

The Ascended Lord is the One who Remains Present in the Midst of His Disciples

Discipleship and Vulnerability in The Great Commission

The Case of Matthew 28.16-20

By

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One of the greatest ironies in the Great Commission is the fact that the ascended Lord is the one who remains present in the midst of his disciples. Yet, Matthew has represented the risen Lord not as one who will one day return, but as the one who remains with his disciples always, until the end of the age. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us (1:23).

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age”¹

One of the puzzles, in the Great Commission, which some theologians have identified as the substance of the narrative, is twofold consisting of *Discipleship* and *Vulnerability* in the Commission: Firstly, in the realm of *discipleship*, by making the risen Lord yet present, ‘Matthew does not find it necessary to say that Jesus will return; how could he, if he always remains with his disciples? The present puzzle is significant in our understanding and interpretation of the Parousia or the second coming of Christ. For Matthew, in the delay of the *Parousia*, the one who is to return is the one who is present in the midst and work of his disciples. The Good News here is that ‘it was precisely because of such bold fusion of the recognition and awareness of the present lordship of Christ with his empowering presence that enlighten his followers to make disciples of all nations that the delay of the Parousia did not cause any catastrophe in the early church. Being so, the delay cannot be expected to cause any at the present, for in the same way that Christ has always been present in the commissioning of his disciples why cannot he be present in the commissioning of his Church? Secondly, in the realm of *vulnerability*, at the beginning of his ministry along the shores of Galilee, Jesus selected Twelve, among many, to become his followers but, at the end, we are only told of the Eleven who return to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them, so as to reunite with him after resurrection. This is the first time, the disciples reunite with Jesus, since the last supper and aftermath, when Jesus was arrested and the disciples deserted him. Yet, ‘when they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted (*distazo*). This doubting, distancing, and the missing link are critical components to our understanding of discipleship and vulnerability in the great commission.

Discipleship and Vulnerability in the Great Commission

The disciples go “to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them,” so as to reunite with their risen Lord. “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. “Doubting is translated as *distazo*, from the Greek. This word has as its root *dis*, which means “twice” or “two ways. Again,” *distazo* can also mean “hesitate.” According to one scholar, The picture that comes to mind in the *distazo* is Robert Frost’s poem, “The Road Not Taken.” In that

¹ The Great Commission: *Matthew 28:16-20 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)*

poem, ‘a traveller comes to a fork in the road, and hesitates, knowing that his choice will make all the difference, but not knowing which fork would be the better choice.’

The cost of discipleship and vulnerability constitute the hallmark of the Great Commission. The missing number is critical in the commission. The presence of the eleven only is the painful reminder of the events leading to the Last Supper. The missing link, reminds us of Judas and all the painful details that followed his actions. Where twelve Apostles were found, now only eleven are reported. Some evangelists, like Luke took it to pains to restore the original number by including Matthias to the remnant (Acts 1:12-26), but Matthew preferred to keep the story in the *Great Commission* original by reporting on the eleven. Matthew’s position is strategic, to say that Jesus intended to build his church on the frail and the vulnerable. This has led some theologians to say that to see ‘number eleven as a limping number.’ According to them, “The church that Jesus sends into the world is fallible, imperfect. Yet Jesus uses exactly such a church to do his perfect work.... Jesus takes this imperfect number and gives it a *perfect* vocation. That encourages us, because we, too, limp—but the Christ who began a good work with the eleven disciples is continuing it with us. The disciples will grow into the role that Jesus gives them. While their conduct in the book of Acts is hardly flawless, they will press ahead in the face of great opposition. They will sow seeds that will take root—multiply—waft across oceans on winds of faith.

Jesus’ choice of ordinary people to carry out an extraordinary mission is fully in keeping with God’s work throughout history. God always chose the frail and the young in faith to carry his mission in the world. To God, our ability is less important than our availability. Our ability can even get in the way if it obscures God’s role in our achievement. The disciples’ weakness in Matthew’s gospel does not however denote a dark side of discipleship only. In Matthew the disciples’ doubt is strangely juxtaposed to their worship: ‘they (all) worshiped him, but some doubted.’ In Christian discipleship faith and vulnerability are connected. The Eucharist as a sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace. In Christ. God who remains invisible is made manifest and visible. As Matthew looks at the members of his own community – living at a frontier, experiencing difficulties in defining their own identity on the border between Judaism and Christianity, and yet the fully unknown Gentile world – he reminds them of the rather challenging reality of doing Christian discipleship in a world that still regard Christianity as just another culture, or as part and parcel of Judaism. Matthew wants his community to know that Christian discipleship never takes place in self-confidence but in the knowledge and recognition of our own weaknesses, at a point of crisis where danger and opportunity come together. Matthew’s Christians, like the first disciples, stand in the dialectical tension between worship and doubt, between faith and fear.

