

**Bible Readings: Matthew 28. Consultation of mission leaders and executives at the Overseas Ministries Study Centre at New Haven, Connecticut, April 29-May 3.
Conference focus: 'Fresh Expressions of Church for Mission, Missions and Missionaries'.**

I am delighted to be able to share in this mission leadership forum with you over these two days. Your theme for these days, *fresh expressions of church: implications for mission, missions and missionaries*, is of major importance. And I am more than a little intrigued by the focus on orders and mission movements. We are in for a feast of good things.

I want to explore with you in my two sessions material from the Gospel of Matthew. I spent ten years of my research life focussed on this Gospel, so my choice might not surprise. But you may well be aware that one of the approaches to this Gospel involves identifying it as a mission handbook. I think it is more than that, but a mission handbook perspective brings some important aspects of this Gospel into sharp relief.

I intend to take up Mt 28. Some of our attention will be to interpretive issues and some to the connections between what we find in Matthew and our situation with its challenges and opportunities. We may indeed need fresh expressions, but they must be fresh expressions of what has always been the substance of authentic faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. My attention will be on the need, in relation to all fresh expressions, to take our bearings from the fundamental shape of Christian faith.

28:1: Vigil

Where we pick the story up, Jesus has been judged, condemned and executed. His body has been placed in a sealed and guarded tomb. The women are returning to their vigil after a break for the Sabbath. They are mourning; they are honouring the dead one; they are remembering.

I have been involved in theological education in England for 25 years. I have helped to send out hundreds of people into ministry in the Church of England. They have gone out with enthusiasm; they have gone out with optimism; they have gone out with energy and devotion. And over those twenty five years I have watched the decline of the Church of England. Each year less and less people went to church. Each year the wider culture moved further and further away from the Christian roots of British culture. One of the students who came back to do a PhD with me put his experience something like this. Twenty years earlier, when he had been a young Christian, ministers who were people of prayer, had good people skills, preached well and organised good programmes in their churches saw their churches grow significantly. When he did the same the best that resulted was keeping the status quo or modest decline.

Britain is full of medieval churches. And it is full of churches that either have very small congregations or have been converted to other uses. Many of the churches have lots of tombs in the churchyard. But the collection of buildings themselves can seem like a memorial to Christendom. A tomb that reminds of the past life of Christianity in Britain.

The good news is that the decline seems to have bottomed out and many more churches are experiencing growth and new churches are being planted. The church is freshly open to thinking outside the box, and important parts of this thinking are about fresh expressions.

But you can understand that for me the situation of the women at the tomb resonates with the church situation in Britain. In Mark the women thought they were coming to anoint the body of Jesus, but in Matthew the women are stripped of anything to do. All the forward momentum has

been lost. They can look back, but they have no basis on which to look forward. It has all stalled. We see two Marys keeping lonely vigil.

There is a demographic time bomb in so many of our churches. If things don't change there will be nothing left but a lonely vigil on a visit to the graveyard of the Christian church.

28:2-3: Earthquake and Angel

However, the situation is not actually what the two Marys think it is. Things have already moved on. The next piece of action is designed to catch them up on this.

One of the mindsets that proponents of fresh expressions readily fall into involves taking too much on themselves. Where the mainline churches tend to denial or to fatalism, the movers and shakers in fresh expressions sometimes give the impression that their creative energies offer the magic bullet. But in the end it all depends on God. If the body is dead, only God can bring back life. The good news for us is that in the goodness of God the situation is not as bleak as it seems to us. The situation was not what the two Marys thought it was; and our situation is not what we often think it is.

All had been quite while the Sabbath day was being observed, but now God is once again powerfully on the move. The day of rest is sandwiched between two earthquakes. It would appear that we are to see this earthquake as a side effect of the angel's rolling away of the stone. The angel shakes the earth to roll the stone. However, the stone is not rolled away to let Jesus out, but to reveal the empty tomb.

