

# The Great Commission – Gather, Build, Send

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Andrew Harrex – 30<sup>th</sup> October 2011

Matthew 28:16-20

When Richard first approached me about the possibility of coming to Leith to do my internship training I admitted to him I wasn't so sure. I told him of my nervousness about working in a congregation that included my former Biblical studies professor, academics & PhDs, doctors, lawyers, scientists and God forbid, students. Richard suggested in a classically Richard kind of way that I shouldn't worry too much about anyone attending Leith. He simply said "I think you'll find everyone makes the same noises in bed at night."

Now I think Richard was saying to me that "Leith is a community of ordinary people". And from what I have seen over the last two years I think he was right. You are a group of very ordinary people, a group of very special ordinary people.

In our passage today we see another group of very special ordinary people. Fishermen, tax collectors, political activists; the disciples were not what you might expect of a community about to be commissioned to take the teaching of Christ to the ends of the globe. Matthew's account of Jesus's last words to his disciples has been called the Great Commission. It is the commissioning of a bunch of ordinary people whom Jesus has **gathered**, has **built** up with his teaching and discipling, and is now **sending** out to the nations.

In a wonderful return to where it all began (4:12, 18-25) the risen Jesus meets with the eleven disciples back in Galilee. Better still they meet on a

mountainside, the place where the teaching and challenge of Jesus Sermon on the Mount (5:1) shook their Jewish, law abiding worlds.

As Chris Caradus reminded us several weeks ago, sometimes we just need to return to where it all began and remember. Remember the power of that first encounter, remember the joy of receiving Jesus' love, remember the journey that has been travelled since then.

On that Galilean mountainside the sight of the risen Jesus, does to them what it has continued to do for 2000 years. It causes them to worship him. But even in these last great verses of Matthew we are reminded by him of the ordinariness of these disciples. Some doubted. Even after all they had seen and experienced they still live with uncertainty.

Why was I so scared of the professors, the PhD's, the scientists, the students, of Leith? I doubted. I doubted what God was doing. I doubted that I had the knowledge or the giftedness, or the depth to be able to minister in a place like this with so many people who had "their lives all sorted". Isn't it funny how we put others up on a pedestal and think they must be so much more together, more spiritual, more qualified than us, only to find that they have just as many doubts as us. Do you ever doubt?

Jesus does for them what he does for each of us in our fear and doubt, he moves, he comes, he meets us where we are at. And he tells them and us just how massive, and powerful and great he is. He says "*All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me*". This reflects a phrase found in Daniel 7:14 about the Son of Man; One who all peoples and nations will worship, whose kingdom is everlasting and will never be destroyed. And here Jesus is claiming it as his own. Whatever doubts the disciples might have it seems that Jesus' appearance says to them "no need to doubt, I who stand before you have overcome, and because you are mine, you will overcome".

The disciples have been taught by Jesus, have seen his power and authority in miracles and in his teaching. When we lift our eyes beyond

ourselves to Jesus, the one who has all authority, doubt seems much less of a problem. As we understand who we are “in Christ” we realise it is not us who has to overcome, for Christ has already done that for us. He leads us in his authority.

And then he says “go”. But it is not the going that is important; it is the instruction to “make disciples of all nations”. To get to all nations, there must be a going out.

The disciple-making is to include Baptism. Disciples are to be baptised into an allegiance to this God who is one and yet three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus takes his place alongside the Father and the Spirit as one who deserves our worship and our commitment.

Disciple-making also includes teaching. Disciples must be taught to obey all that Jesus has commanded, and this includes the sermon on the mountainside in Galilee and all the teaching that follows.

Just as the return to the Galilean mountainside took the disciples back to where it all began Matthew does the same for his readers. The final verse of his Gospel tells us Jesus promises “I am with you always”. It is the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah (7:14) that Matthew quotes in 1:23 “the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” which means, “God with us”.

Jesus has gathered this rag-tag team of ordinary individuals and he has trained them. They have followed his ministry, listened to his teaching, seen his miracles, watched him get offside with the religious authorities, despaired at his death on a cross, rejoiced in his resurrection and through all this, they have been trained. Jesus has been building in them all that they need to carry on his mission. And in these final verses in Matthew he sends them to go and do it.

