



Sermon preached by Revd Dr John Bradbury on 4th June 2023

Readings: Matthew 28:16-20; Genesis 1:1-13; II Corinthians 13:11-13

Trinity Sunday: Celebrating the fifth anniversary of Downing Place Church

Matthew 28:16-20:

Jesus is on a mountain just as he had been on a mountain 3 years before.

Much has unfolded: the preaching, teaching and storytelling. The healing and the miracles. The betrayal. The death at the hands of the colonial power in cahoots with religious authorities. The resurrection appearance to the first apostles – the women at the tomb, who went to tell the disciples. Who believe them – and head to Galilee – and find themselves up this mountain.

There are echoes of that first mountain top. Then he was accompanied by the Devil – the tempter. Who shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me”. Jesus does not. “Away with you Satan! For it is written ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him’”. Jesus, son of man, son of God, God incarnate, second person of the Trinity, had ample opportunity to rule with power and might over the kingdoms of the world. He chose not to. Rather, he taught, and told stories, and healed, and performed miracles, and headed towards death upon a cross.

On this final mountain top Jesus is not alone. There are 11 disciples with him. Of course, the significant number in Hebrew thinking is 12. 12 is complete. 12 is good. 12 is perfect, even. These disciples are not 12. They are 11. Not complete. Not good. Not perfect. 11 flawed human beings who are to make disciples of all nations. It seems, well...unlikely, to say the least.

‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him’ said Jesus to the Devil on that first mountain. This in Hebrew thought is foundational. It is this thought that makes the creation of idols so troubling. God alone is God. However good humans are at setting up other people or things or ideas as God – scripture calls us back again, and again and again to the reality that God alone is God. Humans and things are not. So how is it, that on this last mountain top we see the disciples worshipping the person Jesus – the very one who had said ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him’?

This conundrum is one that the church will grapple with over the centuries – little do those first disciples know they are setting off an exciting journey in dogmatic theology. For them, one senses, it was something more instinctive. The one they had known as their friend, the one they had followed, the one they had denied. The one they had watched die. The one who now stood in front of them – this one they cannot but worship. Even though some doubted – and who, frankly, would not? – they worshipped. And in worshipping they know that this is not idolatry. This is not a deep break with their Hebrew tradition – rather, it is them worshipping the one, living God.

We are told that they ‘saw’ Jesus. Something of course that we cannot do. We, nearly 2000 years later, do not ‘see’ Jesus as those first disciples saw Jesus. We ‘see’ something that they cannot however – and perhaps see something they would not have believed. Because we do see a church, spread throughout the world, on every continent, over 2 and a half billion disciples of Jesus, which on one calculation is over 44 million more than last year. Something utterly extraordinary began that day.

Jesus speaks: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”. All authority? Is Jesus here making a claim to be some all-powerful totalitarian dictator? The power and the might are his? I suspect the Church has all too often thought exactly that and taken its mission as to continue to exercise that

power and authority. How easily we take this last mountain top and use it as an excuse for succumbing to the temptation the Devil places before us as if we were on that first mountain top.

Jesus' command, however, is to 'make disciples' – to make followers; learners. To baptise them. To teach them to obey everything he commanded. A difficult call for the gospel writer who tells us that the ones who are blessed are the poor in Spirit, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted. Jesus' call is for all to follow his way – which rejects earthly power and glory, loves enemies, forgives again and again and again, and tells us to take up our crosses and follow his way.

All of this is difficult and demanding. How can an imperfect 11 ever hope to make disciples of all nations? How can we obey everything Jesus commanded – when some of it is obscure and difficult, and beyond our human powers? But Jesus makes another startling claim – “remember, I am with you always to the end of the age”. Jesus, the one the disciples worshipped as the one true living God may not be with us such that we can 'see' him. But the living God is indeed with us, in the person of Holy Spirit, the Spirit that blows where it wills, always ahead of us, calling us on into a future we would not believe if we could see it. The Spirit that when she encounters us, is the one true living God encountering us.

5 years ago, I wonder which of us would ever have imagined the world as it is today? 5 years ago, as we inaugurated Downing Place, who would have imagined quite what Downing Place has become? Which of us would have thought we'd live through a global pandemic, locked into our homes for months on end in a world shut down? Which of us might have imagined we'd be living in a Europe torn apart by war with millions of people fleeing a war zone? Which of us would have imagined an economic crisis such as millions and millions of folk are dependent on food banks, and caught making choices between heating and eating? Which of us could quite have envisioned this extraordinary transformation of a beloved building? Which of us might have dared imagine that Open Table would experience such extraordinary growth – in a church world where decline is our sad normal? Which of us would have imagined Pioneer ministry taking shape in the ways it is around Alex's work in this city centre? There were moments it was hard to see beyond the questions of which coffee machine we were going to use and which way of organising the flower rota was most effective. Just as those imperfect, doubting, worshipping 11 probably could not see quite where to put their foot next as they began to come down that mountain, never mind evangelising all the nations of the earth.

Yet God is extraordinary. So extraordinary that whatever we say in human language will always fail to grasp or define just who or what God is. God is the one God. The creator God. Who brings all things into being out of nothing. God is the God we encounter in Jesus, whom we cannot but worship, and whom we follow and from whom we learn. Spirit God, uniting us with Jesus across time and space, leading us on, inspiring and challenging us to perceive the ever-new thing God is about to do in our midst.

My goodness, how we give thanks for all that God has done and is doing in this place – a place which is a light to so many, a place where people can find their place – Downing Place. And yet – we never arrive. At least not in this earthly life. We continue to be caught up in God's ways with the world, in a world transforming and changing beyond our wildest imaginings in ways equally exciting and troubling. And as our call 5 years ago was to respond to the call of God to set out on a journey, so that call remains. 11 imperfect people called to baptise and make cross-carriers from all the nations of the earth. And here we are. Not knowing where we will end up next. What the next surprise will be. Yet we are promised the living God remains with us as we respond to that call to be disciples, living out our whole lives in response to the one who uses his power and authority to reject the temptations of worldly power and authority, and who took up his cross, and calls us to do the same. Our gospel – our good news – might be mad, bonkers and foolish, but it is glorious, wonderful and joyful. It is good news that transforms our lives, the lives of the communities we find ourselves within, and the life of the whole world. Let us thank indeed the living triune God for that. Amen.