The angel is described in language meant to echo pieces from Daniel. The angel is, so to speak, wearing his credential. He carries with him something of the glory of God. His form points to him being part of the transcendent supernatural order, and indicates that he acts for and with the power of God. The same sort of echoing of Daniel is to happen again in the Great Commission verses.

28:4: Guards

The guards participate in the scene only in a secondary way. The event bowls them over, but they do not participate in it in any deeper sense. Except that our guards here weren't destroyed by it, I imagine that many people in Japan in March would have experienced the earthquake and subsequent tsunami rather like the guards: an overwhelming event of which they could not make any sense.

Frozen in terror the guards form a kind of tableau against the background of which the action with the Marys carries on.

28:5-7: Angel's Message

Unbeknown to the Marys their dead Lord had not stayed dead. The Gospels keep the actual resurrection off camera. But presumably even earlier that morning than the women had come to the tomb, Jesus was restored to life and made his way out of the sealed tomb---leaving the big stone plug in place and its seal undisturbed.

Why is the resurrection kept off-stage? We don't really know. My guess is that it has something to do with the mysterious nature of this event. Lazarus was summoned from the tomb and everyone saw him shuffle out, still shrouded in grave clothes. Remarkable as it was, this was an event in normal history. The earthquake at the moment of Jesus' death broke the tombs open. The raised bodies presumably came out through the openings created. And later they were seen in the city. But

their restoration to life was not observed. This time we have events that are caught up in the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection. They are no longer *quite* events in ordinary history. They share something of the mystery of Jesus' own resurrection. There is a kind of middle ground here between the raising of Lazarus and the raising of Jesus. The off-stage status of the actual resurrection of Jesus is of a piece with the difficulty people had in being sure that the resurrected Jesus was indeed Jesus when they met him.

The resurrection of Jesus was no mere restoration to life. It was a transition to something totally new. It was beyond description. The resurrected Jesus was somehow other. And the resurrected Jesus had moved into a liminal space. Have you ever reflected on why it is that nobody expected the resurrected Jesus to pick up the threads of his life and ministry and carry on? Somehow it was all different now.

What comes in the rest of the chapter is grounded in the fact of the resurrection of Jesus. Only the resurrection of Jesus makes possible a moving on into the future beyond the enormity of the cross. The resurrection of Jesus makes it possible to affirm the significance of the ministry of Jesus and its culmination in the cross. The resurrection opens up the future that is mapped out towards the end of Mt 28. Without the resurrection the few short years of Jesus' ministry would be reduced to a curiosity of the past. With the resurrection Jesus' ministry defines the future to all eternity. The powerhouse for all that is to come is the reality of the resurrection of Jesus.

For me, probably the best piece of work that N. T. Wright has produced is his book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (SPCK, 2003). In it, among other things, Tom sets out to show that for all its mystery, the resurrection of Jesus is a reality in the public square, not just some private reality of faith. Something unprecedented and quite unexpected happened with Jesus in the first century, and it still stands as a challenge to all who want to try to make some overall sense of reality.

Whatever else might be involved, a fresh engagement with the reality of Jesus as resurrected from the dead needs to play an important role for us if in relation to the church of our day, if we are going to be kept from being like the two Marys, keeping a lonely vigil at the grave-monument to the Christian church. Whatever form our fresh expressions take, they must keep a clear focus on Jesus as alive from the dead.

More about the resurrection later. But now we turn our attention to the experience of the Marys at the tomb.

The angel does a show and tell with the women, or actually the other way around, a tell and a show. But first the angel puts the women into a privileged place. The guards were terrified and so they should have been. The women might have been more than a little inclined to be as well. But for all their confusion these women were women who were headed in the right direction. These are women who seek Jesus the crucified one. They were not to be afraid.

