

4/5/03 am *'From the grave to the sky'* Matt.28:11-20
Mohammed Saeed Al-Sahaf – do you recognise the name?
He was Saddam Hussein's Information Minister who provided some incredibly funny moment, in the midst of all the sad scenes in the recent Iraqi war, as he kept on maintaining that the Iraqi army was in the process of wiping out the coalition forces, even as the American tanks came round the corner. Apparently one Arab newspaper carried a cartoon showing him being welcomed in the Islamic heaven by no less than 63 angels – only 3 of whom were concerned with examining how he had lived his life, while the other 60 tried to get him to accept that he had actually died!

He almost certainly wasn't the first person in history who refused to face the facts that stared him in the face, and probably won't be the last to try spreading misinformation. We see something of the same thing happening in this morning's final section of Matthew's Gospel, where the religious leaders refused to face the facts about Jesus' resurrection and tried to spread the rumour that the empty tomb was explained by the fact that the body had been stolen by the disciples while the soldiers were asleep – a story which Matthew tells us was circulated widely and pushed strongly.

This part of Matthew's gospel brings us to the end of what we have called 'the Easter Journey'.

- i) It began at Bethany with the woman who anointed Jesus with the precious ointment as a way of showing her thankfulness to him.
- ii) It took us on to the Upper Room where Jesus shared the Last Supper with his disciples, using it to speak about his imminent death and warning them that they would soon deny him and that one of them would even betray him.
- iii) Then from the Upper Room we came, via the Garden of Gethsemane, to 'the place of the skull that is called Golgotha' – to the cross, with its horrendous suffering and

separation for Jesus, and its immense significance for our hope in God.

iv) After that our journey brought us from the Cross to the grave, and to the empty grave, announcing the dawning of God's victory for Jesus, and the new day of resurrection and life for all who trust in him.

v) And so now, today, we come to the final part of that journey – ***From the grave to the sky*** – the final chapter in the story of Jesus' earthly life, but the beginning of Jesus' exalted, eternal reign in heaven.

I couldn't help thinking about Buzz Lightyear in the film, *Toy Story* – As he would zoom off to the rescue of his toy friends, he always exclaimed, *To infinity and beyond!*

In today's verses we see Jesus bidding an earthly farewell to his followers. We might reverently say that it was a case of, *To eternity and beyond!*

As we look together at these final verses of Matthew's Gospel, I want to get you thinking about '3 greats':

1. Great Honesty
2. Great Commission
3. Great Promise.

1. A Great Honesty.

First of all, we need to notice the great honesty in Matthew's words in vs.16-17.

*Then the 11 remaining disciples (Judas having hanged himself) went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go, and there they met with him – **and here is the great honesty** - When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.*

The gospel does not try to tell us that they all found it easy and natural to accept that Jesus, whom they knew, for sure, had been cruelly crucified to death, had left the tomb empty and was now utterly alive - the complete conqueror of death. Matthew is amazingly honest about it – they worshipped him but some doubted!

Perhaps it means that while some of them were completely convinced, others had questions and nagging doubts. We

certainly know that Thomas found it all very hard to accept – ‘Doubting Thomas’ as he has been known ever since.

Maybe it means that most of them had a few unanswered questions and lingering doubts in their minds.

But, *they worshipped him* – they didn’t take up the attitude that until every last question was answered, and all the things they wondered about resolved, they would hold back from worship and trust in Christ. They had seen enough to know that Jesus was indeed the one they needed to trust and honour and serve with their lives.

It’s an incredibly great honesty – and, I think, it is a very helpful honesty – for who among us would say that we understand everything about the life and death and resurrection of Jesus – that we have not questions which are not completely resolved. If those first disciples had their doubts and their questions, and were honest enough to admit to them, we can take encouragement to be like them. But like those first disciples, we ought not to hold back our response of worship and commitment to Christ, until every last ‘i’ is dotted and ‘t’ crossed in our understanding. These kind of honest questions are all right – we shouldn’t be afraid to admit to them – provided that we actually want answers, and aren’t using them as excuses to run away from the truth and call of Jesus – as the religious leaders did, making up total untruths and spreading misinformation, so that they didn’t have to think any more about Jesus.

Despite their remaining questions, and even doubts, the disciples worshipped him – they recognised that Jesus was now utterly alive, that he was the complete conqueror of death – that as he, himself, told them, ‘*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*’ – and they were willing and ready to give themselves to Jesus, in trust and service.

That word, ‘authority’ is a word that has cropped up before in Matthew’s gospel.

