

I wonder have any of you considered just how long it is that we haven't been together? On Wednesday night I was out walking the dog and Alison made a comment in passing about the last 12 weeks. I looked at her and said, "Surely not?" But it's true, the last time that we were together was 12 weeks ago. Staggering.

But the one thing I believe these 12 weeks has done for us as a Church is to ask the question – what are we here for? Why do we as Church exist? What is our purpose? There may be many different answers to that question. Some of you might say the purpose of the Church is for fellowship, getting together, being there for each other. Others of you might say that the purpose of Church is for teaching the Word of God. And then some of you might say it's about praise like Ephesians 1:3 to give God the Glory. There's got to be a reason why each of us are here on earth. Why?

Our passage today tells us what our why is. Your why is the mission of God. Your why is to reach out to people for the cause of Christ. Your why is to seek and save the lost. That's why we exist as a Church today. You can spend all the time in the world praising God, fellowshipping together in your church gatherings, but if we are not outside reaching people with the Gospel then we've missed the point. I believe in these days when our Church buildings are closed, God is teaching us a big lesson. Jesus in Luke 19:10 said that the Son of man's purpose was to seek and to save the lost. That Greek word Lost – *apollumi* – means dead. None of us want to see anyone die do we, and therefore our why is to seek those people who otherwise are going to die.

All of us have a mission. Some of you have a mission in your house to reach a family member with the Gospel of Jesus. When we all get the chance to get back to those coffee shops, are you going because of your need for good coffee, or is it your mission to reach out to someone who is lost? So here's the tough question this morning - When is the last time when this has happened in your life – when you reached out to someone lost?

You see now is the time folks to waken up and realise the Church cannot go back to what it was. Now is the time to assess why you exist. The mistake we make with Church is that we come each week for the teaching, for the worship, for fellowship and we think that we've got it. But the reality is that if we look at Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:24 he says that we run the race to get the crown. Running the race in my view doesn't happen as we gather on

Sundays or even like right now. For me this is your training ground. All of what we do is preparation. But next you have got to go out and run the race.

In the past year I have reflected that the membership I've had in Ballyclare golf club has been worth nothing. The reason I say that is that in the past year I've played maybe 5 times on the course – which makes for a very expensive round of golf. But on the other hand I have been spending much more time at the driving range practicing. The thing is that I can spend all my time on a driving range hitting golf ball after golf ball after golf ball, but unless I'm out on the course I'm not actually playing golf. There's a difference between training and the actual competition.

What we do in Church is training, but all of this is to build you up for the main event. And the main event in my view is not simply to get back to Church. Many of you haven't realised that you need to get out and be in the competition. And maybe the reason why you're not is because you know as well as I do that it's tough being out there. It's tough when the Gospel is on the streets rather than tucked away in some church gathering. Our raison d'être, our reason for being is to tell people about Jesus. I believe God is challenging us to reimagine what Church is.

Therefore I want you consider from our reading of Matthew 28 this morning, a few things which are to prepare you for the mission that Jesus wants you to engage with.

Say Yes to Jesus

Firstly can you see that the 11 disciples go up to Galilee from Jerusalem. They're going home because they've been told earlier that this is where Jesus will meet them. It's back to where things all started. It's where they were picked. These disciples are just normal everyday folks. He didn't pick priests or officials who would be considered important in the community. Some of these guys are fishermen. There's nothing special about who they are and actually it doesn't need to be. It just needed people who would say yes to Jesus. Folks, hear it from me, there's nothing spectacular in my background or in my life that in any way justifies me being in front of you now as your pastor. My dad was an alcoholic. My mum was a house cleaner. I didn't get my 11 plus. There's no intellectual skills in me. All that happened 12 years ago was me saying yes to Jesus when he called me. He called me out of a good job. He called me to leave Coleraine. And in absolute trust we as a family gave our yes to God's

mission. You know I have been so encouraged this year to see 5 of our teenagers who said yes to Jesus with a desire to go and serve him on mission through Exodus. That's what I long for more and more in our Church family, but not just the young, that everyone would say yes Jesus I'm available to be used for your mission.

Heartfelt Worship

Next we see from the text that the disciples worshipped him, but some doubted.

