

## The Great Commission.

Our subject is that of 'the Lord's Commission' at the close of Matthew's gospel. And our reading comprises chapter 28, verses 16 to 20:

Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them.

When they saw Him, they worshipped Him; but some doubted.

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in (*literally, 'into'*) the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatever I have commanded you; and behold, I am with you always (*literally, 'all the days'*), even to the end of the age'. Amen.

If you like alliterations, I guess you could split the Lord's words into three sections, under the headings ... (i) His *power*, (ii) His *programme*, and (iii) His *pledge*. Or, if you appreciate headings, but don't warm to alliterations, you might settle for (i) an *infinite resource*, (ii) a *universal mission*, and (iii) an *abiding presence*.

But, for my part, I prefer to simply work through the passage, expression by expression.

And so to the opening words of verse 16 ... '**Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee**'.

This is the first and only time that Matthew is compelled to refer to the apostolic band by the sad term, 'the eleven', rather than by the more familiar term 'the twelve' ... compelled, that is, by the treacherous betrayal of Jesus by Judas Iscariot, 'one of the twelve' as he is described no less than seven times in the gospels.<sup>1</sup> For, as yet, the apostolic number has not been made up by the selection of Matthias to replace Judas.<sup>2</sup>

'Judas', according to the apostles' prayer in Acts 1, went 'to his own place', in all likelihood, a reference to Gehenna.<sup>3</sup> By way of contrast, 'the eleven' now 'went' to their appointed place, to Galilee.

Sometime before, on the way to Gethsemane, Jesus had forewarned His disciples, 'All of you will be caused to stumble because of me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered', then adding, 'But after I have been raised, I will go before you into Galilee',<sup>4</sup> the word translated 'go before' no doubt intentionally carried on the picture of the Shepherd, who would 'go before' His sheep.<sup>5</sup>

More recently, He had, as related in our chapter, repeated the same appointment to His disciples through the ladies who had visited His now-empty tomb. These ladies had been instructed twice to inform the disciples that they were to see the Lord again in Galilee; once, in verse 7, by the angel who had rolled away the stone from the entrance to the tomb, and once, in verse 10, by the Risen Lord Himself.

The words of the angel and of the Lord were similar, but not identical. In both cases, the ladies were told not to be afraid (the words 'Fear not' being, as you probably know, the most frequently repeated instruction in scripture), and to tell the disciples that 'there', in Galilee, they would 'see' the Lord. But we cannot miss the lovely distinguishing touch in *our Lord's* words, when He said, not 'tell my *disciples*', but 'tell my *brethren*', consistent, of course, with His words to Mary Magdalene, in all likelihood spoken just a short time before.<sup>6</sup>

Given that this meeting between the Lord and His disciples was announced in advance no less than three times, He (the Lord) clearly regarded it as of great importance. Why He did so, soon became clear.

**To the mountain which Jesus appointed for them.** To the mountain to which, at some time (whether in chapter 26 or here in chapter 28 we know not) Jesus had specifically directed them. It is perhaps fitting that Matthew should end his book on a mountain.

It was on a mountain, he has told us, that Jesus proclaimed the principles of His Kingdom (the so-called 'Sermon on the Mount').<sup>7</sup>

It was up into a mountain, Matthew has told us, that Jesus went to pray alone.<sup>8</sup>

It was on a mountain, he has told us, that Jesus taught, healed and fed four thousand men, beside women and children.<sup>9</sup>

It was on a mountain, he has told us, that Jesus was transfigured, His majesty and glory then providing the basis for the expectation of His coming manifested Kingdom.<sup>10</sup>

It was on a mountain, he has told us, that Jesus delivered His great prophetic discourse about the events surrounding His second advent.<sup>11</sup>

It was to a mountain, Matthew has told us, that Jesus took His disciples after they left the Upper Room the evening before His death.

No, Matthew, we can think of nowhere more fitting for you to close your book than on a mountain.

According to Mark 3, it had been on a mountain that Jesus had first appointed the twelve to be apostles and from which He had sent them out to preach.<sup>12</sup> What better place then from which to re-commission the remaining eleven, albeit now with a much wider (and far more daunting) ministry?

### **When they saw Him, they worshipped Him.**

In fulfilment of the promise relayed to them by the ladies from both the angel and the Lord Himself,<sup>13</sup> the disciples now 'saw' the Lord Jesus in Galilee. And, when they did, they 'worshipped Him'.

Previously many others had worshipped Him, from (i) the wise men from the East back in chapter 2,<sup>14</sup> through to (ii) the ladies whom He recently met when on their way to inform His disciples of the message given them by the angel at the empty tomb here in chapter 28.<sup>15</sup> As far as the record goes, they themselves (the apostles) had worshipped Him at least once before; following the night storm on the lake, recorded for us by Matthew at the close of chapter 14.

This particular resurrection appearance of the Saviour was unique in that this was the only meeting between the Risen Lord and any of His disciples which took place *by prior appointment*. All His other appearances had been, and would continue to be, sudden and unexpected.