People find it very hard to be identified with a failing cause. Who wants to go down with the ship? And as we move further and further into a post-Christian culture both sides of the Atlantic, there is a huge temptation to soft peddle those traditional Christian values that have fallen out of favour with the wider culture. Poverty, economic justice and non-discrimination are popular causes, and we readily stand up for them in the name of Christ. And so we should, but what about the values that don't line up so well. Non-discrimination as Christians understand it cannot be equal validation of all possible options. And what of sexual enjoyment as a consumer commodity that leads to

cohabiting replacing marriage as the relationship of choice? What of the easy acceptance of no fault divorce? What about the main-streaming of gay and lesbian marriage?

Our fresh expressions must never be new forms of consumer religion. We want them to be culturally relevant, but they must also preserve the counter cultural dimension of Christian faith.

The two Marys' loyalty to Jesus ran deep. They had sought him when he was alive to minister to them. They still sought him when authorities and people had turned against him and sent him to a shameful and hideous death.

It is those who are unashamedly Jesus people who will make a difference in our world. Are we nurturing up Christians for whom Jesus comes readily to their lips whether they are talking with other Christians or to those who have no knowledge of or evident interest in Jesus? Are we raising up Christians who want see the world as Jesus sees it? Of do most of our Christian folk, most of the time, keep their Christian faith under the radar?

Loyal to the bitter end, it was the two Marys who were first to know that Jesus was alive. 'He is not here; for he has been raised'. They are first told and then they are shown the negative evidence. No body! A sealed tomb has been broken open as they looked on. And there is no body of Jesus inside. They had seen the body go in. They knew it had been there. The angel was explaining what they were seeing---or not seeing---in the only way that finally made sense. It made sense and it actually was what Jesus had told them would happen, though at the time his words had made no sense.

Christianity is, in part, an evidence based faith. As we unravel and try to move on from the modernist or enlightenment paradigm within which this has become enmeshed, it is important that an interest in 'empirical' facts does not fall by the way, that we do not lose a sense of the importance of history. Something happened in the first century that still in the twenty-first century cries out for explanation. We have lots of bridges to build to help people see this, but religious experience in the present cannot be allowed to drift loose from its historical moorings. The Bible as a book of the facts of the past continues to matter. Some of our fresh expressions are in danger of sliding away from this reality.

The two Marys get their 'great commission' , or I should say their first 'great commission' from the angel. When you know, right away you go and you tell. That is the shape that the angel gives to the women's role. In 1972, when I was first ordained the ministry to which I went was one that involved a lot of going to people in their homes. Some of this was social. Some of this was in relation to specific pastoral needs. But primarily it was about discussing issues of faith with people at an individual level. Social mores have changed in ways that make this extraordinarily difficult today. But I believe that there was a very important instinct behind what I was doing. And because I did it with consistency it rubbed off on how church members related to each other and to their neighbours and friends. What one comes to know one should go and one should tell. Discipling people to in turn become disciple makers is an emphasis at Trinity, Bristol.

The women's new knowledge was restricted, but it was timely and it was profoundly important. What they had to share would undergird everything else that was to engage the early Christians.

The news was that Jesus was risen from the dead. Earlier when Jesus had predicted Peter's denial, he had intimated that beyond the scattering of the flock there was to be a reunion in Galilee. The angel makes it clear that the two Marys were also to be part of this rendez vous in Galilee.

28:8: Marys' Response

With 'fear and great joy' the women set off at a run to share their news. 'Fear and great joy' strikes me as a marvellous combination. This is not the paralysing fear of the guards. In a brush like this with the supernatural, fear is an inevitable and even a proper human reaction; but joy must have the last word, indeed great joy.