- after the Sermon on the Mount, the people had remarked on how Jesus spoke with authority. (Matt.7:29)
- when he healed the man lowered through the roof by his friends, Jesus had spoken of having authority on earth to forgive sins. (Matt.9:6)
- in the introduction to the story of the sheep and the goats, Jesus described a day when he would judge all people with the final authority of heaven. (Matt. 25:31ff)

And so now, in the light of the Cross and the Resurrection of Jesus, the disciples could see that this authority was for real – it was confirmed – Jesus did indeed represent the very identity and authority of God, and the only proper response was one of worship – worship which reflected inward conviction and on-going loyalty – despite any remaining questions they might have. Jesus was the one upon whom they could stake their very lives and deepest hopes – the one they needed to commit to – even allowing for their continuing questions and wondering about things.

Does this describe you? Does this great honesty help you? Have you begun to worship Jesus in all his authority, with the worship of personal commitment?

The Easter journey is really only completed when you reach that cross-roads of choice, and when you make that commitment to go down the road with Jesus.

If you need any further convincing, listen to this immense prophecy about Jesus from the book of Daniel – a prophecy confirmed by Jesus resurrection: (Daniel 7:13-14)

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven ... He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

2. From a great honesty, we move on to think about
The Great Commission.

This is the name which has long been given to the famous missionary words of Jesus in our reading today: The Great Commission - Matt.28:19-20.

Therefore 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 I have commanded you.

Or as we find it in Mark's Gospel: *Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.* (Mk. 14: 15)

Jesus does not recommend that it might be a good idea for some people, who trust in him, to be interested in Mission – **he demands** that all the people who trust him and worship him take mission absolutely seriously. In our terms this is like Jesus' 'last will and testament' – this is what he wanted to happen after he was gone – and just as we usually feel a very heavy responsibility to carry out someone's last wishes, so we need to take Jesus' wishes very seriously. If as we saw from the words of Daniel, Jesus is the Son of Man who has been given *authority, glory and sovereign power, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away*, then it is right and necessary that all people of every nation and language should be given every opportunity to worship and trust in him.

Go and make disciples of all nations – or the other similar words of Jesus at the beginning of the book of Acts: *You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth* i.e. beginning close to home and spreading out ever further to the most distant parts of the world.

Those who trust in the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus, those who worship him within the family of his church, are given a very clear command by Jesus – **WE** are to be witnesses for him – **WE** are to tell other people about trusting in him – **WE** are to spread the Gospel and help other people become disciples of Jesus.

'Go' is a command. **'You will be'** is not optional!

Perhaps we need to pay special attention to one or two things which Jesus makes very clear in this command – for they protect us from one or two very common, but fairly serious, mistakes we often make when we think about mission.

1. **This command is for all time and for all places.**

The church is commanded by Jesus to go out with the gospel and do everything possible to persuade and convince and convert people to Christ.

- **Yes** we are to show respect for our neighbour who does not seem in any way interested and who lives a very respectable life – but we are to be deeply concerned to show them that Christ is the one we trust in, and the one they need to trust in. It might not necessarily mean that we stand on the street corner and preach, for although I respect those who use that method, I'm not sure it really works. However, at least the street corner preacher cares enough to try – sometimes we don't even care or try. Do you care about your neighbour or friend or family member who doesn't seem to care much about Christian faith? Evangelism is the responsibility of every Christian and the task of every church.

- **And Yes**, Jesus does tell his church to take the Gospel to every land under the sun. Even though we are to show the deepest respect for people who are loyal to the other great world religions, Christians are to operate with the conviction that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only truly great faith – the only true faith that gives people God's great hope. As the first followers of Jesus put it in the early chapters of the book of Acts, *Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which they must be saved.*

So therefore the Church – and you and I who make up the church – have been given this Great Commission by Jesus

– the task of Evangelism and of Missionary Outreach in all the world.

Sadly we haven't always listened very seriously to Jesus last expressed wishes. We have been comfortable enough with our own faith and hope in Christ, but have not cared enough about others having that faith and hope. Maybe, of course, it has always been a bit like that. In his own lifetime Jesus once came to some towns and villages. Here's what it says in Matt.9:36: *When he saw the crowds he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples: The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field.* That could be a word to us about our families, our town, our country, our world – not necessarily a word about becoming full time evangelists or overseas missionaries, but a word about caring, about praying, about giving, about serving people in our day, people who are so often harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

2. The other important lesson for us in this great commission is this: **This command is about helping people to become real disciples of Christ.**

Jesus said, *Go and make disciples.*

- Therefore this command is not about getting people on the books of a church, its not about the labels of Presbyterian, Church of Ireland, Baptist etc – it's about making disciples – people who really do trust in Jesus as risen Saviour.

- Nor is this command about getting people to make a skin-deep decision to trust in Christ. This is not just about making a decision at an evangelistic service, nor is about a verbal profession of faith. This is about helping people to become Disciples of Jesus – a word which means committed trust, life-long learning as we follow him.