### **But some doubted.**

It is at least possible that the doubts arose, not in the minds of the Eleven,<sup>16</sup> but in the minds of *others* who witnessed our Lord's manifestation on the mountain. We cannot be certain, but it could well be that this appearance of our Lord to the Eleven coincides with His appearance to 'over five hundred brethren at once' (the majority of whom were still alive when Paul wrote to the Corinthians).<sup>17</sup> Certainly, we can assume that our Lord's appearance to the five hundred was located in Galilee, for even after the ascension we know of only about 120 disciples in Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup>

But I suspect that, in any case, the doubt was *not* whether the Lord had actually risen from the dead. He had already given, in the language of the King James Version, '*many infallible proofs*' of that.<sup>19</sup> But I suspect that 'the doubt' was rather whether the One whom they now saw (and saw it seems from no little distance, hence His subsequently drawing near), whether this was in fact the Lord Jesus. And we recall that there were several other occasions when disciples failed at first to recognise the Risen Lord as being who He was.<sup>20</sup>

### **And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.'**

Having approached His disciples (whether only the Eleven or a company well in excess of five hundred), before issuing what we might call His 'marching orders', Jesus made the astounding claim that 'all authority' (both in heaven and on earth) had been given to Him.

And I say 'astounding claim' deliberately. For here He speaks as One who has, *not only* all resources *on earth* at His command, but all the resources *of heaven* also.

In earlier chapters, Matthew has stressed 'the authority' which our Lord exercised during His public ministry. This authority extended, Matthew made clear, not only to His teaching,<sup>21</sup> and to His healing-miracles,<sup>22</sup> but even to the forgiveness of sins,<sup>23</sup> and also, through the authority which He delegated to His disciples, to casting out unclean spirits and healing all kinds of disease and infirmity.<sup>24</sup> And I note in particular our Lord's own words in connection with His authority to forgive sins, 'the Son of man has authority *on earth* to forgive sins'.<sup>25</sup>

But such examples of His authority clearly fall short of what our Lord claims here at the close – of that all-encompassing authority, *not only on earth but in heaven*, with which, presumably, He was endowed following His passion and victorious resurrection.

Previously, following His cleansing of the temple, the Jewish rulers had asked Him, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and *who* gave you this authority?'<sup>26</sup> Although Jesus does not say it now in so many words, clearly the authority now given Him in heaven and on earth was bestowed upon Him by the same One who, according to chapter 11, had previously 'delivered' 'all things' to Him during His public ministry – in particular, as He said, the authority while on earth to reveal the Father to whoever He chose.<sup>27</sup> That authority was, as He claimed, uniquely His. As one American preacher put it, 'He has a monopoly on revelation. Jesus has cornered the market'.<sup>28</sup>

That is, universal authority has now been vested in Him by *the Father*. And we cannot help but recall the audacious offer once made on another mountain by the one styled by Matthew as 'the tempter',<sup>29</sup> when he 'showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to Him, "To you I will give *all this authority* and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will".<sup>30</sup>

'Audacious' did I say? Can you imagine it? The usurper offering to sell the kingdoms of earth to their rightful heir!<sup>31</sup> And the Tempter's claim that the authority over the world's kingdoms had been 'delivered' to him was certainly stretching the point.

But, having then rejected Satan's offer, and by pursuing His path of obedience to the will of God (even though that path led by the way of the cross) our Lord has now received *far more* than Satan had ever offered.

And we can hardly miss our Lord's repetition of the word 'all', tying together as the word does verse 18 to verses 19 and 20: 'all authority', then 'all nations', 'all things', and 'all the days'. In particular, we note that the universal authority of Jesus<sup>32</sup> is the basis for the universal mission of His disciples. We might well say that is what the 'therefore' is '*there for*'!

### **Go therefore and make disciples.**

As we saw just now, Jesus had once declared that 'all' was 'delivered' to Him.<sup>33</sup> And we read that He went on immediately to invite men therefore to *come to Him* that they might 'learn' from Him – that they might, that is, become His disciples, the word 'learn' being very closely related to that translated 'disciple'.<sup>34</sup>

But now He declares that 'all' is 'given' to Him, and goes on immediately to command His disciples to *go for Him*, and to make disciples of others.

And the pedant in me notes in passing that '*to make disciples*' is the correct translation. In English, the word 'disciple' is *a noun*, and only a noun.<sup>35</sup> It is *not* a verb.<sup>36</sup> So, if you hear a preacher or teacher refer to 'discipling' somebody, you know that, whatever knowledge the brother may have of his Bible, or perhaps of the Greek language,<sup>37</sup> his knowledge of *the English language* leaves something to be desired!<sup>38</sup>

But what, I ask, does it *mean* 'to make disciples'?<sup>39</sup>

First, we must note that the title 'disciple' is used in the New Testament with a wide range of meanings, stretching from, (i) on the one hand, those who only followed Jesus outwardly, and for altogether wrong motives, men who were not genuine believers at all and who had no real commitment to Him,<sup>40</sup> right through, (ii) on the other hand, to those who, in our Lord's own words, were 'truly' His disciples, to those who 'abode' in His word,<sup>41</sup> who were wholeheartedly committed to Him, who were willing to surrender their ultimate allegiance both to family and to themselves. Such were willing to renounce all that they possessed, and to identify themselves with Jesus even if that meant losing their very lives.<sup>42</sup> A wide range of meaning, indeed!