28:9: Jesus Met Them

So here they are, running off to fulfil their mission, but on the way there is a curious and very important interlude. Later, in the great commission at the end of Matthew, the promise of Jesus' presence is made to those who are engaged in fulfilling the mission charge. I think the main mission charge to come is already in Matthew's mind as he reports here the Marys' meeting with the risen Jesus. Notice the way in which the worshipping of Jesus here plays a role parallel to that which it will play in the great commission. One of the old mission mantras, in good King James English, was 'if there is no "go" then there is no "lo"'. It is as the women head off to fulfil their task that the risen Jesus comes to meet them. While in the Gospels people quite often meet with Jesus. Only in this verse is it Jesus who meets with somebody. Only here is Jesus the 'meeter'. Jesus comes to be with them; they don't come to be with Jesus. Jesus comes alongside them as they head off to fulfil their mission. He encourages them; and he renews their commission. They are not now just commissioned and sent by the angel, but directly commissioned and sent by the resurrected Jesus.

We will be looking at this more later, but I just want to say here that a sense of having one's marching orders directly from the living Christ makes a huge difference to how one holds up when the going gets tough, and when there is a need to hang in there for the long haul. I don't mean this in a lone ranger sense or in the sense that might lead to a bit of a messianic complex. But I do mean this in a deeply personal and religious sense. The church is charged with recognising the authenticity of calling, but calling has its heart in a deep personal transaction between an individual and the Lord. Fresh expressions need to be offering us a fresh excitement in being personally called to our task by the living Christ.

The women's specific commission was time-limited and narrowly focussed, but it makes use of patterns that have a wider pertinence.

The strikingly new thing about the version of the message that Jesus himself gives is his calling of the disciples his brothers. The previous most recent contact of Jesus with these men had played itself out in terms of their collective desertion of Jesus and Peter's denial of Jesus. The language 'my brothers' speaks eloquently of restoration: beyond all reasonable expectation Jesus treats the relationship as unruptured. Between their failure and these present words is interposed the death of Jesus. These are the men who drank from the cup at the Last Supper. As he offered them the cup he had said, 'this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'. The blood of the covenant has done its work. The disciples are forgiven. They can be called to their new task. Jesus calls them his brothers.

We can only speculate as to why it was that the women got to see Jesus where, in the first instance the male disciples had to be content with a second-hand message. But there is a correspondence between this and the situation earlier: it was the women and not the male disciples who were prepared to own their connection with Jesus right through the passion.

Whatever we make of the asymmetry between how the women and the men are treated, it puts a particular challenge in front of the men. They are put into a position where they need to act on the truth of something before they can come to know its truth in a deeper and more personal manner.

The women's witness was intended to be enough to be going on with for the men. Their own coming encounter with Jesus depended on what they did with the women's message.

28:11-15: Stitch Up with Guards

We can pass fairly quickly over the specific text details in vv. 11-15. The guards were there to ensure that there was no falseness on the part of the disciples. Instead, now, they become instruments of the falseness of the chief priests and elders. Getting a fair hearing for the Christian gospel has always been challenging, and is increasingly challenging in our times. In the ancient world Christians were often thought of as atheists; in our world we are often thought of as kill-joys and as subject to irrational prejudices. In every generation we have needed our apologists. It is not that apologists convince people of the truth of Christianity. Rather, when it works, apologetics makes a space within which Christianity can be seen as possibly plausible and possibly something that an intelligent person might be able to sign up to. In other words, apologetics creates a space within which conversation can take place, a space within which witness can be borne. As long as people know ahead of time that Christianity is superstitious nonsense that has passed its sell-by date and that its beliefs stop people from being good citizens in some important respects, listening is very unlikely to take place.

Mt 28:11-15 is a little piece of apologetics. It offers an explanation of how a popular view quite undermining to Christian faith gained its ascendancy. And it argues the case for considering an alternative view.

Christianity has always been involved in historical apologetic. History matters for Christian faith. If loud voices say it is impossible to know anything certain about Jesus of Nazareth, then the plausibility of commending him as the living Lord is affected in a major way.

For most of Christian history, Christians have been involved in philosophical apologetic. Where there has been a dominant philosophy in a certain place and time, Christians have laboured to articulate their faith in a way that was intelligible in relation to that philosophy. This is both an important and quite dangerous activity. Adhering to the mode of rationality that is prevalent in a dominant philosophical discourse makes one intelligible, but it may change the content of the message in subtle, but important ways. (Athenasian creed) For most people postmodernism is more a mood than a philosophy, but as a mood it is so powerful that it calls for a philosophical apologetic that will take this mood with all seriousness.