The Great Commission as Reversal of Power and Authority

The reversal of power and authority consists in the fact that it is Jesus who comes to the aid of his disciples instead of them going to him: More commonly the supplicant approaches the authority rather than the other way around—the disciple comes to the teacher—the sick person comes to the healer. Jesus reverses the roles here, perhaps to overcome their doubt/hesitancy—perhaps to demonstrate his own approachability—perhaps to model the kind of “reaching out” behaviour that he expects of the disciples to fulfil the Great Commission. In the reversal power, almost as if he refuses to come to their aid and help them wrestle with their doubt, Matthew portrays the risen Jesus’ final appearance to his disciples in starkly sober language. He simply says that the eleven disciples went to the mountain in galilee where Jesus had directed them to go. Then Jesus came to them and commissioned them (28:16-18). He is simply Jesus, the same name given to him in the gospel narrative; he is the same one who walked the dusty roads of Palestine with his disciples. He is now risen

from the dead, yes, but his glory is hidden, wrapped in the mystery of divine grace. No ascension into heaven or outpouring of the Holy Spirit is alluded or even anticipated. There is a remarkable restraint in the way Matthew describes the entire scene, there no glamour, sheer or ovation; the concentration is almost exclusively on Jesus word:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age”²

The reversal of power is quite dramatic and far-reaching, the ascended Lord remains present in the life and mission of his disciples. At the beginning of the gospel, Jesus’ presence was primarily promised to Israel, here at the end it is extended to all disciples wherever they may be. His presence is, moreover, permanent – until the end of the age. Again, it is for this reason that no ascension, no outpouring of the Spirit and no Parousia need to be mentioned. The experience of the ‘always, immediate, comforting and empowering presence of the Lord’ precedes everything else. The reversal power as revealed in Jesus’ abiding presence is, however, intimately linked to his followers engagement in the commission. It is as they make disciples, baptize them, and teach them, that Jesus remains with those who follow him. Christ’s presence remains the driving force, not the other way round. Because Jesus continues to be present with his disciples, they can go out in fulfilling the commission. The good news for us today is that ‘the risen Jesus is not as the One who has ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, and who will one day return (Act 1:11), but as One who remains with his disciples always, until the end of the age.’

The Great Commission and the Reality of Covid-19 Pandemic Today: Theological and Social Challenges

Like the disciples, what are to make of this gospel, today, as we battle with the Covid-19 pandemic? As we have seen so far, for Matthew, then, being a disciple means living out the teaching of Jesus, which Matthew has recorded in great detail in his gospel, with particular interest on the Sermon on the Mount. It is unthinkable to divorce the Christian life of love and justice from being a disciple. Discipleship involves a commitment to God’s reign, to justice and love, and to obedience and to obedience to the entire will of God. Rather than being a fellowship of the chosen, detached from the world’s sorrows and agonies, the great commission involves, from the beginning and as a matter of course, making both existing and new believers sensitive to the needs of others, opening their eyes and hearts to recognize injustice, suffering, oppression, and the plight of those who have fallen by the wayside. Current challenges in the USA, in the event of George Floyd’s brutal murder, articulate this position, as well as our own inability in quelling the alarming effect of Covid-19 pandemic, since it has proved extremely hard to social distance in the midst of poverty and unemployment in many parts of Africa.

As we face, the present challenges, our consolation comes from the fact that Matthew does not portray the Great Commission as the community of the saved, but as community that survive by relying on God’s grace alone. Matthew’s interest is in the cost of discipleship. For Matthew, the church is to be found where disciples live in community with one another and their Lord and where they seek to live according to the will of God. For Matthew’s Great Commission, it is not possible to make disciples without learning to practice God’s call of

² The Great Commission: *Matthew 28:16-20 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)*

justice for the poor. The love commandment, which is the basis for the church's involvement in redressing socio-economic challenges is an integral part of the commission's commandment. To become a disciple means a decisive and irrevocable turning to both God and neighbour. What follows from here, is a journey, which in fact never ends in this life, a journey of continually discovering new dimensions of loving God and neighbour as the reign of God and justice are increasingly revealed in the life of discipleship.

Again, as we reflect on gift of Trinity in the Great Commission, the Good News today, is that despite their vulnerability and fears, in Matthew, Christians find their true identity, when they are involved in mission, in communicating to others, a new way of life, 'a new normal,' to use the new vocabulary in the event of the Covid-19 pandemic, a new interpretation of reality and of God, and in committing themselves to the liberation and salvation of others. A community that lives in the spirit of the Great Commission is one that understands itself as being different from and committed to its environment, more particularly to the plight of the poor and the marginalized, a community that exists within its context and a way that is both winsome and challenging. In the midst of fear, confusion, and uncertainty, this is a community that seeks to drive itself back to its roots as found on Jesus of Nazareth who fulfils God's love by helping the helpless.

We are told that those who have critically engaged further with Robert Frost's poem, see "The Road Not Taken" as 'an ambiguous poem that allows the reader to think about choices in life, whether to go with the mainstream or go it alone. If life is a journey, this poem highlights those times in life when a decision has to be made.'³ The same is the experience of these eleven disciples when they see Jesus. They struggle, they are torn and vulnerable: 'They want to believe—and they do believe—but they are torn. Knowing that Jesus died, they hesitate to believe their eyes when see him alive again.' We should not be surprised at either reaction—worship (bowing down) or doubt/hesitation. It is certainly fitting that the disciples should worship Jesus. They know that he was executed. They know that Good Friday appeared to be the end. But now they see Jesus back to life again, confirming beyond doubt that he is the Messiah. They see with their own eyes that their teacher is Lord of life, exercising power even over death. But how to believe behind our human curtain and vulnerability? As we face the Covid-19 pandemic, ours is a gracious and loving God who sees both our doubt and vulnerability as recipes and seeds of our Christian faith.

Amen

³See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Road_Not_Taken