How would it have felt that day as a disciple? How would it have felt to hear these words and then see Jesus disappear off into the heavens to his

Father’s side? How would it have felt to receive the Holy Spirit in the days ahead and know that Jesus wasn’t kidding?

Whatever it felt like, the disciples did it! They did what Jesus asked and they began to fulfil the great commission, and we gather today because Jesus knew what he was doing when he gathered, built up and sent this group of ordinary people.

And I think Jesus still knows what he is doing, and that is why he has gathered you here today.

I believe, after two years of life with you, dearly loved, ordinary people of Leith, that God has called you to be a gathering, building, sending people, that this is part of the DNA of this Church as you go about the work of “growing great community”.

Can you raise your hand if you have been here 20 years or more? 5? 2? Less than 12 months? This is a gathering place. And hopefully when people turn up here they stay because they are welcomed and loved and accepted. I wonder how many of you have come here a little bit lost, perhaps hurt or wounded by a past experience. Leith has a history of caring for those who walk through its doors. When my wife Christine first came along to Leith 15 or so years ago she tells me how she was invited to a Trebilco or a Lee or a Fitzpatrick or a Marshall house every Sunday for lunch. The challenge as you have grown bigger as a congregation has been to maintain that kind of hospitality and to keep gathering those who come along. My prayer is that each would experience the kind of welcome we have received as a family here. You have gathered us in and for your care and support we are hugely thankful.

You have also been a community that seeks to disciple and build those who attend. Your children and youth programmes take seriously the call to train up the young. All are encouraged to participate in small groups and to sharpen one another in the words of proverbs “as iron sharpens iron”. Pastoral care involves encouraging each member of the

community to grow in their faith journey and the leadership of this church have recognised the need to raise the levels here. That is why they are seeking to grow the ministry team. What an exciting thing to choose to commit to – finding more money in the budget so that the faith community might be supported in growing to a mature faith. The challenge to be a “building” community is to help one another to listen to what the Spirit wants to do in your life. You cannot walk with Jesus and not be changed, through the hard times and the good. I am a different person because of my time here. God has used Richard and Helen and all of you to teach me much about overcoming my doubts, the skills I bring as a minister of the gospel, and confidence that Jesus knows what he is doing.

And finally, you are a sending Church. I doubt whether there is a Pressy Church in the country that has been attended by more ministers in training than this one over recent years. The Harrexes are only the most recent in a long line. But more than that, for 10 years you have supported the vision of the missionary church that is Studentsoul. It is a community for students that gathers them, builds them and after 2, 3, 4 short years sends them on to live a life of faith in other parts of the country or world. But even more than that, every day of every week, people of this congregation are sent out to schools, classes, lectures, halls, flats and workplaces. Perhaps some in this very room may be called in the future to go and serve God in missions overseas. But there are also nations of people represented right here at our front door. And this presents another possible challenge. Could being sent to the nations include offering conversation language classes to non-english speaking students, could it include biking to the ends of the earth to raise funds for some on the other side of the world to have water, could it involve raising more support for mission work to at risk youth here in South Dunedin? These are matters for prayer but if there is one thing the Harrexes have been reminded of over the last weeks, it is not our good ideas and plans that will get us there. Being sent means we must rely completely on the one who sends us in his name. As a sending community may you ever be

in prayer, seeking God’s will for your future and trusting him for the risky things he calls us to.

2000 years ago Jesus put his trust in a particularly ordinary group of individuals. He gathered them to himself, he built and trained them up and then he sent them out to change the world.

We also are called to this. Though the future remains uncertain may we know the purpose and the promise of the one who says “I am with you always”.

And so we come as ones gathered, built and sent to the gathering, building, sending event that is the communion table.

We gather as the community of faith around this table. We gather with those across the globe, those of the past and the present. May we know that at this table there is neither Jew nor Greek, rich or poor, academic or labourer, doubting or confident, we are one in Christ.

We come to this table to remember that Jesus is Lord of this table and Lord of our lives. He is the one who supplies us with daily bread and living water. At this table we are built up in our faith and in the knowledge that Christ has made it possible for us to receive God’s grace.

We come to this table to be sent, sent out into a world that needs Good News, sent out into a world of possibilities and the mystery of the unknown. But in the sending this table promises that Christ will travel with us and that one day he will return and all that has been promised will be completed.

Let us come as the community of faith to the gift of this table.