Sermon Sunday 23 January 2022 at Stowe 9.45am

The Great Commission: its early development

Isaiah 55: 1-7

Matthew 10: 1-10; 32-33; 40-42

Andrew Rudolf was preaching on the first of this series two weeks ago, explaining what a commission is (among other things).

Today we look at the next phase, as Jesus calls the twelve, starting with two sets of brothers – Andrew and Peter, and then James and John – though it’s still early days.

In Matthew 10 Jesus sends out his twelve disciples. Notice the list is set out in pairs: Peter and Andrew (brothers); James and John (brothers); Philip and Bartholemew; Thomas and Matthew; James and Thaddeus; and finally Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot. There’s a shorter account of the same event in Mark’s gospel where it explicitly states He sent them out in twos, presumably in the pairs we have here listed in Matthew. I always wonder how Simon the Zealot got on with his ‘buddy’ Judas Iscariot… I’d love to have been a fly on the wall!

We don’t have hours to dissect this list of those Jesus called to be his closest followers. Let me say two things about them. First, they were very ordinary men. Men because in the mores of the time it just wouldn’t be possible to call and send women in the same way. These men were not from the high ranks of society. Not rich. Just ordinary folk.

Secondly, they are an amazingly diverse bunch. We have an ex-tax-collector, Matthew, hated by Jews because they would usually extract more money from people than the Romans asked for, and pocket the change. And no-one could do anything about it. They were despised for, among other things, being unpatriotic.

There was Simon the Canaanite, known as Simon the Zealot. He was an extreme patriot – about as far removed from Matthew as you could get. These two would never normally be seen together – except if they were fighting – to the death, probably. No love lost.

Yet in God’s economy, Jesus has the ability to bring together such utterly opposing factions and get them to work together for the Kingdom.

Let’s just go back a stage for a moment to see how Jesus got to this point, to try and discover his game plan. His first appearance as an adult was his Baptism, when Jesus accepted the task his Father gave him. In the Temptations which followed, Jesus decided on the method and strategy he would use to embark on his task. In the Sermon on the Mount (ch 5) we hear the distillation of his teachings and words of wisdom. In ch 8 we read about some of Jesus’ powerful acts, starting the task in earnest. And in Ch 9 we see the growing opposition Jesus faced. Then we come to ch 10, today’s reading, when he called and sent out his chosen twelve.

What was the purpose of sending out the disciples? To continue the work he himself had started, work his Father had commissioned him to do; and then to train them in that same ministry - which they would continue after he had gone. First he showed them what ministry is, then encouraged them to copy, to do likewise, while he was still around. That is a recognised method of training today. Reports from them on their return indicate that they really had been given supernatural gifts to carry out Kingdom work. People really were healed and many came to faith.

Note the order: first to preach the gospel; then to heal the sick. Both/and, but in that order. Healing of body and mind is important, but getting the message of everlasting life across was even more important. Body and mind are both mortal, while the soul is eternal.

The instructions about what to take and not to take is interesting. Clearly, a minimalist approach is encouraged. Take no money – ie rely on God and on those you meet to supply your needs. I don’t know about you but I do my own checklist before I venture outside: cash – yes – phone – yes – mask – yes- and so on.

And as well as not even taking a purse they are told not to take a bag. It is thought this bag was in fact a collection bag to receive money as they went round preaching and healing, which is what some itinerant preachers were known to do. But no, Jesus says, rely on God alone.

All this neatly summed up in v8: ‘Freely you have received: freely give.’

And what were they to do as they travelled? v7 says this: As you go, preach this message: The Kingdom of Heaven is near.

What did Jesus mean by that? He meant that the Kingdom of God (Heaven) is a society on earth where God’s will is done as perfectly as it is done in heaven. It is as if the messengers of the King are saying, ‘Look! You have dreamed of the kingdom, and you have longed for the kingdom. Here in the life of Jesus ***is*** the kingdom. Look at him, and see what the kingdom means.’

In v32 we hear part of Jesus’ instructions to the twelve, this time about acknowledging they know Him in front of other people, and not denying him. That’s about witness.

How might we deny Jesus?

Well, we can deny him firstly by our words. I’ve come across people who call themselves Christians but speak as if they weren’t. Their language betrays Jesus. You’ve probably met such people.

There was a scholar from Trinity College who, when asked if he was a Christian, replied, ‘Yes, but not offensively so.’ He meant that he did not allow his Christianity to interfere with the society he kept and the pleasures he loved. Now, that’s not what Jesus calls his followers to copy, either then or now. We as Christians are called to be different in this world, not to be conformed to this world.

Secondly, we can deny Jesus by our silence. That means being willing to share our faith-story with others at the right time. That means sometimes speaking out against what we believe is wrong, even at the cost of being criticised or worse. And especially when it would be much easier and more comfortable to remain silent.

And thirdly, by our actions we could betray Jesus. If we live in a way that others see us as no different from them, what kind of witness are we? Consistent living is a key to demonstrating the Kingdom in action.

And in v40 we read of Jesus using illustrations that the Jews would easily recognise. He is saying that those who willingly accept what you say are not only accepting you but accepting Jesus, and indeed accepting God himself. They had the idea that one who welcomes, say, an ambassador is in effect receiving the King who sent them. So Jesus is encouraging them in this new venture, that they will see amazing things happen. They will see people healed, and many will come to faith.

And further, anyone receiving a prophet and welcoming him into your home will be rewarded just like the prophet will. Similarly with a righteous man. What these verses are saying, I believe, is that though we can’t all be prophets or evangelists or famous speakers, we can nevertheless help and support such people – and we will be rewarded. Those behind the scenes are as important as those on stage, but may not get the recognition. There’s a story of a young lad in a rural village many years ago who sought to enter the ministry, and after a great struggle managed to become a priest. On his journey he had been helped by the village cobbler, the shoemaker for the area. The cobbler was a wise man who had read widely, and had done a good deal to help get the lad into the ministry. When the lad was finally licensed to preach, came the day for his first sermon in the village church. The cobbler said to him, ‘It was always my desire to become a minister, but circumstances of my life were against me. But you have achieved what was closed to me. So now I want you to allow me to make you some shoes, at no charge, and I want you to wear them every time you preach. Then I will feel I am in the pulpit preaching the gospel that I always wanted to preach,standing in my shoes.’

Beyond a doubt the cobbler was serving God as the preacher was, and his reward would be the same.

The point? Even if you may never be famous, you can serve God in helping others, even those who are better known than you.

So in conclusion, what are we to take away from this to help us this coming week? We’ve seen how Jesus chose the twelve; how he called them, how he appointed them. He has chosen you, and he has chosen me. He has called us. What has he appointed you to do? We are all disciples, meaning learners.

We are not apostles. I believe there are no apostles any more – they were special for the times, being physically with Jesus during his ministry. We don’t have that privilege, but of course he has promised to be with us and within us as we seek to serve him in our part of his world. He has a job for you. He has equipped you. He has gifted you. He has enabled you.

Our job is to discover what that unique task is, and get on with it. Someone defined Mission as ‘to find out what God is already doing, and go and join in’.

Jesus’ last words on earth were both a command and a promise:

‘Go and make disciples of all people, teaching them to obey all I have commanded you. And surely I am with you, to the very end of the age.’

Go thou and do likewise.

Amen.