

The living Church looks outwards

[Matthew 28:18-20](#) | 16th July 2017

'Go and make disciples of all nations.' Seven words which have changed the world as they set the agenda for the fledgling followers of Jesus and, indeed, the institutional church which grew from most modest beginnings.

It was an instruction which ran quite counter to the prevailing religious and cultural life. Jewish religion was primarily concerned to maintain boundaries and, whilst it permitted Gentiles to convert to Judaism, it was on the whole content to retain a distinct and distinctive religious and cultural identity amongst the Hebrew people. It had no particular compulsion to look beyond its existing membership.

The state-sponsored Emperor religion of Rome assumed that everyone in the Roman Empire worshipped the national leader. Laws demanded citizens make a token act of devotion to the Emperor. Whilst there were exceptions, these were limited. The Empire assumed everyone was a worshipping member and accordingly, it concentrated on conquest, not religious conversion.

The early Christians were different. They needed to increase their numbers in part simply to survive, but there was far more to it than that. Their entire theological outlook was that the whole world had been transformed, for ever, by the living, dying and rising of Christ. The logical conclusion was that everyone was, at least potentially, included in God's salvation-plan. Therefore, everyone had a right to hear for themselves, told in a way they

could understand, and with a pathway they could walk, to fruitful faith-filled living.

It is possible to read this passage with a modern post-colonial mind-set and wince at what might be thought the imperialistic tone of Jesus' command. Should we really, in the twenty-first century, be 'making' disciples? The short answer is 'yes', but only if we understand what it entails. The words matter.

There has been a fashion for many years of using nouns as verbs: it's called 'verbing' and is very common as in 'to access', 'to leverage', 'to interface'. The same sort of thing occurs in the translation of the original Greek which makes a verb from the word for 'disciple'. In a way, Jesus instructs his followers to 'disciple-ify' the whole world which is why the word is translated 'make disciples' or, sometimes, 'teach'.



But it is less forceful than 'making disciples' might connote, and is more involved than a simple view of teaching might suggest. A longer paraphrase of Jesus' instruction might be: 'give people everywhere the opportunity which you have had. Let others see your whole lives, your hopes and fears, your dreams and faith. Let them walk and speak with you, that they may see me through your whole lives, and come to know me even as you have come to know me.'

It's an apprenticeship model of learning, an in-depth disciple-making. It's not forcing so much as enabling; not compelling people to be something they aren't but co-constructing with them their identities as people faithfully living with a Christ-focus. It's presenting aspects of Jesus' life and teaching and then saying, 'What do you make of this?' And it continues by helping faith make sense for life in ways which change the world.

That was a familiar way of life for religious Jews in the first century. They followed particular teachers as disciples in order to learn from their example and from conversation with them. As they communed with the master who communed with God, so these apprentices came to learn of God in deep and authentic ways.

Brought up to date, this has a deep relevance for church today. Far from being a place where faith is spoken about in ways that are dull, brief and irrelevant to life, "the focus of church activity is consciously outward-looking with a 'whole life' rather than a 'church life' concern. Church is deeply rooted in its local community, working in partnership with other denominations, faiths, secular groups and networks, and explicitly passionate and prophetic about justice and peace both locally and globally. Connections are frequently made between faith and daily living; loving service to human need is strongly encouraged and enabled."

In other words, what we should talk about here in church is the 'stuff' that is going on in our lives. And we do not simply talk, but take active steps. Church is not merely about what happened in the past; it is about what's happening now. It's contextual, contemporary and committed.

And that is why thriving churches are engaged in the wider world, not exclusively their own congregations. Many such churches encourage their members to give sacrificially of their time to go to serve elsewhere in the world; and the whole church learns from the experiences which are re-told in many ways in worship and on the web. The whole church supports those who go, it learns from them and through them, and sometimes inspires others to go, too.

This happened in Dundee as Mary Slessor heard of David Livingstone's exploits and, later, his death in Africa through the Missionary Record distributed in her church. She determined to follow in his footsteps. It happened as Jane Haining was deeply involved in the life of Queen's Park Church, led the Sunday School and formed a

missionary society in that congregation. At a meeting in Glasgow she discovered a sense of call which she pursued through further study and became matron in a children's home in Budapest. She was killed by the Nazis in 1944 and is the only Scot regarded, as Oskar Schindler, as one of the Righteous Among the Nations by the Jewish people.

Two examples of faith learned as apprentices and exercised both here and overseas. We are privileged to see on their way members of our congregation here who see something of life in a school for orphans in India and who will come back and tell us what they experienced. This is no holiday, but follows the practice of Christians from the earliest days to travel to see and to share, to return and report.

They will see part of the process of disciple-making as children are welcomed into a community clearly expressing the love of Jesus. No-one is forced to believe, but the influence of Christian principles on these young lives may have a life-long impact, as it has had on you. More than that, experiences such as this touch those who

travel and are part of the process of coming to deeper and richer faith ourselves. When we see with our own eyes, and speak face to face with people whose faith inspires us, so we are apprenticed to these masters and we learn different aspects of commitment and trust.

And what about us? Is faith a private business, perhaps only one of our many leisure interests? Or is it influential throughout and across life? Is our sense of being made disciples a broad one? What steps might we - perhaps literally - take to discover Christian life at work and become more deeply involved in God's energizing work?

'You need to get out more,' my family sometimes tell me. Perhaps we all do, and discover God at work all over the place; and experience the enrichment of being at work with God.

What do you make of the idea that church is a place from which we look outward? And how will your place in church make you more outward-looking in Christian ways in the days ahead?

Read further...

Esther Addley, Article on Jane Haining, The Guardian 22 September 2016.

Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/sep/22/scottish-teacher-killed-in-auschwitz-is-remembered-by-her-students>

The Mary Slessor Foundation, About Mary.

Available at <http://maryslessor.org/mary-slessor/>