

"The Great Commission"

Sunday 17 May 2009

Rev Brian Senior

Readings:

1 John 1:1-7

Psalm 16:1-6

Luke 24:36-49

Sermon

During these last few weeks, following Easter, we have been looking at the occasions when Jesus appeared to various people, following his resurrection from the dead.

On Good Friday we focused on Jesus' death for our sake ... remembering that he died so that we can be forgiven and have a new relationship with God. But if he had only died, and that had been the end of the story, we would have no reason to follow him.

On Easter Morning we celebrated Jesus' resurrection ... the incredible fact that God raised Jesus back to life again, so that all who believe in him can share in his eternal life. But if it all ended with the resurrection, and that had been the end of the story, the disciples would simply have gone back to being followers of Jesus, listening and watching but not getting on with the job of living the life of faith.

But this coming week – especially on Thursday and again on Sunday – we will be thinking about Jesus' Ascension ... the time when he returned to be with his Father in heaven, before sending the Holy Spirit upon his people at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit was coming to equip Jesus' followers ... to give them power to live their lives as disciples of Jesus Christ ... but first Jesus needed to help them to understand what that would mean.

So during this time following his resurrection ... and before his Ascension ... Jesus met with his followers many times. He taught them ... encouraged them ... helping them to understand more of what God is like, and getting them ready for what they needed to be doing next ...

... so it is very appropriate that in this service we have a Baptism. Today Ronnie and Rebecca, and Brooklyn-Lee's godparents, will make promises on his behalf about rejecting the devil, the corruption of evil and the sin that separates us from God and one-another ... and turning instead to Jesus as Saviour and Lord ... and the way, the truth and the life.

During this service all we who are followers of Jesus will have the opportunity to remember and re-affirm the promises that we have made, and to pray for Brooklyn-Lee that he will grow up knowing Jesus for himself, and learn to live as his true disciple.

So ... in Luke's gospel ... in the passage just before the one we read today ... we read about how Jesus met with two of his disciples on the evening of the day of the resurrection. The two were walking home from Jerusalem to Emmaus, about seven miles away, when they were joined by a stranger who they didn't recognise at first.

The stranger began to talk with them about the things of God, and they invited him to stay with them. As they sat down for a meal, the stranger broke the bread, and they recognised that he was Jesus – and then he was gone!

Luke tells us that they got up straight away and hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the others what had happened ... and discovered that Jesus had already appeared to Peter. In fact, Jesus had already met with Mary in the Garden ... later he would meet with Thomas, who found it hard to believe ... and with Peter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

For now, the disciples were just beginning to realise that Jesus really had risen from the dead – but he had changed. His resurrection body was somehow different from how it had been before he had died ... and when you think about it, that's hardly surprising.

The power of God which raised Jesus from the dead had not just breathed life back into his broken body ... it had transformed it into a body which will last for ever ... just as God has promised he will do with all those who believe in him.

No wonder it took a while for the disciples who saw him to realise what had happened ... that this really was Jesus risen from the dead.

So Luke tells us, in today's reading, that it was while they were still talking about all this, that Jesus himself came and stood among them, and said: "*Peace be with you.*"

Notice that it says: "*They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.*" ... because they were still struggling to believe that it was possible that he was alive again.

I don't know about you, but I sometimes find that when I am told something, I might understand a little ... when I see it for myself, I understand more ... but to touch and to hold and experience something for myself can make such a big difference. The disciples were just the same.

- They had *heard* that Jesus was risen.
- Now they could see that Jesus was risen.
- Then they *touched him* ... they felt that he was flesh and blood, with the nail prints still in his hands and feet and the wound from the spear still in his side .. and they really *knew*!

.. and just to drive the message home, while, as Luke says, "*they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement*", he asked them for food, and took a piece of broiled fish and ate it in their presence. Ghosts don't come for supper!

You can imagine them saying to one another in their excitement: "I just don't believe it!" ... while coming to realise that actually they did! It was really true ... Jesus was alive!

Of course none of this would have taken them by surprise if they had really listened and understood all that Jesus had said to them when they were on their way to Jerusalem. He had told them that he would be rejected ... sentenced ... and crucified – and he had told them that he would rise from the dead.

Jesus reminded them now, that all this had been foretold by the prophets hundreds of years before. He had told them many times that he had come to fulfil all that the prophets had said would happen.

None of this was an accident ... God had been planning it all along.

But it was all so far outside their experience that they could not take it in. When Jesus had been arrested they had lost their nerve. They had run away ... they had let him down ... they had deserted him in his hour of need and they had thought it was all over.

Only now was it all beginning to make sense ... and Luke tells us that Jesus 'opened their minds' so that they could at last understand the Scriptures:

"This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations."

