

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 90”
Matthew 28:11-20

Lady Nancy Astor, the first woman to be elected to Parliament, awoke on her death bed to find the family gathered around her, looking anxiously on. “*Am I dying or is this my birthday?*” she asked – and then died. Henrik Ibsen, the great Norwegian playwright, overheard the nurse telling a friend that he was making a good recovery from his illness. Ibsen called out, “*On the contrary*” and those were his last words. Whereas H G Wells did exactly the opposite and, as the nurse solicitously tried to make him comfortable, he shouted, “*Go away. I’m all right.*” And that was the end of him. My favourite last words, though, are those of Oscar Wilde, who looked up and, as he breathed his last, us reported to have said, “*Either those curtains go or I do*”.

Famous last words. There are many, many more we could have entertained ourselves with this morning. But the ones we are going to reflect on for a few moments today are the ones we have just read: the famous last words of our Lord, Jesus the Christ, the Kingly Messiah. Having begun to look at this wonderful Gospel of Matthew almost exactly four years ago, we have finally got to the end. (Just so you know what to expect for the next few weeks, we’ve got visitors from Kosovo with us next week, then from Romania. After that a couple of weeks looking at worship and then we’re going to have a bit of a root around in the Minor Prophets – the little books at the end of the Old Testament.)

As we’ve looked over the whole of this Gospel, I hope very much that it has helped us all to grasp a little more about the life and ministry of Jesus. Matthew, leader of a church of Jewish believers in the first century, is thought to have written this account of Jesus’ life to help those new converts to Christianity understand a bit more about the man they’ve decided to follow. In order to allay their anxieties about betraying their Jewish faith and heritage, Matthew has concentrated on demonstrating that Jesus is, in fact, the fulfilment of that faith, quoting from their Scriptures – our Old Testament – and drawing all kinds of parallels between what Jesus has been doing and what had been predicted by the Jewish writers and preachers. For Matthew, there is no doubt that Jesus is the Messiah who was sent into the world to help bring to fruition God’s plan for the salvation of the world.

You see, God created a world that was perfect in every way, a world – a universe – that he himself declared good. Into that world he put human beings, to work with him and take care of that amazing creation. But evil somehow leaked into the world, affecting all that had been made, including humanity, distorting and perverting it. No longer did men and women recognise God as King. No longer did they accept his sovereign rule, and that meant that eternity too would be spent without the presence of God – which would be hell for them.

So God determined to do something about it. He wanted to rebuild his Kingdom, to bring things back to what they should have been. So to inaugurate that he sent his Son, Jesus, into this world, having promised just that through generations of prophets, preachers and poets. Jesus came into our world as the promised Kingly Messiah. And we have read about his life and ministry in the Gospel as he taught about the Kingdom and what life will be like within it. We have read about the way in which his life offered people glimpses of what the Kingdom might look like, with the handicapped healed, the hopeless given hope, the marginalised accepted, the loveless loved, the downtrodden given dignity. We have read about Jesus' debates with those who had taken power for themselves and used it to do down others. We have heard his stories and parables about the attitudes that need to be adopted to live in this Kingdom. We have seen him taking authority over a creation grown chaotic outside the boundaries of God's gracious stewardship.

Of course, that kind of ministry gained Jesus some powerful enemies: not only the gatekeepers of religious and cultural tradition, but also those who had themselves profited from the lawlessness of a world apart from God, and, indeed, the very devil himself who tried unsuccessfully to recruit Jesus to his side as Jesus prepared in the desert for the beginning of his ministry. And those enemies – religious, political, spiritual – conspired to do away with him as he was arrested, tried, tortured and executed on a cross. But that only served to play into the hands of God himself, whose plan all along was that Jesus should accede to his Kingly crown only through a sacrifice of unconditional love. And to prove it was all true – as we saw last week – to prove that God had a plan and that Jesus' words could be trusted above all others, Jesus was brought back to life, demonstrating yet again that the Kingdom of God could not be bound by any human limitations. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus was shown to be the King, and in the words we have read this morning, Jesus is about to take his royal throne at the right hand of his Father in heaven.

