

## Matthew 28:11 – 20 – Worshippers and Witnesses

My late sister-in-law Barbara once told me of something that had happened in her classroom. Barbara was a primary school teacher in Cornwall in the 1970s. In one particular year, her daughter Jo was in her class. One day, a little black girl arrived to join the class. Now in those days you didn't often see people with black skin in the remote county of Cornwall. A little later that day, Jo noticed that the new girl was in tears. So she went to her mum and told her that one of little girls was crying. "Which girl is that?" asked Barbara. "The one over there in the red jumper," said Jo.

Barbara thought it was lovely that her daughter hadn't noticed that the new girl's skin colour was different from the rest of the class. She was simply a little girl in a red jumper who needed comfort.

I wonder what you or I would have said in reply to Barbara's question. Maybe we would have said something quite different. Different people see the same thing in different ways. After a crime has been committed and the police are interviewing possible witnesses, they will often be suspicious if two people give exactly the same account of what they saw. Our first heading:

### **Different witnesses, different worshippers**

Last week, Easter Sunday, we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus. In our story from the Bible today, we find two different groups of people who witnessed the resurrection. But each group had their own interpretation of what had happened. Let's read verses 11 – 15 again.

*<sup>11</sup>While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. <sup>12</sup>When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, <sup>13</sup>telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' <sup>14</sup>If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."<sup>15</sup>So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.*

Different witnesses to the same event: the women and the soldiers. They had all seen the empty tomb, yet reacted in quite different ways. If you look back to verse 8, you'll see that the women were afraid, yet filled with joy. And in verse 9, we read that this led them to worship Jesus.

The soldiers were also afraid – scared for their lives because they had failed in their duty as guards. This led *them* to the chief priests, who had requested that the Roman governor, Pilate, post a guard on the tomb. Did this lead the soldiers to worship? Well, they clearly worshipped money. Like Judas before them, they accepted the bribe that the chief priests and elders

offered them. They also accepted the assurance that the Jewish leaders would square it with Pilate, and keep them out of trouble.

What of the chief priests, and the elders? What did they worship? Well, they clearly worshipped their own status, and would do anything to protect it. The soldiers tell them everything that happened, but they still don't believe that Jesus was who he said he was – the Son of God. They're so certain that they are right, and that Jesus is a trouble-maker and a deceiver – if you look back to verse 63 of chapter 27, you'll see that's how they described him – they are so certain that they are right, that they ignore all the evidence and refuse to believe in him.

Should we be surprised at this? Well, in Luke chapter 16, Jesus tells a story about a rich man and a beggar, named Lazarus, who both die. Lazarus is taken to Abraham's side in heaven, and the rich man is condemned to hell because of his callous indifference to the plight of the beggar. The story ends like this, as the rich man pleads with Abraham:

*<sup>27</sup> ... 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, <sup>28</sup>for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' <sup>29</sup>Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' <sup>30</sup>'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' <sup>31</sup>He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'*

So, what were the reasons that the chief priests didn't believe in Jesus? Well, one reason was prejudice. Clearly, their minds were already made up; they weren't prepared to look at the evidence and admit that they might be wrong. And a second reason was fear: they were afraid of what it might mean for them if the story of the resurrection was true; they were afraid of the changes that it would make to their lives.

And these are still the reasons some people don't believe today. They are prejudiced; their minds are closed. They've already decided that the Bible is irrelevant in today's world, and they're not prepared to read it with an open mind, and to look at the evidence. And they're afraid, afraid of the changes that following Christ would make to their lives. A third reason is, of course, that they've never heard the gospel clearly explained – and that's where we come in. But more of that later.

So, what do the chief priests do? They come up with this feeble story that the disciples stole the body; a story, Matthew says, that was still doing the rounds some time later. Well, could there be any truth in it? Could the disciples have stolen Jesus's body? Not a chance. A few short weeks later, Peter and the other disciples are on the streets of Jerusalem proclaiming the risen Christ. They're flogged and imprisoned – and some are later

executed – and all for what they knew to be a lie? Later, in Acts 17:6, the followers of Jesus were accused of turning the world upside-down. Why? because they knew that their story was true.

And, of course, the claim that the disciples stole the body while the soldiers were asleep doesn't make sense. If they were asleep, how could they know what had happened? No, we can have confidence that the Bible's account of the resurrection is solid, historical fact.

Let's read on. Verses 16 and 17.

*<sup>16</sup>Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. <sup>17</sup>When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.*

Our next heading:

### **Faith and Doubt**

In the Bible, mountains often serve as places where people meet God in a special way. And in our story today, the eleven remaining disciples gather on the mountain in Galilee where Jesus had instructed them to go. And there they meet the risen Christ and worship him. As Jews, they would have been brought up to believe that there is only one God, and that worship belongs to him alone. So here, at last, they recognise that Jesus is fully God in human form.

But, we're told, some doubted.

What are we to make of this? Well, first of all, notice that the Bible doesn't hide the fact that some of the disciples were struggling. Matthew tells us candidly that some doubted. Luke tells us of a similar reaction when the disciples met the risen Christ on a different occasion. After all, they had seen him die, so it wasn't surprising that: *...they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement... (Luke 24:41)*

And, of course, we're all familiar with the story of Thomas, who also found it hard to believe that Jesus had come back to life. .