I wonder if they grasped at that point that it was they who would be doing the preaching!?!

Think back for a minute to our first reading. Here is John, many years later, thinking back to those amazing times and writing about his experience. Think about how he must have felt as he wrote these words:

*"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – **this we proclaim concerning the word of life.**"*

John uses beautiful language to say:

- I was there!
- I saw it for myself, with my own eyes!
- I touched him!
- It really happened!

... and I want to tell you all about it!

He goes on to talk about '*the life*' ... Jesus! ... the one he spent three years being with, listening to, watching ... sharing meals and jokes ... his very special friend. And he says:

"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ."

John is saying:

"This is the truth and I've got to share it!" "This is how you too can know Jesus Christ."

John has discovered the Light of Life, and he wants everyone to know about it ... and everyone to have the opportunity to come to know Jesus for themselves.

John was doing exactly what Jesus said he would do ... being a witness. Back in Jerusalem, Jesus had said to them:

"You are witnesses of these things."

Those first disciples were uniquely equipped to go out and tell others about Jesus. They had, after all, been there. They had an intimate experience of knowing Jesus as their friend and their Rabbi. They had watched him closely and learned from the Master.

They were indeed witnesses of these things ... and we might be tempted to think how much easier it must have been for them. As I was saying earlier:

- when we are told, we understand a little
- when we see, we understand so much more
- when we experience for ourselves, we can really get hold of the truth more fully

... so when we begin to understand from the Scriptures that this command of Jesus ... to go and be witnesses ... applies to us as much as it did to them, then we can feel very inadequate. We might think "Well, it was alright for them" ... but we haven't had the opportunity to walk with Jesus, to listen to his teaching, to see what he has done. We haven't touched him, seen the proof, eaten with him, shared his day ...

... but wait a minute.

There's something which Jesus said to Thomas which ought to make us stop and think. It's not in this passage, but in John's gospel (John 20:29), when Jesus appeared a week after the resurrection and Thomas was there, having been absent the first time he came to them. Jesus said:

"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and have yet believed."

There are lots of people who dismiss the Good News about Jesus because they think there isn't any evidence ... but that is nonsense. It simply isn't true.

The four gospels record the accounts of four different men who either knew Jesus personally, or got the facts from those who did ... many of whom suffered or even died for witnessing to Jesus - telling the truth about his life, his death and his resurrection, and the difference he had made in their lives.

Why would anyone suffer and die for what they knew to be a lie? ... that just doesn't make any sense.

More than that, this Good News spread like wildfire around the Roman world, even though the followers of Jesus were often persecuted for their faith ... so people who hadn't met Jesus in the flesh, still came to believe in him, and witnessed to other people about him, even if it cost them their lives.

And it is still true today. All around the world, Christians in many lands suffer discrimination, persecution, imprisonment, torture and death because of their faith in Jesus. They refuse to stop telling other people about Jesus, because they know that it is true that he died for them and rose again, and that he wants people everywhere to come to know him.

And here in this Church today are Christian people who have never seen Jesus, but have met him nonetheless ... through reading the Bible and the fellowship of the Church ... and through the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives ... people who witness to him by

what they do as well as by what they say.

Jesus said: "*You are witnesses of these things*" ... and called his Church into being to witness to the work of God in the world and in our own lives ... and to call people to repentance and faith. This is what the Church is for ... and this is what we sign up to in Baptism ... to play our part in this work of sharing the Good News of Jesus.

But notice one more thing. Jesus did not send his disciples out straight away. He instructed them to remain in the city until they had been "*clothed with power from on high.*"

Jesus was talking, of course, about the Holy Spirit ... who would come upon them on the Day of Pentecost, bringing them the power of God to work in their lives. The Holy Spirit would come to equip them with gifts for God's service ... and especially to enable them to preach and teach, to perform miracles, and to lead others to faith in Jesus.

Coming to know Jesus is a life-changing experience. When we become his disciples we can never be the same again ... but not only is it the best life imaginable, it comes with the promise of eternal life with him. I love those words of King David in the Psalm:

*"Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance."*

There are two more weeks until Pentecost, when we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit on those first disciples in Jerusalem. But ever since that time, the Holy Spirit has been coming on the disciples of Jesus in every age ... empowering God's people for the work of witness and mission.

The Holy Spirit comes to all who put their faith in Jesus Christ, and are open to the work of God in their lives and respond to his call to be his witnesses ... all we need to do is ask.

Will we be faithful to his call ... and faithful to our promises ... to live at witnesses to Jesus, so that many more people in this community will come to know him as their Lord and Saviour ... and have the promise of eternal life?

And what about those here this morning who don't yet know Jesus? Will you be willing to look deeper into the things of God and be open to Jesus ... because there is nothing better than being his disciple?