

Go Global: The Great Commission

Mt Albert Baptist Church, 19 August 2007

You've been looking over these last few weeks at the subject of global mission. I've been reading this week about Adoniram Judson. He was the first missionary to go to Burma. His story is an incredible one. While he was in Burma, war broke out between the Burmese and the English, and the Burmese arrested Judson because, being an American, he looked and spoke like an Englishman. For two years he was imprisoned in appalling conditions. Every night the guards would hoist the lower part of his body high off the ground so that blood rushed to his head, preventing him from sleeping and causing fierce cramps in his shoulders and back. Clouds of mosquitoes feasted on his raw flesh. Incredibly, he survived. But a few months after he was released, his wife died of smallpox. The pain for him was that he hadn't been able to be with her during most of her illness. Then shortly after that their baby daughter also died. Judson nearly had a breakdown. He would kneel by his wife's grave for hours each day, regardless of the weather. He built a little one-room hut in the jungle, dug his own grave in case it might be needed, and worked in solitude on translating the Bible into the Burmese language. Now, up to this point, only a handful of Burmese had shown any interest in the Christian message. But Judson struggled on, for thirty-four years in all, and as a result today more than one million Burmese Christians trace their spiritual ancestry to Adoniram Judson.

An incredible outcome. But what do you think prompted Adoniram Judson to go to Burma in the first place? What enabled him to stay there? Why would anyone spend their life like this? This morning I'd like to look with you at one of the greatest mission passages in the Bible, Matthew 28:16-20: **[slide 1]**

16Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. 17When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19Therefore go 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 I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

It was on the basis of these words that Adoniram Judson went to Burma. It's this passage, perhaps more than any other, that has motivated thousands of people like him to devote their lives to the cause of mission. And it's not surprising. This is the ultimate team talk. Think of Graham Henry, **[slide 2]** the All Black coach, with his players in the changing room before the World Cup final. He's about to head up into the stands. They're about to take the field. And with a few carefully chosen words the coach prepares his charges for the battle they face. Here is Jesus about to ascend to heaven. His followers are about to take the field. These last instructions to them – to us – are so crucial. So powerful. Look at what he says.

A motive for mission

First of all, before Jesus outlines the game plan, before he tells his disciples *what* he wants them to do, he explains *why* they're to do it. **[slide 3]** He gives them a motive. He starts with this announcement (v 18): 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.' If Jesus has been given all authority on *earth*, then he has authority over every human being on planet earth. The apostle John says that by his blood, by his death on the cross, Jesus ransomed or purchased men and women 'from every tribe and language, people and nation' (Rev 5:9). We are his. And one day we will all have to give an account to him. But Jesus says that he has been given supreme authority not just on earth among humans, but in heaven where what Paul calls the 'spiritual forces of evil' wage war (Eph 6:12). On the cross, Jesus 'disarmed the powers and authorities' (Col 2:15). And when he ascended to heaven, Paul says God 'seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion ... and placed

all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church' (Ephesians 1:20-21).

This is the fundamental basis for mission. This is why we're to go. If Jesus didn't have authority over all the earth – over all the nations – if he was just one of many great teachers or prophets or divine incarnations, then we'd have no reason or justification for telling others about him. And if Jesus didn't have authority in all of heaven – authority over all the forces of evil – then we might proclaim him to the nations, but we would be doomed to failure from the start. We'd never be able to turn people from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God. To even try would be utterly ridiculous.

I read this week about a magazine photographer who was assigned to get photos of a forest fire. When he arrived at the airport, the plane was warming up near the runway. He jumped in with his equipment and yelled, "Let's go! Let's go!" The pilot swung the plane into the wind and they were soon in the air. The photographer yelled, "Fly over the north side of the fire, and make three or four low level passes." "Why?" asked the pilot. "Because I'm going to take some pictures. I'm a photographer and photographers do that sort of thing!" "What!" cried the pilot, "You mean you're not the instructor?" A ridiculous situation. For us, for people like us, to try to go and make disciples of all nations seems equally ridiculous. Sometimes it seems like an impossible task, doesn't it? It would be, except for the fact that Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. And because he has supreme authority on earth the nations need to know; because he has supreme authority in heaven, no demon can stop us.

A method for mission

And so Jesus goes on in this passage, in this team talk, to outline the game plan or the strategy – the method – we're to use. [slide 4] In v 19 with three little words he explains how we are to make disciples of all nations. First, he says, 'go' – or literally 'in your going' – make disciples of all nations. The word that Jesus uses there means to depart, to leave, to cross boundaries. For some of us that will mean crossing geographical or national boundaries. It'll mean going to other nations. And for the rest of us it will mean supporting those who go. But no matter where we are, we are all to go, to cross boundaries, to reach out. Like Jesus, who was called a 'friend of sinners', we are to be reaching out to those who haven't yet discovered the freedom that comes from submitting to the authority of Jesus. Are you doing that? Are you intentionally building friendships with non-Christians? We can't obey Jesus' command – we can't bring people to him – if we only ever hang out with Christians. [It's like feeding sparrows at the park. I've noticed there's a pattern to this. You start dropping crumbs at your feet but the birds initially hang off, cheeping nervously. Then eventually, a big brave, hungry sparrow hops in and snatches a crust. Soon there's a feeding frenzy. But there are always one or two smaller sparrows at the back of the mob. They're too shy or small or sick to get any closer. They look really hungry so you throw some chunks of bread their way. But as the little fellows hop desperately towards the bread, the other sparrows – who have already eaten their fill – swoop in and scoff down every last crumb. If all we do as followers of Jesus is feed ourselves, and focus on ourselves, those who are starving for the Bread of Life will miss out.] So Jesus says to us, 'go'.