Perhaps, from time to time, we all encounter a momentary struggle in our faith. In the past, Jesus had rebuked his disciples for their lack of faith. But now, he doesn't rebuke the doubters – he reassures them, as we see in the next verse, verse 18:

*<sup>18</sup>Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*

Here, Jesus is saying that it's OK to worship him, as he claims for himself all of God's authority – in heaven as well as on earth. He's about to send them out as his witnesses – demonstrating that he can use even those of

us whose faith is imperfect. So, if you're struggling with doubts, wondering if Jesus can ever use you, be reassured: you don't have to wait until you're perfect before you can come to Christ. Each one of us comes acknowledging our own weakness, and our need of forgiveness. We come to the foot of the cross, where Jesus died to pay the price for our sins. We see there his open arms embracing us as his brothers and sisters, welcoming us in to God's family, and sending us out to witness to him.

So, here's our final heading:

### **Sent out as Witnesses**

Look down with me at verse 19:

*<sup>19</sup>Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*

This command of Jesus to go and make disciples is sometimes called the Great Commission. You may have heard me say before, that whenever you see the word 'therefore' in the Bible, have a look to see what it's there for. So here, we need to look at the previous verse, verse 18, where Jesus says: *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."*

At a meeting of the Privy Council on May 10 last year, King Charles formally approved a new Great Seal of the Realm. This seal is the chief symbol of royal authority. As you can perhaps see in the picture, this seal depicts King Charles seated on his throne, holding the orb and sceptre – symbols of the authority of the monarch. This Seal is used, for example, when an Act of Parliament receives the Royal Assent. The King's seal of approval – this Great Seal of the Realm – is used to form an impression in a kind of plastic (they used to use wax). And this plastic seal is then attached – it's physically fixed – to official State documents, showing that these documents come with all the authority of the Crown.

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, the apostle Paul wrote this: *And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit. (Ephesians 1:13)*

So, what is the word 'therefore' there for? Jesus, having all authority in heaven and on earth, says to his disciples, *'Therefore, go...'* So he sends them out in his name, marked with his seal – the promised Holy Spirit – passing his authority on to them. And this is where we come in. When we're feeling inadequate, not up to the job that Jesus has given us to do, to be his witnesses and share our faith with others, let's remember that the Bible says that as believers we are marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, and we go with his authority.

Jesus uses four verbs in the commands he gives to his disciples: go, make, baptise and teach. The key verb is make; Jesus's command is to make disciples – the other three verbs tell us how to do it. We're to go, baptise and teach. Jesus has equipped his church with evangelists, whose role is to go and preach the gospel, and through the work of the Holy Spirit, to bring people to faith and to see them baptised. But the Great Commission doesn't end there; we are to make disciples, not just converts. So Jesus has also given the church teachers: *So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11)*. The pastors take over from the evangelists, teaching new converts to obey all of Jesus's commands.

Every now and then at Emmanuel, we have a day called Mission Sunday, where we invite an evangelist to preach to us. A few weeks ago, Ed Drew was here. Last year, we welcomed Glen Scrivener. These are men whose special role in the church is that of evangelist. Then week by week our vicar, Martin, pastors us and teaches us from God's word, the Bible.

There's a story I heard that illustrates the difference between evangelists and pastors. Pat and Mick are on a polar bear hunt. They're in a hut on the ice, when Pat says, 'Stay here Mick. I'm going to see if I can find one.' A little while later, Mick looks out of the window of the hut, to see Pat running at top speed towards him, pursued by a huge bear. He opens the door to let Pat in. But at the last minute, Pat steps aside and in rushes the bear. Pat shouts, 'Look after that one, Mick. I'll go and catch another.'

Well, I don't think that's a true story. For starters, you could never out-run a polar bear. They can run 100m in about 8.5 seconds – that's a second quicker than Usain Bolt. And this story is a bit of a caricature of the different roles of evangelists and pastors. But we get the point: our work for the gospel doesn't end when we see people brought to faith in Christ. In fact, it's only just beginning.

And it's not just our vicar Martin who's responsible for making disciples; we all share that responsibility. Last Sunday, as they were baptised, Roxy and Snehal and Emma witnessed to their faith in Jesus. And we played our part in welcoming them into the fellowship of the church. And that welcome involves all of us helping them to become fully committed disciples. This means encouraging one another to be regular in reading the Bible, to be faithful in prayer and in meeting together week by week. These are the key elements of discipleship: Bible reading, prayer and fellowship.

So, may I ask you: how are you getting along with reading your Bible each day? What's your prayer life like? How important is it to you to meet with others in church on Sunday and in a midweek homegroup? If you're struggling, don't give up, because Jesus has one last thing to say to you

this morning. And it's this: look down at the final sentence of our reading. Jesus says: *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*"

What a wonderful way for Matthew to end his gospel. Jesus's promise is to be with us forever. He has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. I'm reminded of the promise that God gave to Joshua back in OT times. Joshua was Moses' servant, and Moses, this great man of God, had died. So Joshua had to take over and lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. Was he feeling nervous? You bet he was. How could he follow someone like Moses? But God never promised that he would make him into a second Moses. What he did say to Joshua was this: *Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1:9)*

Jesus has commanded us to lead people into the Promised Land of God's kingdom. And all we need is to know that Jesus will be with us, to the very end of the age. So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

Amen.