, that we believe. We would say that that faith is not all that it might be, but it is faith, nonetheless. All of us are faced with the challenge of nurturing that faith, of growing that faith and growing ourselves to become more and more like Christ. Some Churches have all of their people divided up into small groups for Bible Study and prayer because they see that this is a crucial activity in being disciples. We cannot make disciples, as Jesus commissions us, unless we are disciples ourselves and give ourselves to the task of growing and nurturing our faith. Love God, love other people – these are the two great aims in life; do we love God and love others to the best? No! Then we have growing to do, learning to do and guess what – that makes us disciples!

How do people in our community know what Jesus looks like? How do people know what kind of person Jesus is and what Jesus stands for? They look at us! We are His ambassadors, His representatives in the world. We are commissioned by Jesus to speak on His behalf, to represent Him in the world by the way we live. We are called to believe and to become more and more like Christ; we are called to be disciples and called to make disciples, to draw others to Christ and to help others become like Him. What a privilege! The bar is set high; it is a real challenge! Be a disciple, make disciples? It's what Church is for!