We said last time that the resurrection was effectively the climax of this story: that was when Jesus was finally shown to be King. But there is this short postlude or epilogue to it all as Jesus gets ready physically to leave this world and to leave the little band of followers to whom he is entrusting the continuing work of his Kingdom here on earth, as he leaves to be declared King in the throne room of heaven. It's a bit like the end of the pantomime, when the story has all been resolved and we know everything is going to work out happily ever after, but there's still that final scene as (usually) the wedding or the coronation takes place. (Please don't misunderstand that: it's just an analogy. I don't want to find all over Facebook, "Minister says Matthew's Gospel is just a pantomime".)

Matthew ties up the loose ends of the resurrection itself with the few comments about the attempts of the Jewish leaders to bribe the guards into fabricating a story about how Jesus' body was removed from the

tomb. Notice that he says, “*And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.*” And remember, as we’ve said many times before, when this Gospel first appeared, there were still plenty of witnesses alive who could have produced evidence to the contrary if there had been any.

And then we find Jesus back in the Galilee region, meeting up with his eleven remaining disciples. His mission is now fulfilled, the Kingdom is inaugurated and Jesus is about to pass on the baton to those whom he has spent three years training and preparing for the momentous task of taking all this to a wider audience. Now, there’s usually something in any passage of the Bible that you’ve never really noticed, even having read it many, many times. When I was preparing for this, I read the bit about “*they worshipped him, but some doubted*” and, as usual, assumed that there was a large group of people there as Jesus prepared to leave for his heavenly enthronement. Then I realised that Matthew is quite specific that there were only the eleven there (v16). Even then – after all the events of the past couple few weeks – there were some who were still not quite sure.

As there are among us. As even those who would call ourselves firm believers and true disciples feel from time to time. We all – if we’re honest – struggle now and then with doubts and misgivings about it all. We read something or have a conversation with someone, something happens in our life to knock us off balance, we have to cope with suffering or deep anxiety, we look at the world around and see such evil – we wonder, don’t we – just like some of those first followers – if we’ve got it right. And that’s why we need to take seriously Jesus’ “famous last words”. In Jesus’ short final address to these still bewildered disciples, he speaks to **Confirm His Authority, Commission Them In Their Task** and **Console Them With The Promise Of His Presence**.

1. **HE CONFIRMS HIS AUTHORITY**

The disciples have had three years to witness the authority that Jesus has exercised in pretty well every realm. He has shown his authority over the forces of evil as he has driven demons from the possessed. He has demonstrated his authority over the forces of nature as he has calmed storms, multiplied food, withered trees and so on. He has amply shown his authority over the forces of religion and tradition as he has debated with Pharisees, Sadducees and lawyers. He has exerted his authority over disease and death by healing and resurrecting those who have been suffering and who have died. And in his own death and resurrection he has made it clear that there is nothing which can hold him down.

Now Jesus confirms that as he tells them that he has been given authority over everything in heaven and on earth. There is absolutely nothing that Jesus is not master of. He is the promised Messiah, with all

that that entails for them as Jewish believers familiar with the writings of the Hebrew prophets. He is the King who rules over the Kingdom described by those prophets, a Kingdom in which eventually all will be well, all will be just as God intends it to be, a Kingdom which, despite the struggles and difficulties which are still temporarily having to deal with, holds out hope for all eternity. So his followers need fear nothing. We need fear nothing. Our Lord and Saviour is invincible and he will always see to it that his disciples are protected and able to follow their destiny of an eternal future safe and secure with him. As Paul tells the Romans (in *Romans 8:35-39*) we cannot be anywhere safer than in the love of Jesus Christ. As he is enthroned as King of kings and Lord of lords, there is nothing, no-one who can now frustrate the rule of Jesus the Kingly Messiah and spoil the destiny of God's people.

2. HE COMMISSIONS THEM IN THEIR TASK

And because of that authority ("*Therefore ...*"), Jesus is able to commission his own followers in what they need to do to continue the mission that he has begun – the mission to show more and more of the Kingdom of God in the life of the world. And at the heart of that mission is "*making disciples of all nations*". Notice that Jesus does not say "Christians" or "converts" or "followers", but "*disciples*". We have plenty of Christians in this congregation. We have plenty of followers. We have plenty of people who know their Bibles and say their prayers. But what we need is disciples.