Unlike Church every Sunday, this Youtube thing that broadcasts our services means that I have no idea who is watching. You could be coming with a Christian faith, a different faith or no faith at all. But we all have one thing in common – we all worship something. We all are impacted and consumed by some thing. It might be sex, it might be money, whatever it is. But the story of the Great Commission is that as we reach out we would all be overwhelmed in worship of the person of Jesus Christ – that all of us move from that initial interest to a head knowledge and then to heartfelt love and worship of Jesus. We see in the story that some doubted, and there will always be people who doubt. But this text is calling all of us to make a decision. The decision will prompt our heart into the action of mission. Matthew is just being honest that even in this crowd of people who gather around Jesus, there was doubt. If Jesus is preparing his Church, then our devotion of worship of him will spur us into action. So can I suggest something - If you're not a heartfelt worshipper of Jesus then you will find mission tough because your energy will be coming from a different source. The thing that sustained the work of the early church was that the followers were worshippers. They were willing to do anything for Jesus because they loved him.

All authority is in Jesus

Next we read in verse 18 that Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me".

We all have busy lives I know that, and I know over these 12 weeks as we have tried to engage with some of you to help us with how we are currently doing church I hear the response, Jonny I'm just too busy at the minute or I don't really like cameras. Folks I get that, but as we read this verse I see from it that

all authority lies with Jesus. Therefore the question is whether you are willing to align all of your life to the authority of Jesus.

When we look at the temptation of Jesus we see there that Satan takes Jesus to a high mountain, showing him all the kingdoms of the world and all their splendour. And he tells Jesus that he can have all of this if he would just worship Satan. Satan is offering Jesus something that actually is temporal but Jesus knows that God offers that which is eternal. Jesus tells the disciples that all authority in heaven and earth has been given to him by God. Satan wants you to take the easy way out. He wants your priorities to be focussed on the job, the security, all the splendour. He wants you to be caught up in these days with all kinds of things, but folks it's temporal. It doesn't last. God wants you in his mission to think of the eternal. He therefore neds each of us to surrender all things that in an earthly sense are important, but they have no eternal perspective. Are you willing to submit all of that for him?

Go and make disciples

Next Jesus says in verse 19 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you".

So as we say yes to Jesus, as we come as heart-felt worshippers, and as we submit ourselves to his Authority, Jesus says to you and me, "go and make disciples". Let's be clear, we don't just tell others about Jesus. We don't leave the making disciples bit to the minister. We, all of us, are instructed to make people disciples. Neither is it just about teaching. He says to teach them to obey. We are called to disciple people that their lives are not just transformed to know about Jesus (head knowledge), but they want to obey God from their heart. You know as a parent of two boys I have realised that my job is not just to teach my kids to obey what I say. I know fine well that if all I do with my kids is just fire off instructions to them they will do it but they will be pretty hacked off doing it. God doesn't just want followers who are reluctant, submissive robots. He wants them to see the love that is expressed in Jesus which drives the sinner to be a lifelong follower full of love for their Father in heaven. You see if all we do in Church is bring people through the door but don't spend time growing them, then they don't actually become anything other than a pew filler and that's certainly not what church is about. It's not about bums on sears to pay the bills. We as a church must exist to make disciples, teaching them to follow the will of God for their lives.

God is with us as we go

So that's all great Jonny, but how do we do all this. Well the answer is in the last verse. "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

If in the mission of God we do this as a programme, but we don't sit and receive the power that equips us for his mission, then it will be a complete waste. We will only accomplish this because God will give us the power to do it. In Matthew 1 the Angel instructs Joseph that this child will be called Immanuel – God with us. And then his last words in the same book are these – I'm with you. He's with you as you speak about him in your own home, in your work context, out on the streets. He says I am with you. He gives power to those fishermen, those ordinary guys, because they are the ones who stick close to him. Are you sticking close to him, or are you just waiting for the Church building to reopen? If it's the latter, then please re-read these bible verses to remind yourself of what your purpose is on earth.

So as we start to see things open up again over the months ahead, and you have the chance to get out a little more, remember not to worry about the Sunday services – they will come in due course – remember all of this is the training ground – preparing you so that you can go and make disciples. Today say yes to Jesus, be devoted in your worship of him, submit all that you hold dearly to him, make disciples of him not just people filling pews, and do it all knowing that you're doing it with his power and not your own.