**The Great Commission to “make disciples”. 1. Origins**

Today, we start our new series of 5 sermons on the Great Commission from Matt. 28: 18-20, where the Lord Jesus outlines how his followers should continue His ministry after the Ascension. We’ll look at its origin now and, subsequently, explore its development-in His ministry-after the Resurrection and in the early church, after which we can draw lessons.

1. Intro. 1. What’s the meaning of “commission”? It means a job or a task for someone to do. I’ve looked at an Army commission for someone in the Gunners, where the task is given on the authority of the Queen, as Captain General of the Royal Artillery. Why does she give it? She “reposes special trust in the loyalty, courage and good conduct” of the officer. What is the task? To “exercise and well discipline those under your orders” expecting you will use your “best endeavours..and carefully and diligently discharge your duties”, which are, effiiently, to carry out commands from above-the chain of command.

2. In Matt. 28: 18-20 Christ outlines the task for his followers. It’s a command to “Go and make disciples of all nations”-disciples or learners, who must sign up and commit to following Him and accept the teaching to “obey everything I have commanded you.” V. 20. This may seem a hugely daunting task to us, but not only does Christ command this because “all authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to Me.” V. 18, but, also, He promises to accompany us “surely, I am with your always till the end of the age.”v. 20. It’s not because He “reposes special trust in our loyalty etc”, but because He loves us. Thus, we are not on our own in this task. As we explore the meaning of “Go and make disciples”, we’ll see, at the start of His public ministry, these three points repeated-the signing up and commitment- Christ’s authority invoked-His promise to be with us to transform us for the work ahead.

B. Jesus’ Public ministry. 1. In Matt. 4: 12-24 Jesus started this after His baptism by John, His testing by Satan and learning of John the Baptist’s imprisonment. Verses 17-18 give a template or outline of the basic steps o “ making disciples”-in v 17 He preached “Repent (in Mk. 1; 15 ‘ and ‘believe the Good news’) the kingdom of Heaven is near or at hand.” In v23 there is a follow up for” He was teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the Kingdom and healing every disease and sickness among the people”.

2. What does “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” mean? Firstly, to repent means to turn round or turn away from sin-to change course. This was John the Baptist’s message. His hearers realised their wrong doing, wanted to break with that and lead a better life. This was, certainly, my feeling when I became a Christian. The problem is keeping it up-so easily it could be like a New Year’s resolution-broken before the end of January! That’s where believing the Good News is so important, for Jesus brings forgiveness and transformation into our lives by faith. Secondly, the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ suggests an area like ‘the kingdom of Denmark’. It’s more like in Belgium, where the ruler is the’ King of the Belgians’-an ethnic group, or, better, what Diana, Princess of Wales, meant when she spoke of wanting to be the Queen of people’s hearts. She wanted a special place in people’s affections and to judge by her funeral that was true for a while. Jesus, however, wants to be the permanent King in our hearts and affections, where we obey Him as commander. During World War ll fifth columnists were feared in countries threatened by Hitler. This group had different aims and objectives from those around them and suddenly emerged to help the invading Nazis. If we are part of the Kingdom of Heaven, it is almost like being part of a secret society. I, certainly, felt this excitement, for, as a follower of Jesus, I wanted to stand up for Him, when, conventionally then, churchgoing was Mattins each Sunday, church flowers once a month and often nothing more. Thirdly, Matthew quotes in v 16 Isaiah’s prophecy that “the people in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”This refers to Jesus inaugurating the Kingdom of Heaven, where Light, Truth and love flourish and shine. Jn. 1: 4 & 5 says in Jesus was” life and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it.” This contrasts with the darkness and shadow of death for those who live selfishly for themselves-‘Me-Me first’. Fourthly, what does “near at hand mean”? Jesus, the King, has come, so it’s the start of the kingdom of Heaven that He’s accomplishing-it won’t be fulfilled till his Second Coming. It’s “at hand” in that sense-a work in progress. To sum up, we can understand the three main elements in the theory of “making disciples”-now we turn to the practical outworking of these.

C. Matt. 4: 18-22 show how He started to “make disciples”. He called two sets of brothers, who immediately signed up and committed themselves to following Him. In v. 18 He called Pater and Andrew, who were in the middle of “casting a net into the lake.”. In v. 21 He called James and John, who were in a “boat with their father Zebedee preparing t heir nets”. All four followed Him-a huge sacrifice to give up their livelihood, their traditional life and, worst of all, to disobey their father, whom James and John knew they should honour. This dramatic wrench and exit from the familiar was improved by Jesus’ promising to “make (them) fishers of men” v. 19. In this episode, we see Jesus’ authority and the promise of his Presence to transform them-reflecting His command in Matt. 28: 18 & 20.

The need for Jesus’ promise to transform them is highlighted by the occasion when the making of disciples in Corinth went wrong in the first reading 1 Cor. 3: 3-4. Paul and Apollos had fished for men-those they had helped started to shift their attention away from Christ their Saviour, towards them-“I follow Paul…I follow Apollos”-v4. This mistaken concept of ministry led to party spirit, rivalry, “jealousy and quarrelling among you” v3. Paul reminded them of three points. Firstly, “the Lord has assigned to each his task.” v5., so there are many links in the chain of someone coming to faith. Secondly, there’s the agricultural picture-Paul planted the seed-preached the gospel, maybe, while Apollos watered it-perhaps discussed the issues in a group or one to one, BUT it was God who “made it grow”v6. The two men would have achieved nothing without God’s intervention. Lastly, both men were “fellow workers with God”-v9. What an amazing thought! However feeble we may think our contribution is, we are still “fellow workers with God”, as we seek to make disciples. In any work for the Lord Jesus Christ rivalry can so easily creep in-“In the old Rector’s day we did it differently…”! Whatever task we are given by God, as we seek to make disciples, we are “fellow workers with God”. Keith suggested, last week, our task might just be an act of kindness or a listening ear. I met a Christian couple and their widowed friend the other day and learnt that years ago, when they all lived in London, the widow had asked the husband (ages before he married his wife) whether he had thought of attending St Helen’s, Bishopsgate. There gospel was preached. That started him on his journey of faith. I wonder if, at the time, the widow had ever thought much more about her simple suggestion-it was, however, the task God had assigned to her.

D. What can we learn, then, about the fundamentals of the Great Commission to make disciples? St. Francis is alleged to have said “Preach the Gospel-use words if you have to.” Maybe there is something simple we can do-perhaps quote from our own experience of Jesus’ help to us, or, as Keith suggested, be supportive. Whatever it is, we should be encouraged that we’re not on our own in this venture. He has promised to make us” fishers of men” in whatever form that takes-He gives us the task and the means. Lastly, and I say this as much to myself as anyone else-we could pray about our task as a ”fellow worker with God”, about being sensitive to God’s promptings and to have the boldness to act or speak. Thus, we will fulfil his command to “go and make disciples of all nations.”