Christians have needed to be involved in scientific apologetic, as scientific views on the origin of life and on the history and destiny of the cosmos have placed in question traditional Christian thinking.

Christians have also regularly engaged in ethical apologetic. Incest and cannibalism are charges Christians have had to defend themselves against. As we leave Christendom behind there will be an increasing need to engage in moral apologetic. However defective in actuality the understanding and practice of Christian ethics was in the communities of Christendom, it was the ethics of Christianity as broadly understood that people were either living up to or falling away from. To put it another way the church was the conscience of the community and the conscience of the nation.

For most of the younger generation this is no longer the case. The church, if it is noticed at all, simply represents another voice, a minority voice.

It is often said by historians that Victorian Evangelical Christianity owed its success, in large part,

to the way that it embraced the culture of the day. I think this has a lot of truth in it. It used a mode of discourse that owed much to the enlightenment. It made use of the cultural patterns that worked for people at different class levels in society. Etc. But it might be that the decline of Evangelicalism in Britain at least can be attributed to getting stuck for a long time with a Victorian approach. As it has been wisely said, 'He who marries the spirit of the age in one generation finds himself a widower in the next generation'.

Americans kept going to church long after Europeans largely gave it up, at least in part because a populist form of Christianity had developed in which culture and faith were closely identified with each other. This has represented a huge strength over against Britain where, against the background of the continuing influence of a class structure, the Church of England has tended to be so dominantly middle class and up. Church going for working class people was a form of deference to their betters. But they have long since stopped deferring.

As culture seems to be changing at an ever increasing rate, we have a major challenge in developing an apologetic that resonates with the younger generation of today. But from the earliest time it has been the lived apologetic of changed lives that has probably spoken the loudest on the ground amongst ordinary people. This has to do with individual changed lives, but it also has to do with communities of faith relating to their surrounding communities in ways that visibly mark them out from others.

There cannot be a one size fits all apologetic. Modern western culture is fractured. People are different in their needs and perspectives. Much of our traditional apologetic arsenal still has its value. But fresh thinking is also vital. One of the challenges for fresh expressions is the development of up-to-date popular level apologetics.

28:16: Disciples in Galilee on a Mountain

The scene now moves to Galilee. The women at and around the empty tomb fall from sight. We are not even told that they fulfil their commission, though we are no doubt intended to assume that that they do. The focus now falls on the eleven remaining disciples and we are taken to a mountain setting.

Being on a mountain removes one from the ordinary and the everyday. In Biblical tradition important things happen on mountains. And in Matthew itself we can think immediately of Jesus' temptation, the Sermon on the Mount and the Transfiguration. As well, the two feeding miracles in Matthew both have a mountain link. And the Mount of Olives comes up in connection with Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem and his prayer in Gethesemane. Though there is no claim that this is the same mountain, for Matthew the mountain setting here is the first of a set of clues that encourage the reader to make a link between this final scene and the Sermon on the Mount. More of that anon.

That place matters is a universal human experience. Word focussed evangelicals can lose sight of such dimensions. But contexts that match the activity we are engaging in facilitate and reinforce what we are trying to do. Some fresh expressions are deeply sensitive to this dimension, but not all.

Eleven disciples, Matthew says. Matthew has first introduced this word at the opening of the Sermon on the Mount. The disciples are the primary addressees of that extended sermon. The word is μαθητης. Etymologically it means one who learns. But the word generally points to a commitment to some specific kind of learning, normally based on an allegiance to a particular teacher, and often involving a full sharing of life by a group of disciples with their teacher (Wilkins, *Disciple*). Matthew has introduced four fishermen in 4:18-22 who are called by Jesus to follow him and to be

prepared by him for a role patterned on his own practice. These are the only identified people prior to the Sermon on the Mount to whom the term disciples would naturally apply. But at the start of chap. 10 Matthew names twelve disciples. It is unclear whether a special calling is required of those for whom Matthew will use this language. It probably is, but Matthew does not quite say so.