Then he says, 'baptise' [slide 5] – 'baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. The word translated 'baptise' means literally to 'immerse' or to 'dunk' or to 'bury'. This instruction can be taken literally. And it should be. To be baptised or immersed in water is a powerfully symbolic and public way of saying, 'I'm trusting that Jesus died for me and rose again, and I'm choosing to die to my old life so that I can live with him.' But there's another way to understand this reference to baptism. Jesus says that we are to baptise people 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. That's interesting. Jesus is saying here that God consists of three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and yet they have only one

name. They are so united in love that they are one. Three in one. A trinity. This explains why 14-year-olds never get off the phone. This explains why we all crave relationship and community. We're created in the image of a relational God, a God who is a community of love. And so Jesus is saying here: as you go, invite people into a community where they can experience the love of God. I have a friend who a couple of years ago wouldn't have considered himself a Christian at all. His wife dragged him along to church but he stood on the sidelines for months. And then one day he was invited to a new home group and got involved. A couple of weeks later he rang me and said, 'John, I'm taking you out for coffee. I want to talk.' We went to a local café and he said, 'You know what? Being part of that group, getting to know those guys, it's made all the difference. I realise now that you Christians aren't all freaks. I like what you've got. I want to be part of it. I'm in.' [Believe. Behave. Belong.] Jesus is saying, 'You don't need to argue people into my kingdom. Just immerse them, baptise them, in a community that reflects the love of God.'

Then, thirdly, he says in v 20, 'teach' them. [**slide 6**] Teach them 'to obey everything I have commanded you.' R.C. Sproul tells a story about a young Jewish boy who grew up in Germany many years ago. The lad had a profound sense of admiration for his father, who saw to it that the life of his family revolved around their faith and a weekly visit to the synagogue. But in his teenage years the boy's family was forced to move to another town in Germany. This town had no synagogue, only a Lutheran church. And the life of the community revolved around that church. All the best people belonged to it. Suddenly, the father announced to the family that they were all going to abandon their Jewish traditions and join the Lutheran church. When his stunned family asked why, he said, "It'll be good for business." His son was bewildered. And over time, his deep disappointment matured into a kind of intense bitterness that plagued him for the rest of his life. Later, when he left Germany and went to England to study, he formulated a whole new worldview. He conceived a whole new movement that denied the reality of God and described religion as "the opiate of the masses." The boy's name was Karl Marx, the founder of communism. You may not think you're a teacher. You may not think you are teaching God's word to anyone. But the truth is you are. By the way you live, as much as by the words you speak, you're teaching your family, your children, your friends, all about Jesus. The question is: What are you teaching you them? So because Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth he says, 'Go to them, baptise them, and teach them by your actions and your words.' That's the game plan.

A mentor for mission

But then, like any great coach, Jesus goes on to finish his team talk with a word of personal encouragement. [**slide 7**] He says, 'And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.' The promise at his birth was that he would be Immanuel or 'God with us' (Matt 1:23). Here at his departure that promise is fulfilled. Jesus is saying, 'If you believe that I have all authority, and you attempt to go and make disciples of all nations, then you can be assured that I will be with you all ways. I'll be a *mentor* that never leaves you. There will be times when it looks like you're losing. There will be times when you feel like you've dropped the ball, or can't play on. But if you are trying to make disciples in my name, you can claim this promise. Through my Spirit, I'll be with you to encourage you, to direct you, to empower you. Your efforts for me will not be wasted. Do you believe that?'

That was the experience of James Gilmore was a doctor who went out as a missionary to Mongolia in 1870. He worked there for 20 years and in all that time not one single person was converted. Not one single disciple. In fact, one of his diary entries says, 'In the way of direct results I have seen nothing. I cannot say that I have yet seen a single Mongol ambitious about his soul. I have seen hundreds of them working out their own salvation, as they suppose, by prayer, offerings and other works... but I have never seen one at all anxious that Christ should save him.' Gilmore maintained that he did not meet one single person who was even interested

in Christianity. It depressed him enormously. But he kept going. He lost his wife. He lost one son. He was separated from his other two other sons when they were just about eight and ten years old. Not surprisingly he had a complete mental breakdown. And yet he was sure of his call? He had gone in obedience to this commission. Was Jesus with him? Yes. Because it turns out that what Gilmore learned in Mongolia made it easier for others to follow him. His many sacrifices and his early death at the age of forty-nine inspired dozens of others to obey Christ's great commission. Jesus was with him. And he will be with us.