And they are to be identified by two things. Firstly, they are **baptised**: they have taken a decision to declare publicly their intention to follow Jesus and have undergone the rite of initiation that Jesus himself laid down. They have been baptised in the name of the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – to show that they are chosen by the grace of God, saved through the death of Jesus and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. For some of you that baptism took place at a time when you yourself were unable to know what was going on, so you have the opportunity to confirm that when you are older and conscious of your decision to be a disciple. For others, maybe you've never been baptised and you feel that now you should take that step of declaration and obedience. If you do, have a word with me or one of the elders. But the point is, this is not some easy commitment that just means signing on a dotted line or saying a few words in private to a church leader: this is a public declaration that things are going to be different from now on.

And secondly, perhaps even more importantly, they have been **taught to "obey everything" that Jesus has commanded**. That's where the distinction can best be seen between those who claim to be Christians and those who are truly living as disciples: obedience. Obedience to Jesus' command to love one another. Obedience to Jesus' command to love God with every part of your being. Obedience to Jesus' command

to live simply. Obedience to Jesus' command to submit to the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, sharing and so on. Obedience to Jesus' command to witness and to reach out to others. In short, a conscious intention to follow where he leads, whatever the cost, whatever the problems. Are you sure that you are obeying everything Jesus has commanded you? It's not easy – and there are plenty of difficulties along the way. Jesus is not offering a quick fix for your problems. He is not promising a magic route to riches – just like non-Christians, but a bit quicker because you've prayed about it. He is not saying you'll be kept free from illness or tragedy or difficulty. What he is saying is that, if you're prepared to follow him, to live the life of devotion, to adopt the distinctive lifestyle of those whose attitudes have been transformed by his Holy Spirit, to model the values of the Kingdom of God in your own daily life, then you will be able to share for all eternity the benefits of that Kingdom in his very presence. And that is something well worth sharing with others who might otherwise miss out on all that God has to offer. Or, to put it more bluntly, will end up in the hell that is eternity without God.

3. HE CONSOLES THEM WITH THE PROMISE OF HIS PRESENCE

These first disciples must have been devastated when Jesus died. They must have been delighted when he was seen to be alive. Now they are crushed again as he prepares to leave them, this time for good. But although his physical presence will no longer be there, although they will not be able to see him, touch him, hear him directly, he will still be there with them, there for them.

Already, according to John's gospel, he has promised them his Holy Spirit. That will be for them a reminder of his presence and a source of comfort and strength when the going gets tough. Here he reiterates that: "*Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age,*" he says. Jesus will never leave his disciples. We can always call on his help and experience his strength and his wisdom, wherever we are, whatever we are doing. That's the great promise that he leaves with those first disciples and which is repeated in every generation to those who read and trust these words.

They are Jesus' last words, the words he wanted to remain in people's minds. **Confirmation of his authority, commissioning for the task of mission, the consolation and encouragement of his permanent presence.** Those three things have actually been present, more or less obviously, in all that Jesus has done and said throughout this great Gospel of Matthew. Maybe now that we've got to the end of it, you could read it all through again with some of these thoughts in your minds (and you can read any of the sermons on the website – even listen to some of them, I believe). We need to hold those three things together, but there may be one of them that you particularly need to focus on now.

Perhaps you need to be **reminded of the kingly authority of Jesus** – in your own life as you struggle to control some aspect of your life that is causing problems, or look out at a world which seems to be in utter chaos. Pray that Jesus will assure you of his authority.

Perhaps you need to **take seriously the task of sharing the story** of this Gospel with those around you – or even deal with that call you’ve heard to go and share it “*with all nations*”. It may be that you yourself need to recognise the call to be a disciples – to be baptised or to take more seriously the call to obey Jesus’ teaching. Pray that Jesus will make clear to you his will for your life.

Or perhaps you need this morning to be **assured once again that Jesus is really with you**. You need to experience the indwelling power of his Holy Spirit, to know that – despite what you’re going through, despite what you see around you – Jesus is alive and at work. Maybe even, you’ve never known that and you want to get in on the action this morning. Just listen to these words from *Romans 8:35-39* which I referred to earlier on:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

*“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And pray that Jesus will encourage you and bless you with his presence this morning.

Let’s reflect on that quietly for a few moments, asking God to speak to us by his Holy Spirit.

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Questions for discussion

- 1) How do you experience the authority of Jesus in your own situation?
- 2) Does Jesus' commission mean that every disciple is to be an evangelist? Why/why not?
- 3) How do you know that Jesus is always with you? What about the times when it doesn't feel like it?
- 4) What has been the best bit of Matthew's Gospel for you?
- 5) What are you going to do about all this?