

Trinity Sunday

7<sup>th</sup> June 2009 B

Great Commission

There have been many persons given exciting commissions in their lifetimes. There was Michelangelo's commission to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Sir Christopher Wren's commission to build St. Paul's Cathedral in London and Walter Reed's assignment to stop yellow fever in the Panama canal to name a few. But I tell you, in my life and yours, there is an even greater commission. It is found here in Matthew 28:18-20 where Jesus Christ turns to his disciples and says, "Go! Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...." Think of it! Almighty God, not a President of the United States or a Pope or a King, but God himself, turns and looks you and me full in the face and commissions us to work with him on his latest creative project. I tell you, when the most important thing some of us have been asked to do all week is to wash the dishes or take out the rubbish, this comes as quite a jolt! I know of no other statement in the Bible that can give a person more of a sense of esteem, joy, and purpose than Christ's great commission to his disciples. It turns the farm, the assembly line, the office, the kitchen, the mill, the classroom, and the retail shop into an artist's studio where we may fairly affirm, "I'm here on temporary assignment with God. My talent and time and money are really needed. God has personally called me here to be his representative." It's interesting that the great commission, written originally in the Greek, actually says, "As you go into all the world, make disciples." It has almost a casual or spontaneous air about it. And sure enough, search the scriptures as you might, you'll find the disciples nowhere starting "How to Witness" schools or planning a missions conference where they look at each other and say, "We've got to make some plans. Strategy! Strategic Plans That's what we need! The renewal committee meets this Wednesday night at eight!" Mostly the disciples went about their great commission with spontaneous and breathless excitement. And considering the dimensions of the great commission, we can discover more of this breathless excitement in our own lives as well.

First of all, consider the height of our commission. In the text Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples." *All authority.* That doesn't leave much out, does it? "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." That is, Jesus. Not the committee or the mayor or priest or vestry members or some court. It's all centered in one person — Jesus Christ. What does this authority say? He says, "Go and make disciples." He says it to a group of fisherman, merchants, and government officials. You see, this commission is so vast it'll take more than a bunch of individuals to get it done. It'll take a worldwide body of encouraging, working, loving, committed, cooperative people to accomplish this task. Never forget, the great commission was given to a group, not an individual. It was given to the church! When Jesus set about his ministry of teaching and healing there were those who asked, "By what authority do you do this? Is it your own ego or Satan or some man who compels you to do these things?" And Jesus consistently pointed to God as the basis of his authority. It is the same today. You just get busy going and making disciples and teaching, and real soon, somebody's going to want to know why.

“Go,” Jesus said. And his marching orders still stand. “Go! Make disciples! Teach!” No human being has the authority to countermand the order.

I love the story of the raw army recruit standing at attention on the drill field. The drill instructor yells, “Forward, march!” And the entire ranks begin to move, all except this one raw recruit. He’s still standing there at attention. So the drill sergeant strolls over to him and yells in his right ear,

“Is this thing working?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” The recruit yells.

Then the drill sergeant walks around to the other ear and yells, “Is this thing working?” “Sir, yes, sir!”

The soldier says. “Then why didn’t you march when I gave the order?”

“Sir, I didn’t hear you call my name.”

Some of us are like that soldier standing around waiting for God to call our names. But the great commission is a blanket order. It has everyone’s name on it. And you can be sure that the man in charge says, “Go! Make Disciples! Teach!” That was something of the height of our commission. Now this: something of the width of our commission. The gospel describes the proportions as including “all nations.” Funny how we like to narrow our ministry to Anglicans or upper middle class or the educated or youth or the elderly. Jonah had to get all of this straight in his own commission. God said to him, “Go to Nineveh!” But Jonah hated Gentiles. He only wanted a ministry to his own Hebrew people. It took a storm, a whale, a hot sun, and God’s rebuke to straighten him out. Passing on, let’s consider not only the height and width of our Christ commission, but also its depth.

The Gospel says we are to baptize people, make them disciples, and teach them to observe all that Christ commanded us. Notice he didn’t call on us to make converts or church members, but baptized, obedient disciples! Nietzsche, the German philosopher, said, “God is dead and the stench of his corpse is all across Europe.” He advocated humanism and proposed the development of a “superman” of Aryan heritage protected by selective breeding and superior education. The Nazi Party picked up his idea, and men like Hitler, Goering, Goebbels, Mengele, Himmler, and Rommel set about building such a society in Germany’s Third Reich. But it all ended with bullets and bombs, chaos and suffering such as the world has seldom seen. The Christian faith has no less a plan. But it involves a much higher and good order. Hitler would have renewed man by his own efforts. We seek to renew the human race by the effort of God. For us, man-made-new begins with hearing of God’s holiness and man’s sin and our most certain judgment. It continues with the good news of God’s love and provision in Christ and a clear call to repentance, faith, the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and obedience. Those who respond are then led to the water to be baptized. Politics can’t make a man like this. Economics can’t make a man like this. Nor can education or medicine or finances. Only the

love of God can work such a change in human souls. Such is the depth of our commission. A final dimension of our challenge! It's length. It took Michelangelo over ten years to paint the Sistine Chapel. So it's fair to ask how long it'll take us to fulfill the commission Jesus has given us. "What'll it take, Lord? Five minutes? A year? Two years? Five? Ten?" And *Christ* says, "Go ... to all nations ... teach all I have commanded you ... *to the close of the age.*" In other words, each of our commissions lasts until the job gets done, until life is over, "until the close of the age." I can't imagine a football player coming off the field in the third quarter, walking up to his coach, and saying, "Coach, I've been thinking. I've played enough. Let some other guys finish the game. I'm going over there for a pie and a beer and relax with my girlfriend." It'd never happen! Yet it does happen in the church. "For ten years I've labored for you, *Jesus*. Sunday school, group prayer, worship, small groups. I've done it all. So now I'm going to buy me a sailboat and head for the beach every weekend I can. Let somebody else do your work for a while." And *Jesus* says, "Until the close of the age." You see, the Christian life is not a 100-yard dash. It's a lifelong marathon. So, here we sit — fishermen, government officials, leading women, teachers.

Today, as of old, *Christ* comes and speaks his great commission. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you: And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." It's easy to put this great commission aside for something else, isn't it?