Matthew never uses 'disciple' in a way that takes us beyond the Twelve. But he does use the related verb μαθητευειν which means 'disciple someone, make a disciple'. This has happened to Joseph of Arimathea; he had been 'discipled to Jesus' (27:57). In 13:52 Jesus talks of the possibility of a person being 'discipled [to be] a scribe for the kingdom of heaven'. And in the Great Commission Jesus directs the Eleven to engage in disciple making. The Twelve are both disciples in a distinctive sense and also paradigmatic disciples. The Twelve are those whose sharing of life with Jesus and learning from him at every level provide the foundation on which the discipleship to which Matthew challenges his readers is ultimately based. Replication is not a bad headline term for what Jesus commissions in Mt 28:16-20.

This dimension of replication needs to be built in to how we configure our fresh expressions.

Being sent back to Galilee for the commissioning has its own symbolic importance. In some sense what had taken place in Jesus' ministry is to begin afresh and on a new level in the ministry of the disciples. There is a major watershed here. Jesus does not resume his own ministry. Instead it is to be renewed by the disciple band. Jesus began in Galilee and so will the disciples now.

The need to do it over again is, I think, how we find ourselves thinking about the challenge of making Christ known in our generation. Ours is a fresh beginning called for by collapse, not one called for by the new situation created by the death and resurrection of Jesus. But the terms in which the disciples made their fresh beginning can help orient us in our fresh ventures.

28:17: Worship and Doubt

When they saw Jesus the disciples responded just as the women had done. They worshipped. The word used here (προσκυβεω) was one that was in transition in the NT period. Etymologically it should mean 'give a kiss to' or 'kiss in the direction of'. The predominant older meaning was religious, presumably symbolised in kissing the feet of the statue of the god to whom religious submission is given. When Eastern monarchs took to making divine claims for themselves, then falling at their feet or bowing over to kiss their hand would imply recognition of their divine status and submission to it. But the religious content was not always there, especially later. The core idea is that of submission on the basis of the significance of the one being submitted to: to προσκυβεω is 'to express in attitude or gesture one's complete ... submission to a high authority figure' (BAGD).

But words degrade, and at least by the second century the word can mean, 'show respect to', 'greet' and even, going back to its etymology, 'give someone a kiss', though probably not in an erotic context.

Matthew uses the word with some ambiguity, but when he uses it in connection with Jesus the sense is always heading towards a Christian recognition that Jesus is to be worshipped as God. His use of the word clearly reaches this goal on three occasions: after the stilling of the storm and in the two post-resurrection scenes when people see the resurrected Jesus for the first time.

With Jesus there is both what he is and the capacity of people to realise what he is. The worship here in Matthew 28 is drawn forth by experiencing him afresh as the resurrected one. In this week after Easter our focus on Jesus as the resurrected one should draw us afresh into worship of Jesus.

The starting point for mission must always be worship. And without returning again and again to the posture of worship we become too extended in our mission endeavours and lose our rootedness.

In this verse, however, we encounter not just worship but also doubt. The juxtaposition of worship and doubt is quite deliberate. Indeed it is a deliberate cross-reference to the stilling of the storm and the walking on the water (Mt 14:31, 33). Peter doubts; all worship. The challenges to the faith of the one who, in faith, walks on the water to Jesus do not go away in the post-resurrection situation of the church. For Peter doubt gave way to worship; but amidst the challenges of life, both doubt *and* faith that leads to worship coexist at times. Being of little faith (14:31) is still being of faith and still leads to worship. We do no service to the gospel if we do not deal with the greys as well as the blacks and whites.