Personally, I understand the making of 'disciples' here as being the equivalent to making 'converts' ('Christians', if you like).

From what I can see, the description 'disciples' is used throughout the book of Acts (24 times, to be precise) to identify those who were what we would call 'believers'.<sup>43</sup> I note, for example, that at Antioch 'a great number *believed*, and turned unto the Lord ... And the *disciples* were called *Christians*'.<sup>44</sup>

And I note that the *only* place where the word translated '*make disciples*' is used outside of the gospel according to Matthew is in Acts chapter 14, concerning the visit paid by Paul and Barnabas to Derbe. 'When they had preached the gospel to that city and *made many disciples*', we read, 'they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch',<sup>45</sup> which I understand to mean that many at Derbe were made disciples by their response to the preaching of the gospel.<sup>46</sup>

That is, as I understand it, our Lord's command recorded in Matthew 28 to 'Go ... and *make disciples of all nations*' amounted to much the same as His command recorded in Mark 16 to 'Go into all the world and *proclaim the gospel to all creation*'.<sup>47</sup>

Which brings us to the sweeping scope of the assignment which the Lord gave, to 'make disciples of **all nations**'.

This universal commission stands in obvious and striking contrast to that which He had earlier given to the same men as recorded back in the first part of chapter 10. Then He had 'commanded them, saying, "Go *not* into the way of *the nations*, and into a city of Samaritans enter not; but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel".<sup>48</sup> Now, in sharp contrast. over against that earlier, '*Go not* into the way of *the nations*', He commands. '*Go* ... and make disciples of *all nations*', thereby extending their earlier mission (which had been limited to their fellow Jews) to that which embraced every nation on the earth. From now on, their parish was to be the whole world.

If I may digress just for a moment, we must be careful not to confuse the Lord's 'unchangeableness' (His 'immutability', if you prefer) with His *way of working* at any particular time.

For, although He Himself does not change, His way of working sometimes does. And the very different commissions of chapter 10 and chapter 28 simply mark distinct stages in the outworking of the one plan and purpose of the unchangeable Lord.

And for some in our day to claim that the supernatural sign gifts of the apostolic days *must* continue at the moment because 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever' (as I have seen argued) is simply to mix and to confuse things two things which are as different as chalk and cheese! By the very same line of reasoning, we should still be offering animal sacrifices today, together with, in accordance with Matthew 10, restricting our gospel preaching exclusively to 'the house of Israel'!

In brief, it is not a question of what God *can do*, but a question of what He *is doing* in the age in which we live.

Still thinking of the two commissions of chapters 10 and 28, I am interested to note how Matthew opened his book with the words, 'The book of the generation (or 'genealogy') of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham'.

We might say that, if, in chapter 10, 'the son of David' restricted His disciples' preaching (as, by and large, He confined His own<sup>49</sup>) to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel', here in chapter 28, 'the son of Abraham' (Abraham being the man to whom God had promised that in his seed 'all nations of the earth shall be blessed'<sup>50</sup>) now extends their mission to 'all nations'.<sup>51</sup>

And what better place to expand His disciples' mission to embrace 'the nations' (to embrace '*the Gentiles*', that is) than on a mountain somewhere in that land which both our Testaments speak of as 'Galilee of *the Gentiles* ('of the nations')'.<sup>52</sup>

### **Baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**

That baptism is not necessary for salvation is established by the experience of the repentant malefactor,<sup>53</sup> and that baptism alone does not bring salvation is proved by the case of Simon the Sorcerer.<sup>54</sup> But in our passage, the Lord made it clear that all *true* disciples *should* be baptised.

First, we must understand what Jesus meant by 'the name'. A Jew did not regard a name as a mere label or means of identification. To such, a person's name expressed not so much *who* the person was as *what* he was.<sup>55</sup> And the Being of God likewise found expression in His Name – pre-eminently, in the Old Testament, that of 'Jehovah'. And so we read, for example, of 'this glorious and awesome name, Jehovah your God'.<sup>56</sup>

There is then no mistaking the implication of our Lord's words here in Matthew 28. He must be understood, if I can put it that way, as *expanding* the name 'Jehovah' into that of 'the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, first discovered in 1947, are dated by scholars from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC to the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. The Scrolls included manuscripts of biblical texts which were then the oldest known portions of any part of Holy Scripture.<sup>57</sup> But in 1979 two far more ancient portions of scripture were found during archaeological excavations at Jerusalem. These portions consist of two tiny silver scrolls inscribed with parts of the so-called 'High Priestly Blessing' pronounced on Israel by Aaron, as recorded in verses 24 to 26 of Numbers 6. These tiny scrolls have been dated to around 600 BC, making them the oldest known texts from the Hebrew Bible.<sup>58</sup>

