

Synod Sermon

Friday 14th May 2021

The Great commission in Matthew and Mark are at the same time similar, and yet so different, and they bear looking at, in the light of this new Synod, and my first with you as your bishop.

It is my and others assessment that the church in the west has largely lost its way. While we in the so called advanced west are declining in church attendance, in the rest of the world, especially where there is real trial and tribulation, even persecution the church is growing. This is because the decision has to be made. Are you in or are you out of a relationship with God? Places such as Africa where Muslim extremists kidnap Christian girls as has been reported in the media in recent years are just the tip of the iceberg of the conflict and tensions in those areas of our world. The choice of being a Christian is a life and death decision. Here in the west we haven't got to that point, yet, but I suspect we will. Maybe not life and death, but certainly persecution. I think its coming.

The problem for most of our churches is that we are still living on the largesse of the past, when we had good attendences. In those days people came to church as a matter of course. As a result we lost the edge, or the impetus to follow the command of the Great Comission. We forgot how to make disciples, and why we needed to make disciples.

Culture no longer supports the church, and any social capital we had has largely evaporated. We have gotten lazy as a church, except when it comes to keeping the doors open, but with respect to our purpose as Christians we have largely abrogated any responsibilities to the clergy, and the laity have remained, at least where ministry is concerned largely passive. While the laity have certainly been involved in activities in the church, they have not been involved in what I would call ministry that grows the church. That has been left to the professional whom we pay, lay or clerical, and the rest doesn't matter. Might be a bit harsh, but I don't believe I am too off the mark, for I look around the largely empty churches and I see the evidence of decades, not years, decades of neglect, mainly by the so called leadership of the church, usually bishops across the whole of the church, usually because they themselves have not been exposed to proper leadership models.

The Great Comission is our purpose as a church. If we are baptised into the death and resurrection of Jesus, then we are his disciples. The Great Comission was not just for those initial eleven, but for all subsequent disciples. This means us as well.

The Great Comission has one verb in it. Make Disciples. That's it. In the Greek a number of things matter. What the verb is about, who the verb concerns, and word order. In the Great Comission of Matthew the word order is interesting. The three participles which we translate as go, baptise and teach, are important. Their word order is important. As participles they can either function as verbs or nouns. Here they

function adverbially, in other words they add on to the main verb Make Disciples. The verb is really important, but it does not come at the start of the sentence. The Participle go comes at the beginning. To translate it as go, is not really a very good translation. Because of its position in the sentence and the fact that it is a participle, not a verb, it can be translated as you are going, whatever place you find yourself in or wherever you are or are going. In other words, whatever place or situation you find yourself in, whether it be at work, or at home, or at play, assisting people, doing whatever you are doing, make disciples. Then, after you have made disciples baptise and then teach them.

This is a different approach to how I have experienced this in the past. Normally in churches we have gotten seekers, we have said we will teach you the faith, then when we think you have understood we will baptise you then teach you how to be a disciple. Jesus, says, no, make disciples then baptise them then teach them. He demonstrates this by calling fishermen as his first disciples. Fishermen go out in their boat into the rough sea, throw the nets over and drag the catch unwillingly into the boat and then sort the catch. What we seem to do, is we have our boats firmly tied up alongside the wharf, with us either in our homes away from the fishing boat, or on the wharf enjoying a fisherman's basket meal, and expect that the fish will make their way in from the open sea, into the harbour, locate our boat, and leap out of the water into our boat. Then we come along at a later date, look in with amazement and say, great, more fish, and we didn't expend any effort. Doesn't work like that.

The Markan Commission is slightly different. The commission in Mark is to preach the Gospel to the Creation. Two comments. First, the Creation is not the world. When we think of creation in the bible we are immediately drawn back to Genesis 1. God creates, and it is good, and humankind stuffs it up. Here the implication seems to be that we need to proclaim the good news to the creation, which has been subject to futility because of the sinfulness of humankind. The second is that the gospel is the good news that Jesus is raised from the dead, and therefore new life, and new hope has come into the world, even though it doesn't look like it. Paul, is able to write that the creation groans in eager longing for its redemption. The creation, all of it, from the rocks in the ground, to the creatures in the oceans and in the skies, on the land, the plants and all seed bearing fruits, through to humankind can now live in a new living hope that the death, resurrection of Jesus and now the Ascension of Jesus means that the long night of exile is over, and we look with great expectation to the coming of the new day of the Lord.

Mark is keen to make the point though, you need to decide, are you in or are you out? If you are in, that is you accept Jesus as Lord and become his disciple and follower you have life, if you decide to reject it, then you do not have life, there is no salvation. This is anathema to the west, for we have become lazy, but for those where it is life and death, they understand it fully and the church is growing.

In our current situation where we are living in a pandemic, the world has changed. People know the world has changed, and now the opportunity is there for us to preach the Gospel, to make disciples. Only one problem. We are not prepared as a church, for we have left that bit out for far too long. Some are prepared, and for those who are I

encourage you to make disciples wherever you are and in whatever situation you find yourself. For those who feel time has passed them by, then simply pray for labourers to go into the field, and support whatever efforts might be taken up in your parishes. For those who want to shown how to make disciples, as your bishop that is one of my most important tasks, to prepare you all for mission and ministry.

Generally we are not ready to make disciples wherever we are and in whatever situation we find ourselves. However, as long as we are committed to wanting to doing that, God will win out in the end. God will find a way, we have to trust in God.

I am committed to putting this diocese in a position where we are all capable, according to the gifts we have been given by God, to make disciples, and to grow the Kingdom of God here on earth as it is in heaven. I am trusting in God, I am praying about it, and I am relying on his ability through our Lord Jesus to make this happen. What I need is people in this diocese who are willing to join with me in this endeavour. We don't have to know how we are going to do it yet, we don't need to know what we are going to have to do just yet. All we need is to know right now is why we are going to do it, and that why is being faithful to the command of Jesus, to make disciples.

I invite you all to join me as you are able on the journey with me.

+Keith

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