In our fresh expressions we need confidence, but not arrogance. We need radical discipleship, but also the capacity to make sense of even the most flawed and limited forms of genuine response to Jesus.

28:18: Jesus Comes and Speaks of his Authority

Jesus' coming to here is almost as unique as Jesus as the one who meets the Marys---otherwise only after the Transfiguration. As well as providing another link between the two episodes it prepares for the Jesus 'being with' to come in v. 20: Jesus comes in order to be with.

The commissioning to come only has significance because it is grounded in the authority of Jesus. Matthew has represented Jesus quite frequently in the gospel as one who has authority (7:29; 8:9; 9:6, 8; 21:23, 24, 27; cf. 10:1; 11:27). However, the recent events of the Passion had represented a major challenge to the authority of Jesus. In light of the resurrection, Jesus' death is his ultimate achievement, not a mark of his final failure. The resurrection has vindicated Jesus' authority. He can freshly lay claim to it. His authority is comprehensive. It extends from heaven to earth.

Mission is grounded in confidence in the authority of Jesus. The earth has been subject to invasion by one who has total authority. A singularity point divides history. There is history before Jesus and history since the revealing of the total authority of Jesus. In a world of many faiths, and dominant unfaith in the Western world, there is a firm anchor point in the authority of Jesus. This is the only viewing point from which all the confusions of life can be finally integrated. If we have confidence at this point we can live successfully with all the things that inevitably remain unclear.

The authority that Jesus lays claim to here is that of a plenipotentiary. This is not just the authority to give orders; it is the power to make things happen. That is why the authority claim in v. 18 leads on to the promise to be with the disciples in mission that is to come in v. 20.

28:19a: Go; Make Disciples; All Nations

'Go' isn't just about going away from this meeting with Jesus. The call to go is grounded in Jesus' own itinerant ministry. It is a call to go to where the people are. As Jesus had begun by going throughout Galilee (4:23), so the disciples were now charged to do the same. We may find ourselves critical of the imperial assumptions that often went hand in hand with the mission endeavours of the past, but these people had heard the imperative to go. And in many cases their going was at great personal cost. I have the impression that the life-long Western missionary has become an endangered species in our time.

The activity of discipling is something I have already begun to comment on. Whatever else it is, it is an educational activity. But there is something quite unusual about the discipling activity to be

engaged in here.

The normal pattern of discipleship, indeed the one exemplified by Jesus with his disciples, is that the discipler has people around him who are *his own* disciples. Under normal circumstances, Peter, say, would have disciples who are disciples of Peter. We see this sort of thing in 1 Corinthians where Paul reports Corinthian Christians as saying 'I belong to Paul' and 'I belong to Apollos'.

In what Jesus calls to in the Great Commission there is a decentredness that must not be missed. It is obvious once it is said, but it needs to be said and said again that the task is to make disciples of Jesus, not disciples of the one doing the discipling. But the mission landscape is littered with the after-effects of mission that does not survive the departure of the mission agency.

On a trip to Indonesia many years ago I was appalled by something I found. Christian groups were seeing their success largely in terms of how much resource from how many agencies they were able to draw on. Before Christmas we had an Indian scholar with us at Trinity who told us many tales of large population groups in India whose conversion from Hinduism to Christianity could not survive the withdrawal of the mission infrastructure in relation to which they had become Christians.

Neither self-focussed missionaries nor top-down structures can achieve the kind of discipling whose enduring qualities come from the permanent link to Jesus that has been created. The world of fresh expressions throws up gifted people who tend to gain guru status. Their capacity to inspire is admirable, but unless their egos are tamed by a passion for helping people to a link with Jesus that is ultimately quite independent of their significance, they will prove to be nothing more than focus figures for passing fads.