Commenting on the words of that Priestly Blessing, Matthew Henry notes, 'the name Jehovah is three times repeated ... the Jews themselves think there is some mystery in this, and we know what it is, the New Testament having explained it, which directs us to expect the blessing from the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of the Father, and the communion of the Holy Ghost,<sup>59</sup> each of which persons is Jehovah, and yet they are not three Lords, but one'.<sup>60</sup> At the least, an interesting suggestion.

For our part, we note that our Lord does not say, 'the *names* of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. Nor does He say, 'the name of the Father, *the name* of the Son, and *the name* of the Holy Spirit'. In other words, *the one single Name embraces the three Persons*. There are *not* three separate *Beings*.<sup>61</sup> God is One.

And yet the Lord emphasizes that there *are* three distinct *Persons*; the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, nor is the Spirit the Father.<sup>62</sup>

By being baptised into the name of the Triune God, Christian converts expressed in symbol their decision (i) to abandon their old way of life, their decision (ii) to lead a new and different kind of life, and their decision (iii) to submit themselves thereafter to the authority of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity.

### **Teaching them to observe all things whatever I have commanded you.**

Consistent with our Lord's command, the practice of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14 makes it clear that fulfilling the Great Commission consists not only in making disciples and baptising them, but also in nurturing and confirming disciples in their new-found faith.<sup>63</sup> And this confirming of the disciples and of the early churches formed part and parcel of the apostolic pattern.<sup>64</sup>

'Teaching them', Jesus said. And that is exactly what the apostle Paul was most careful to do, at Antioch, Corinth or Ephesus.<sup>65</sup>

For Paul knew, as did the Eleven, that critical to the spiritual growth of those who had become disciples was on-going instruction in the authoritative teachings of Jesus. Nor did the Eleven have any reason to fear that they might have forgotten that which He (the Risen Lord) had commanded them (whether during His public ministry or during the forty days between His resurrection and His ascension<sup>66</sup>) for He had promised them earlier that Holy Spirit would not only teach them, but would bring to their remembrance all that He had said to them.<sup>67</sup>

And we note that the Eleven were to teach the new disciples not only the things which Jesus had commanded, but they were to teach them '*to observe*' the things which He had commanded. That is, they were to instruct the new disciples in their responsibility to obey His commands, just as He had once taught these very men, 'If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them'.<sup>68</sup>

And we note again that Jesus doesn't give us the luxury of selecting those portions of His teachings which please us, and of neglecting the rest.<sup>69</sup>

And I suggest that, immediately following Pentecost, we discover these very men *fulfilling* the commission they had been given, in that, when they witnessed about 3,000 of their nation respond to the apostle Peter's message, they saw to it that they (the new converts) were *baptised*, and thereafter continued steadfastly in their (the apostles') *teaching* and fellowship, along with (as the Lord Himself had commanded when He was in the world) the breaking of bread and with prayers.<sup>70</sup>

### **And behold, I am with you always ('all the days').**

Just as our Lord's great *claim* led on to His great *commission*, so His great commission is followed by His great *commitment*.

Before He added these words, it must have seemed to the disciples that they, a mere handful of men (not one of whom was of any great account in the eyes of the world) who were facing an overwhelming task, were to be left alone, like orphan children in a cold, unkind world.

But no! The Risen Lord promised that they would most certainly not be left on their own. True, when, some three years before, Jesus had sent them out to preach, though they had been assured of many things, they were given no promise of His personal presence with them. *Then* He had chosen them that *they* might be *with Him*.<sup>71</sup> But *now He* undertakes to be with *them*, guaranteeing them His abiding presence. For, although His rapidly approaching ascension would take *Him* well and truly out of *their* sight, it would not remove *them* out of *His*.

And when He said, 'I am with you', He emphasised the word 'I', as if He said, 'No one less than I myself am with you'. 'I who have *been given the authority*', He said in effect, 'am with you who *have been given the task*'.<sup>72</sup>

And He would be with them, He promised, not intermittently, but continuously ... 'all the days'. 'I am with you day in and day out, through the darkest and most difficult days of trial and affliction, and throughout the whole of every day'.<sup>73</sup>

This short promise 'I am with you' must rank as one of the most treasured of the Lord's 'exceeding great and precious promises',<sup>74</sup> as well as one of the most repeated in scripture. For the words, 'I am with you' echo from as far back as the Lord's word to Isaac at Beersheba in Genesis 26,<sup>75</sup> right through to the words of our Lord Jesus to the apostle Paul at Corinth in Acts 18.<sup>76</sup>

At the beginning of the Second book of Chronicles, we read concerning Solomon, in the halcyon days of the nation's greatness and glory, that 'the Lord his God was with him'.<sup>77</sup> And then, at the end of the book, we read, in the very different days of failure and weakness on the part of the remnant of the nation, concerning the proclamation of Cyrus, 'the Lord his God be with him'.<sup>78</sup> The Holy Spirit has enclosed the sacred history of the kings of Judah between these two bookends, as if to stress that, whether God's people experience days of great growth and prosperity,<sup>79</sup> or live through days of great failure and weakness,<sup>80</sup> they can rest assured that, in all circumstances, God is with them.

