

# **“Marching Orders”**

**Sunday 19 July 2009**

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## **Readings:**

Acts 8:26-40

Psalm 100

Matthew 28:16-20

## **Sermon**

The 'Great Commission' of Matthew 28 must be one of the most well-known and often preached-on passages of the gospels ... which made me wonder, as I sat down to prepare this, what on earth I could say about it which would be fresh and new!

Having said that, this is also a vitally important passage ... because contained in these five short verses are some of Jesus' last words and instructions to his disciples, and through them to the whole church, down the ages, until he comes again. That being the case, these are words of which we ought to sit up and take notice!

You could sum up the theme of these five verses very easily in one word: 'Go'.

The problem is that most of us Christians read or hear what Jesus said, and yet our every inclination is to do the opposite. Jesus says 'Go' ... and our hearts say 'Stay'!

The problem is that we are much too comfortable!

Oh, I know Church isn't easy! There are all sorts of ways in which being part of the Church can be quite difficult. People, after all, are people ... and although Paul reminds us in Ephesians 4 that we are being

*“built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God”*

... we know that unity isn't something that comes easily. And although we know that God's plan is that we will

*“become mature, attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ”*

... we also know that that the path to Christian maturity is paved with relationships which are sometimes difficult, sins which we find we are powerless to overcome ... and frustrations about how we are to fulfil God's purpose as a motley crew of flawed individuals who so often seem to get it wrong. There are occasions when we wonder what God was up to when he chose to build his Church using such imperfect raw material as us!

But none the less, we are still too comfortable:

- In Church we know that we will mostly be accepted and forgiven, even if it takes time.
- In Church we are at least among like-minded people as far as faith is concerned.
- In Church no-one will laugh at us for following Jesus.
- In Church people won't demand that we explain ourselves and why we think as we do.

- In Church we don't face too many challenges.
- In Church we are, generally speaking, in a safe place.

No wonder we get a bit unsettled when people start reminding us that Jesus says "Go!"

Sorry! ... but that's my job! ... and if it is true that 'in Church we don't face too many challenges ... then I and the other preachers and leaders aren't doing our job well enough!

The whole purpose for us coming **to** Church on a Sunday morning, is to prepare and equip and enable *and challenge us to be* Church for the rest of the week.

Church, after all, is not primarily somewhere we go, but something we are. As the people of God we are called to be a pilgrim people, always on the move ... pressing on towards the fulfilment of God's plan at the end of history, when Jesus will return in his glory to make all things new. We are here for a purpose.

Church, then, is a temporary arrangement. Jesus called his Church into being to fulfil his purpose and plan, and one day that plan will be completed. If we get too stuck in to our structures, we are missing the point. The structures only exist to help us get the job done.

So what are we about then, as we gather here together for a service on Sunday?

[1] We come to Church to worship God, because he deserves to be worshipped.

We were created to live in relationship with God, and to worship him. He loves us, and chooses to live in relationship with us. He is our creator, our sustainer, our ruler and our Saviour. If we truly love him, then we will delight in worshipping him. (It's a good preparation for eternity, too. Since worship will be high on the agenda, we might as well get used to it! Think of worship as a foretaste of glory!)

[2] We come to Church to learn more about God, so that we can understand him better.

God is so amazing, so (literally) awesome, so complex, so mysterious, that getting to know more about him is a lifetime of discovery. Every time we delve into Scripture, as long as our minds are open and our hearts are right, we will discover new truths and deeper meaning. We get to know more *about* God, so that we can get to *know* him more fully.

[3] We come to Church to pray ... for the world, for the Church, for our communities, for our families ... and for ourselves.

Because prayer is simply communication with God, we pray to give thanks as well as to bring him our needs and concerns ... and although we can and should do that privately at home, we also need to come together to agree together in prayer. Corporate prayer is powerful ... God has promised to hear us and to respond to our praying, especially when we pray with others.

[4] We come to Church to be equipped to live the Christian life.

As Christians we are called to live the whole of our lives in God's service, and we can't do that on our own. The Bible talks in many places about the importance of coming together to hear God's word, to be taught God's truth, and to receive God's

anointing to do his will. We gain strength through worship together, through praying together, through learning together from Scripture, through the encouragement of fellowship together with other Christians, and through sharing bread and wine at Holy Communion as Jesus commanded us to do.

So coming to Church is vital for our spiritual health and for building us up as the people of God ... but it is all for a purpose ... and the purpose is that we should GO!