Eleven rather parochial Jews are set the task by Jesus of going to all the nations. People groups have their own cultures and ways, and their own historic religions. Since we in the West are still living down our Imperial past, the idea of having something that everybody needs doesn't sit comfortably---even less so, given the Postmodern emphasis on the place that needs to be made for any and every story. But if we believe that something of unique and earth-shattering importance happened with Jesus, then there is no avoiding this kind of imperialism. Does a fresh initiative of God get under way with Jesus or not? Is it right to think of this fresh initiative of God as somehow eschatological? And if it is eschatological can we avoid the conclusion that it is of pressing newsworthiness for all people? As Christians we believe that the mission venture is actually part of this fresh initiative of God, centred upon Jesus. Jesus has set out his stall, and we are his messengers. All of this is not to say that we should have a one size fits all approach to mission. In early Christian terms, that approach was adopted by those who insisted that to become Christians, gentiles also needed to become Jews. Unity across diversity is the Christian vision. And that allows for a distinctive cultural embodiment of Christian faith for each people group. But this is not a validation of limitless difference. The rest of Jesus' charge brings some clarification here.

28:19b: Baptism in the Name of Father, Son and Spirit

I think all the debate about baptism formulas in connection with Mt 28:19 is rather missing the point. Matthew's story has been about the action of the Father through the Son and by means of the Holy Spirit. 'In the name' is an expression of solidarity with. By his language here Matthew intends to mark a comprehensive commitment to Jesus and what he has brought and done and stands for. But not to Jesus standing alone, but to Jesus within the Trinity of action of Father, Son and Spirit. Matthew's story has been about the action of the Father through the Son and by means of the Holy Spirit. And this is what the baptised are joined to.

28:20a: Teaching to Observe All I Have Commanded You

The teaching dimension of discipling become explicit here. But it becomes explicit not so much in terms of teaching to be believed, but rather in terms of teaching to be obeyed. This is one of the places where the special link of the Great Commission with the Sermon on the Mount becomes visible. In Matthew Jesus' teaching is concentrated into five main teaching blocks, of which the Sermon on the Mount is the one most focussed on what one needs to do. (The other one where the concentration on doing is high is the mission charge to the Twelve in ch. 10.) We cannot fulfil Matthew's version of the great commission if we do not vigorously promote the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount as intended for serious obedience.

Matthew shares the general Jewish impulse to view true religion as involving a way of life and not simply a pattern of beliefs. The language here insisting on total obedience is the same language that is used by Jesus in Mt 5:18-19 in connection with the requirement to be obedient to the Mosaic Law. 'keep [what] I have commanded' also has an echo of the words to the rich young ruler: 'keep the commandments' (19:17). What Jesus has taught is to take its place alongside, and as interpretive of, the Law of Moses, with the Ten Commandments at its heart.

28:20b: With You Always

Jesus is sending the Eleven off to do his bidding. But what about Jesus himself? Surely he is freshly available now, having come through death into new life! Jesus' continuing role is given in 'with you' language. His human life has represented 'God with us' (1:23). Already Jesus has promised his future presence when the church deals with internal challenges (18:20). Now he promises his presence with his missioning disciples.

We need to see Jesus' promise of his presence here in the light of the full authority he has freshly asserted for himself in v. 18. But this is an authority, a power that Jesus chooses to exercise not primarily unilaterally, but in, with and through the disciples in mission. From now on it will not be like it had been during Jesus earthly ministry; now, Jesus will work his power primarily off-stage.

But he will not remain off-stage for ever. The time for the disciples to act in Jesus' stead is bounded on one side by this present commissioning and on the other by his ultimate eschatological role. 'All ... will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory' (24:30). The present time of mission is pregnant with significance precisely because of these boundary markers. There is good news to tell that makes all the difference not only for the present but also for the ultimate future.

There is important grounding for fresh expression endeavours in the day of Jesus' resurrection and the following brief period, as Matthew has captured it for us so powerfully in Matt 28. Fresh expression are simply that; they must not be setting out to offer something different to what the church has always offered. It is to Jesus as raised from the dead, Jesus as the one charged with all authority, Jesus as the living Lord promising to be with us forever, to whom we need to bring the people of our generation.

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