But we cannot miss the fact that the Lord's promise (or perhaps better 'the Lord's *commitment*') here follows (indeed rests on) His *command*, for it is His presence which would empower and enable His disciples to fulfill the commission He has given them.

And a countless company of God's servants have fallen back on our Lord's words, 'I am with you'.

Let me remind you of two missionaries, both from Scotland, and both having served God in the nineteenth century.

I speak first of a famous pioneer medical missionary and explorer in Africa ... almost certainly the first European to view the Victoria Falls and who gave them their name in honour of his Queen. Yes, you may well say (in words supposedly uttered by Sir Henry Stanley at their famous meeting), 'Dr Livingstone, I presume?'<sup>81</sup>

I said that David Livingstone was a medical missionary, and so he was. Some time ago, I came across something which he wrote to his father when he (David Livingstone) was in his thirties.<sup>82</sup> In writing about a proposal made by his brother Charles that he (David) should go and settle in America, he penned the words, 'I am a missionary, heart and soul. God had an only Son, and He was a missionary and a physician ... In this service I hope to live, in it I wish to die'.<sup>83</sup> And many were the times he nearly *did* die.

In the first volume of his autobiography,<sup>84</sup> David Livingstone tells of one such occasion. He records how, on the evening of 14th January 1856, he was on the bank of the Zambesi River, surrounded by savages who were acting most suspiciously.<sup>85</sup> At any moment spears might come hurtling through the darkness. Or, for all he knew, the attack might come at dawn.

Let him tell his own story.

'I felt some turmoil of spirit in the evening at the prospect of having all my efforts for the welfare of this great region and its teeming population knocked on the head by savages tomorrow, who might be said to "know not what they do" ... But I read that Jesus said, "All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth : go ye therefore, and teach all nations ... and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world". I took this as His word of honour, and then went out to take observations of latitude and longitude, which, I think, were very successful'.

And, praise His name, the same Lord who stood alongside David Livingstone in the wilds of Africa is 'honour bound' to be with us too! And I note that, in the good Doctor's journal, the words, 'I am with you always, even unto the end of the world' were written in *italics* for emphasis.<sup>86</sup>

My second Scottish missionary is John Paton, who lived just a little later than David Livingstone.<sup>87</sup>

John Gibson Paton took the gospel to the New Hebrides Islands of the South Pacific. There, facing untold dangers and constantly under threat of death, Paton preached God's word faithfully.

In his autobiography, he wrote of one occasion when a wild Chief followed him about for four hours with a loaded musket. In John Paton's own words:

'Looking up in unceasing prayer to our ... Lord Jesus, I left all in His hands, and *felt immortal till my work was done* ... Without that abiding consciousness of the presence and power of my dear Lord and Saviour, nothing else in all the world could have preserved me from losing my reason and perishing miserably. His words, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world", became to me so real that it would not have startled me to behold Him, as Stephen did, gazing down upon the scene'.<sup>88</sup>

But, thank God, the promise 'I am (or 'I will be') with you' is not only for courageous and life-threatened Scottish missionaries, any more than it is only for a Jacob,<sup>89</sup> a Moses, a Joshua,<sup>90</sup> a Gideon,<sup>91</sup> a Jeremiah,<sup>92</sup> or the remnant of Haggai's day.<sup>93</sup> It is for every believer engaged in any way (whether by front-line service, practical support or prayer) in helping to fulfil 'the Great Commission'.

And, surely, whatever *our* circumstances, trials and fears, *we* are entitled to apply to ourselves the assurance which the Lord gave to Israel of old in Isaiah 43: 'When you pass through the waters, *I will be with you*; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you'.<sup>94</sup> Yes, He still speaks to His people today above the noise of the rushing waters, saying, in the words of our Bible reading this evening, 'I am with you all the days'. And not only so, but He is with us '**even to the end of the age**'.

Outside of Matthew's gospel,<sup>95</sup> the word translated 'end' (or 'consummation') occurs in only one other place in the New Testament; 'now, once at the end ('at the consummation') of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself'.<sup>96</sup>

Just then, as *the ages before Christ* found their consummation in His *first* appearing, so *the present age* will find its consummation in His *second* appearing. At that point, there will be nothing for Him to do by way of 'putting away' sin (for that He did 'once' by His single sacrifice at His first appearing), but when He will provide us with the full and final instalment of our salvation, delivering us from the very presence of sin. *From* that moment, 'we will always be *with the Lord*'.<sup>97</sup> Wonderfully, in our passage, He has pledged that, *until* that moment, He will always be *with us*'.