Jesus met with his disciples on a number of occasions following his resurrection. He continued to teach them the things of God, and now that they had seen him die and rise again, they were much more focused ... they now understood so much more than before.

Before Jesus died, so much of what he taught them seemed hard to grasp. They could not understand why he talked about being betrayed, arrested, tried and crucified. It all seemed too much to take in.

Now they had seen it all happen, just as he said it would, it all made sense. They now knew that Jesus' death had been a sacrifice for their forgiveness ... and they knew that his resurrection was their guarantee of eternal life in the presence of God.

But now it was time for Jesus to leave them, and they needed to know what they were to do next. If Jesus had come to be the Saviour of the world, how was the world to know?

Well, it was not going to happen by them sitting together in Church once a week and hearing sermons ... not that 'Church' as we know it had come into being at this stage. The Church was, and is, the gathering of God's people ... and for now, they were it! If the good news of the gospel was going to be shared, then they were going to have to get busy.

So in Matthew 28, we read of Jesus meeting with his disciples for one last time. It is interesting to note that although they worshipped him there on the mountainside in Galilee, even now, some of them doubted ... but that doubt didn't make them unfit for service.

Doubt is perfectly normal. We all have times when we wonder if we've got it all right ... if we've really understood ... but Jesus doesn't give up on us, as he didn't give up on them. Instead, he reassures us ... he reminds us of who he is and of his love and care for us.

So Jesus commissioned the eleven, doubters included ... and that commissioning falls on us who are now his disciples. So what did he commission them to do? Four things:

- [1] Go.
- [2] Make Disciples of All Nations.
- [3] Baptise in the name of the Trinity.
- [4] Teach obedience to Jesus' Commands.

Let's take a look at these four points in turn.

- [1] Go. Going takes courage. It requires us to get out of our 'Comfort Zone' and go to places, or among people, where we are not so much at home.

This obviously doesn't mean that we are all called to be missionaries in the sense that we should all go off to far-flung places. There are all sorts of reasons why that wouldn't be practically possible, and there are all sorts of reasons why it would be unhelpful. We need missionaries in our own community, after all.

What it does mean is that we need to be willing to respond to God's particular call on us. It might not mean going overseas, but it might mean getting involved at the Community Centre, or going to events which aren't really our 'cup of tea'. It might mean mixing with people we don't know, and don't feel any particular affinity with. It might mean breaking down a few cultural barriers and making relationships with people who are 'not like us'.

So the call to 'Go' *might* mean being willing to answer God's call to go to some far-flung place to take the gospel to those who have never had the opportunity to hear about Jesus ... but remember there are plenty of places within a mile of this Church where Jesus is not known, and where people have never heard that God loves them.

Will we go?

[2] Make Disciples of All Nations.

Making Disciples is not the same thing as getting people to come to Church ... although that may be a step on the way.

Making Disciples is not even the same as making Converts ... getting people to pray a prayer of commitment is not the whole story ... though that, too, is a vital step.

Making disciples means much more than that ... and we have thought a lot about what it means to be a disciple in recent weeks.

A disciple is a follower ... a learner ... an apprentice – someone who follows the Master in order to learn to be like him. It is much more than having an academic interest ... there are lots of people who know a lot about Jesus but are not his disciples. Knowing *about* is not enough ... the issue is knowing *personally*.

On the other hand, discipleship isn't an individualistic thing. A common failing among Christian people in our time is that they think that it is all about 'me and Jesus', whereas growing in faith as disciples is almost always a corporate thing.

Jesus called men to follow him as a community of disciples ... they learned together from Jesus, and they learned by watching and listening to Jesus' as he related to the others in the group. Of course I need to know Jesus for myself ... but I need to know Jesus in the context of being part of the Church which is the people of God.

The 'All Nations' bit is interesting, of course ... we already considered that possibility of God calling us to some far-away place ... but remember we now live in a multi-ethnic community, and many of the nations have come to us. There are dark forces in the world which would use that situation to stir up trouble.

But for us who are following Jesus, the man of love, it means we have an opportunity to show his love to people from many parts of the world who are now living in our community. As the Church we should stand out as those who welcome and show love to people wherever they may come from. There is no place in the community of God's people for racism or animosity towards people from other nations.

### 3] Baptise in the name of the Trinity.

Baptising is closely related to making disciples ... but it is part of the process, not some sort of end product or passing-out parade from discipleship school. If it were, we would have to revert to the system of death-bed baptisms which was popular at one time.