- Nor are we to extract the word about Baptism from this command and think that it is all about making sure that the Sacrament of Baptism has been observed – that this is all that is necessary. Here we can see so clearly that Baptism is to be understood in the wider context of discipleship, never in the vacuum of mistakenly thinking that there is something in Baptism whereby we think that this sacrament of water works in and of itself.

And this applies whether we practice infant or adult baptism. For infants, Baptism is in the context of believing parents through whom God can and does work in the lives of their children. For adults, Baptism places the emphasis on their own faith and discipleship. In either contexts, where these faith and discipleship factors are not actively present, Baptism makes little sense and promises none of God's blessing.

So, Jesus commands his followers and his church to *Go and make disciples*.

- i) We have a Christian responsibility to be trying to do this at a personal level – as parents, as family members, as neighbours and friends at work and in leisure contacts.
- ii) We have a Church responsibility to be doing this locally – both through our weekly activities, and by creating special evangelistic opportunities to which we can invite family members and friends. Sometimes the church doesn't do this well, and sometimes **we** don't make use of the opportunities to encourage and invite people – we don't appear to care enough. Could it be that, as one commentator suggests, we ourselves don't always care enough about Jesus who died and rose again, so why would we care about others?
- iii) We have a World responsibility to be enthusiastically committed to the missionary task. The world might mean other parts of Ireland, other parts of Europe, or other much more distant parts of the world – but committed we must be if we are serious about Jesus' command to go into all the world.

Today, in your pew, you should have found your own personal copy of the 'United Appeal Briefing'. This tells you a bit about the wider mission of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland – the work that individual Christians nor single congregations couldn't attempt on their own, but which can be tackled as a larger denomination – helping us to play our part in the Great Commission of Jesus. This particular issue concentrates more on what the church is doing in Ireland – previous, and no doubt, future issues will concentrate on overseas mission. (Anne McCully involved in the Communications Dept.) Please read your copy – allow it to inform you about the work and to stimulate your interest in that work – so that you can pray for it and support it financially. (By the way, you are already supporting it financially every time you put your offering on the plate. Instead of having special envelopes, our congregation contributes 11 or 12p in every pound of FWO. The only problem is that sometimes we forget we are doing so, and so maybe, even more seriously, forget about the work.

Of course, PCI's work is not the only way of obeying the Great Commission of Jesus. It is our primary opportunity and responsibility as members of PCI, but there is much other good work being done around the world by many churches and inter church mission organisations – and there are many Presbyterians serving in that way – like the work of Wycliffe Bible Translators with whom Gareth and Lorna Dalzell will soon be serving, and about whose work we will hear more next week.

This is Jesus' Great Commission – if we are people who trust in Jesus, and who like those first disciples, come to worship him, then we cannot miss noticing, and should not try to avoid obeying, his command, Go and make disciples of all nations. We can never say, That is nothing to do with me!

3. Great Honesty, the Great Commission, and finally, **A Great Promise.**

Not many of us find it natural or easy to be witnesses, evangelists, or missionaries for Jesus. Sometimes we find it tough enough being disciples ourselves, and we often never get any further than that. I don't think that we should be too surprised, or imagine that we are the only people who feel like that. Remember that even Jesus own disciples closed themselves up behind locked doors, on the very day that they discovered about his Resurrection – they were still afraid to be noticed as his friends and followers.

Maybe that is an example of how it nearly always is – that standing up to be counted for Jesus, telling others about Jesus and making new disciples for Jesus, is a task that is quite beyond our own resources, and a command for which we need courage and help that is from outside ourselves. But it is not a task that is beyond the resources of the Risen, Exalted, Jesus Christ. **His Great Commission is**

immediately followed by his Great Promise: *'And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'*

Because he is the Risen Saviour, and has become the Ascended Saviour in heaven, he is able to be with his people in all situations of evangelistic and missionary endeavour, and in all places where his people go, even to the very ends of the earth.

This is his Great Promise – this is our great reassurance.

How we need it, and how it should encourage and motivate us as we listen to his command, Go and make disciples, and as we remember how he saw the need, *the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few.*

We couldn't do it otherwise – we would be daft even to think about starting, for the odds are stacked against us in this world of godlessness, false gods and no god.

But the Jesus who was raised from the dead, and is the Lord of all authority in heaven, has made his promise clear and unequivocal – *I am with you always.*

The uncertainty lies not with Jesus, but with us.

Do we want him to be with us?

Do we want to be following him ourselves?

Are we ready to Go and make disciples for him?

He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Daniel 7: 14)

Let us join to sing about and worship the One about whom Daniel had this great vision.

Jesus is King and we will extol him, give him the glory and honour his name.