And so a book which commenced by introducing its readers to Him who is 'Emmanuel', which name is, as Matthew pointed out at the time, 'being interpreted, "God *with us*" ... this book concludes with His true and faithful words,<sup>98</sup> 'I am *with you*'.

Although we do need to take to heart the fact that, in its context here, the Saviour's undertaking to be with us is *not* intended so much to give us warm and cosy feelings of reassurance as it is to encourage us in all our labours for Him as we attempt to play our part in fulfilling the charge He has given us.

And I say 'play *our* part' deliberately. Because it was clearly impossible for eleven men (or even, possibly, for something over 500 men), even when supported and empowered by the never-failing presence of the Living Lord, to fulfil *personally* a commission which involved making disciples of all nations. And our Lord's mention of 'the end of the age' serves to confirm that He was speaking through those then present to their successors in future centuries, including us in our own day.

It was way back in October 1792, that a group of fourteen men, including Mr William Carey, formed what later became known as the Baptist Missionary Society.<sup>99</sup>

While on a journey with a friend, speaking about one of their early meetings,<sup>100</sup> a member of the Society's Committee, Dr Andrew Fuller, remarked:

'Our undertaking to India really appeared to me, on its commencement, to be somewhat like a few men, who were deliberating about the importance of penetrating into a deep mine, which had never before been explored.

'We had no one to guide us, and while we were thus deliberating, (Mr) Carey, as it were, said, "Well, *I* will go down if *you* will hold the rope". But before he went down, he, as it seemed to me, took an oath from each of us ... to this effect, that "while *we* lived, we should *never* let go the rope" ... There was great responsibility attached to us'.

And the four men then present rose to that responsibility. They prayed constantly for William Carey, and did all in their power to raise funds to support and maintain the work in India. History records that each man 'held the rope' until he died.<sup>101</sup>

Which leaves each of *us* to answer the question, 'Even if I am not actually venturing down the mine, am *I* faithfully holding the rope for those who are ... whether they are working here in the UK or in any other land?'

And so, with words charged with much-needed encouragement, Matthew brings his book to a somewhat abrupt conclusion, confronting each of us with the authoritative words of the Risen Lord,

and leaving each of us to face for ourselves the practical implications of our Lord's 'Great Commission'.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 26. 14, 47; Mark 14. 10, 20, 43; Luke 22. 47; John 6. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 1. 15-26.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 1. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 26. 31-32.

<sup>5</sup> The disciple had been told that, after Jesus had been raised, he would go before them to Galilee. Following His resurrection, they made no move to return from Jerusalem to Galilee. But, initially, they needed to be convinced that He had risen from the dead, and only His resurrection appearances at Jerusalem would do that. It was, therefore, only after His appearance to the apostles, including Thomas, that the disciples could be expected to make the long journey north.

It is after the narrative about the tomb guards, Matt. 28. 11-15, that we read the statement, 'Then the disciples went away into Galilee', Matt. 28. 16.

If we possessed Matthew's account only, we might assume that these events followed in close succession. But the text doesn't require that assumption.

In all, the passage contains four sections: (i) the appearance of the angel; (ii) the appearance of the Saviour; (iii) the account of the guards; and (iv) our Lord's appearance in Galilee. Whereas the first of these sections is closely connected with the second by the words 'and as they went', and the second is closely connected with the third by the words 'when they were going', no similar connection is made between the third and fourth sections.

There is no reason, therefore, why we should not place an interval of time after the account of the guards and before the departure for Galilee. In which case, time is found for a whole series of manifestations in Jerusalem. The 'forty days', Acts 1. 3, gave ample time for both of the series of appearances in Jerusalem and in Galilee.

<sup>6</sup> John 20. 17. See W. G. Scroggie, *'A Guide to the Gospels'*, pages 609, 611.

<sup>7</sup> Matt. 5-7.

<sup>8</sup> Matt. 14. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Matt. 15. 29-38.

<sup>10</sup> Matt. 16. 28 to 17.8; 2 Pet. 1. 16-18.

<sup>11</sup> Matt. 24-25.

<sup>12</sup> Mark 3. 13-19; Matt. 10. 1-6.

<sup>13</sup> Matt. 28. 7, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Matt 2. 1, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Matt 28. 9.

<sup>16</sup> And yet their faith was weaker even than that of Thomas, Luke 24. 40-41, for they did 'see'!

<sup>17</sup> 1 Cor. 15. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Acts 1. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Acts 1. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Luke 24. 16; John 20. 14; 21. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Matt. 7. 29.

<sup>22</sup> Matt. 9. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Matt. 9. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Matt. 10. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Matt. 9. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Matt. 21. 23.

<sup>27</sup> Matt. 11. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Adrian Rogers, *'Jesus – the One and Only'*, page 3.

<sup>29</sup> Matt. 4. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Luke 4. 5-6.