We baptise people on the understanding that they are disciples ... being nurtured within the life of the Church, and learning more and more of what it means to follow Jesus ... and this is true whether they are babies being brought to baptism by their believing parents, who are nurturing them in the faith ... or adults making their own decision to follow Jesus. Whatever you think about nth baptism of babies, there is no Biblical warrant for an unbaptised believer, whatever their age.

None of us, after all, has arrived ... we are all on a journey of discovery to find out more of what it means to follow Jesus ... to know him better and to love him more. Sometimes little children are among the most sincere, committed disciples ... with a real desire to know Jesus and grow more like him. We must never underestimate the faith of a small child.

### [4] Teach obedience to Jesus' Commands.

Obedience isn't a popular concept in our society. Many people seem to resent authority in whatever form, and rebel against it. But the Christian life is a life of submission to God's will, and especially to the teachings of Jesus.

We can't pick and choose. 'Christianity Lite' is not real Christianity at all. We are offered new life in Jesus, but we are called to offer our lives back to him in God's service. We are often reminded in our Communion services of what Jesus had to say about which commandments are most important. He said:

*"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength"*

and *"Love your neighbour as yourself."*

It is as we choose to live our lives in obedience to Jesus that we will discover that he really is with us always, as he promised ... and will be, to the end of the age.

The account which we heard from Acts 8 – about Philip and the Ethiopian – is about Philip the Evangelist after whom this Church is named. It is an example of someone taking the Great Commission seriously.

The Holy Spirit prompted Philip to 'Go' ... and he went.

Philip discovered a man who was open and ready to know the truth about Jesus ... and he took the opportunity to disciple him, by helping him to understand the truth about Jesus which was revealed through the prophet Isaiah, hundreds of years before Jesus' birth.

As the eunuch responded to the truth, he wanted to be baptised, even though he still had a great deal to learn. He probably could not have given a clear account of how the atonement worked, but he did recognise that Jesus is Lord, and was choosing to follow him ... so Philip baptised him at the earliest opportunity.

The eunuch returned to Ethiopia, and we hear no more about him. Philip was taken elsewhere by the Holy Spirit, leaving the Ethiopian with nothing more than his new-found faith as a baptised Christian, and the Scriptures which he had been studying. It is thought provoking to consider that the Ethiopian Church is amongst the oldest in the world. None of us can know what God will do when we respond in faith to the opportunities he gives us.

So what opportunities are we being given ... and where is God calling us to go?

If you're anything like me, you probably tend to think that your little contribution isn't that great. We are in constant danger of underestimating what God can do through us.

Think again about those eleven men, meeting with Jesus in Galilee.  
What if they had said "Oh, I can't do that ... I'm not the right sort!"  
What if they had failed to believe in God's power to work through them?

As it was, these men went out and turned the world upside down ... simply through believing in the promises of Jesus, and being obedient to his call.

So what is God calling us to do?

Who knows ... maybe there is someone here that God is calling to overseas mission work ... or someone that God is calling to ordination to serve his Church elsewhere ...

... but there is no doubt at all that God is calling most of us, if not all of us, to a deeper commitment to serve him where we already are ... and in the places and among the people to which he will lead us in the future.

We have a great mission field on our doorstep ... about seven thousand people in our parish, most of whom do not know that God loves them, and have not heard and understood the good news about Jesus.

A few of them came to our Family Fun Day yesterday, which was a great success, and gives us something to build on with those families. Others will come to the Harvest Barn Dance or the next Memorial Service.

Will we be there to meet them, and get to know them? ... and will we make the effort to get involved at the Community Centre ... or in the Children's Centre ... or support the work of the Schools? Will we be salt and light in our community, so that we can share to the love and light of Christ with those who at present are still in the darkness?

We come here together on Sundays – and some of us go to Home Groups and attend the Prayer Meetings and various other groups – in order to be equipped and strengthened. The Bible always talks about the Christian faith in the context of Christian community.

We are called to worship together, learn together, fellowship together and serve together. We need these opportunities, if we are to go on growing up into Jesus, and if we are to receive his strength to serve him.

We cannot choose to be Lone Rangers. Those who do usually end up getting lost.

Then we can go out into the world to do the work of God ... in our homes, in our community, in our places of work and wherever Jesus sends us ... before we come back together again to be encouraged and re-equipped for the next part of our mission.

Both are essential. We must be those who are prepared to 'Go'. But we cannot 'Go'

unless we have first 'Come' ... to Jesus, to receive forgiveness ... to the Father's throne, to offer him our worship ... to the Holy Spirit, to receive his anointing. Then we can go out in his name, equipped with his power, to live and work to his praise and glory.