<sup>31</sup> Psa. 2. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Contrast the angel with 'great authority', Rev. 18. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Matt. 11. 27.

<sup>34</sup> Matt. 11. 29.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/disciple>, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/disciple>, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disciple>.

<sup>36</sup> Except in Archaic American English; for which see <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/disciple>.

<sup>37</sup> For Greek *does* use 'disciple' as a verb.

<sup>38</sup> Yet I note that even J. N. Darby uses 'disciple' as a verb: 'Here Jerusalem is gone, and Christ is associated with the remnant in Galilee already around Him, and they were to disciple the nations' and 'The only commission to baptise was to the twelve to baptise Gentiles (not Jews), and it went from resurrection not ascension; they were (to) disciple nations and baptise them', *Letters*, Volume III, page 333 and page 418. So too does William MacDonald (twice) in his classic work, *'True Discipleship'*, under the heading 'World Dominion'.

<sup>39</sup> 'Interestingly, this term does not really show up in the NT outside of the Gospels and Acts, and in Acts the usage seems to be Luke's own, by which I mean it does not seem to come from Luke's sources, but from his extending the usage from his first volume into his second one. Paul, for instance, never uses the word at all. Furthermore, the term is almost entirely absent from the literature of early Judaism (a few uses in Josephus, and even fewer in Philo, and not really elsewhere). By contrast it's all over the Gospels. Of the 261 times it is used in the NT, all of them are found in the Gospels and Acts. And yet the term is not found in the LXX at all. It's use in the Gospels cannot be attributed to the use of the LXX in the Gospels and Acts, not even in the case of Luke who uses the LXX and this term frequently ... (The term 'disciples') is found almost only in the plural in the Synoptics, and mainly in the singular of a particular person in John. Yes, the singular form is found in Matt. 10. 24, 25, 42 and Luke 6. 40; 14. 26, 27, 33, but in these texts the discussion is of the nature of discipleship as an abstract subject. In the Synoptics then, being a disciple is something you do with a group of people, it is a collective enterprise ... (Jesus) calls people as individuals, but they are formed into a group— the disciples of Jesus', Ben Witherington III, *'Jesus and His disciples – what's in a word'*; accessed at ... <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2012/11/10/jesus-and-his-disciples-whats-in-a-word/>.

<sup>40</sup> See John 6. 59-66 ... 'Jesus, knowing in Himself that His disciples murmured concerning this, said to them, "... there are some of you who do not believe" ... After this many of His disciples went back and walked no more with Him'.

<sup>41</sup> John 8. 31.

<sup>42</sup> Luke 14. 26-33.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Acts 11. 21, 26. Also Acts 6. 1-2, 7; 14. 20, 22, 28; 15. 10; 19. 1; 20. 1, 30; 21. 4, 16.

<sup>44</sup> Acts 11. 21, 26.

<sup>45</sup> Acts 14. 21. Verse 22 adds, 'strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith', clearly distinguishing this from the initial 'making of disciples'.

<sup>46</sup> The verb (*μαθητεύω*) is used in a 'transitive sense in the active voice in Matt. 28. 19 and Acts 14. 21', W E Vine's *'Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words'*. Cf. Matt. 13. 52; 27. 57, in both of which verses the word is used in the passive voice; that is, 'who had been made a disciple'.

<sup>47</sup> Mark 16. 15.

<sup>48</sup> Matt. 10. 5-6. 'Jesus forbade the Twelve (v. 5b) from taking "the road to the Gentiles"—presumably toward Tyre and Sidon in the north or the Decapolis in the east—and from visiting Samaritan towns in the south. They were to remain in Galilee, ministering to the people of Israel (v. 6)'. D. A. Carson, *'Matthew'* in the Expositor's Bible Commentary.

<sup>49</sup> Matt. 15. 24.

<sup>50</sup> Gen. 22. 18; cf. Gen. 12. 3; 18. 18. The reference to 'all families of the earth' in Gen. 12. 3 follows on directly from the division of the nations at the Tower of Babel in chapter 11; cf. Gen. 10. 5, 18, 20, 31-32.

<sup>51</sup> Using the very same expression ('all nations', *πάντα τὰ ἔθνη*) as is used in the Greek Old Testament of Gen. 22. 18.

<sup>52</sup> Isa. 9. 1; Matt. 4. 15. See Matt. 28. 16.

<sup>53</sup> Luke 23. 40-43.

<sup>54</sup> Acts 8. 13, 18-23.

<sup>55</sup> For example, 'as his name is, so is he. Nabal (*'fool'*) is his name, and folly is with him', 1 Sam. 25. 25.

<sup>56</sup> Deut. 28. 58.

<sup>57</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead\\_Sea\\_Scrolls](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_Sea_Scrolls).

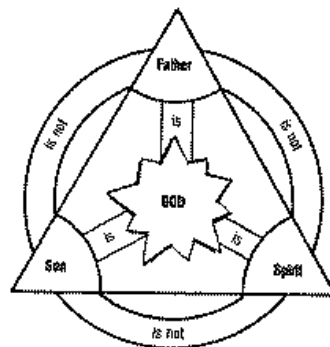
<sup>58</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ketef\\_Hinnom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ketef_Hinnom) and <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/history-and-overview-of-the-dead-sea-scrolls>.

<sup>59</sup> 2 Cor. 13. 14.

<sup>60</sup> *'Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible'*, on Num. 6. 22-27.

<sup>61</sup> 'The common name ... expresses the unity of being', Hans Bietenhard, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume V, page 274.

<sup>62</sup> We read therefore of the three Persons of the Godhead speaking one to one another; e.g. Mark 1. 11; Heb. 1. 8; Matt. 11. 25-26; Rom. 8. 26; and acting one towards each other – for example, in sending or being sent, Gal. 4. 4, 6, or in glorifying one another, John 16. 14; 17. 1. These truths are well illustrated by an ancient diagram.



<sup>63</sup> Acts 14. 22.

<sup>64</sup> 'Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, exhorted and confirmed the brethren with many words', Acts 15. 32.

'Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches', Acts 15. 41.

'After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, confirming all the disciples', Acts 18. 23.

<sup>65</sup> At Antioch, Acts 11. 25-26; Acts 15. 35, at Corinth, Acts 18. 11, and at Ephesus, Acts 20. 20.

<sup>66</sup> Acts 1. 2.

<sup>67</sup> John 14. 26.

<sup>68</sup> John 13. 17.

<sup>69</sup> See Acts 20. 27; Psa. 119. 128. God's truth is not served '*a la carte*'!

<sup>70</sup> Acts 2. 41-42.

<sup>71</sup> Mark 3. 14.

<sup>72</sup> In the Old Testament, when God commissioned His servants and sent them out with a task to perform, if they hesitated and held back, He assured them of His lordship and continuing presence with them; consider the cases of Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Jeremiah, Ezekiel etc.

<sup>73</sup> Strictly 'the whole of every day', C. F. D. Moule, '*An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*', page 34).

<sup>74</sup> 2 Pet. 1. 4.

<sup>75</sup> Gen. 26. 24.

<sup>76</sup> Acts 18. 10. Paul could later say: 'At my first defence no one took my part, but all forsook me ... but the Lord stood by me, and strengthened me', 2 Tim. 4. 16, 17.

<sup>77</sup> 2 Chron. 1. 1.

<sup>78</sup> 2 Chron. 36. 23.

<sup>79</sup> As at the beginning.

<sup>80</sup> As in the later days.

<sup>81</sup> David Livingstone (19 March 1813 – 1 May 1873).

<sup>82</sup> His letter is dated 5th February, 1850.

<sup>83</sup> '*THE PERSONAL LIFE OF DAVID LIVINGSTONE LL.D., D.C.L., CHIEFLY FROM HIS UNPUBLISHED JOURNALS AND CORRESPONDENCE IN THE POSSESSION OF HIS FAMILY*', by W. G. Blaikie; Chapter 6 – '1849-1852'.

<sup>84</sup> '*Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*'. The quotations come from chapter 29.

<sup>85</sup> 'Mburuma's people had behaved so suspiciously, that ... we were by no means sure that we should not be attacked in crossing the Loangwa. We saw them here collecting in large numbers'.

<sup>86</sup> See ... <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1039/1039-h/1039-h.htm#2HCH0029>

<sup>87</sup> John Gibson Paton (24 May 1824 - 28 January 1907).

<sup>88</sup> John G. Paton, '*Missionary to the New Hebrides, An Autobiography*', Chapter VIII – 'Under the Axe', pages 191-192.

<sup>89</sup> Gen. 28. 15.

<sup>90</sup> Deut. 31. 23; Josh. 1. 5; 3. 7.

<sup>91</sup> Judg. 6. 16.

<sup>92</sup> Jer. 1. 8, 19; 15. 20.

<sup>93</sup> Hag 1. 13; 2. 4.

<sup>94</sup> Isa. 43. 2.

<sup>95</sup> Matt. 13. 39, 40, 49; 24. 3.

<sup>96</sup> Heb. 9. 26.

<sup>97</sup> 1 Thess. 4. 17 ESV.

<sup>98</sup> Rev. 21. 5.

<sup>99</sup> It was originally known as 'The Particular Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen'.

See <http://www.wmcarey.edu/carey/bms/bms.htm>.

<sup>100</sup> On 10 January 1793.

<sup>101</sup> The definitive quote, together with its background, is found in '*The Work of Faith, the Labour of Love and the Patience of Hope, illustrated; in the life and death of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*', by John Ryland, D.D', page 144. This volume can be accessed at <https://archive.org/details/workoffaithlabou00rylarich/page/n5/mode/2up>.

See also <http://www.wmcarey.edu/carey/fuller/> and <http://www.wholesomewords.org/missions/bcarey10.html>.