

“Go, Therefore” – Mat 28:16-20 – Trinity Sunday – June 19, 2011

“Not again!” Those are the words I can guarantee that Elizabeth will say as she enters the living room and discovers that I am watching a rerun of one of the Star Wars movies. I can guarantee that she will say “Not again!” because that is what she says every time. I’m not sure if the dig is at the cable channel for running it one more time, or at me for watching it for the umpteenth time, but either way her opinion on the matter is fairly clear.

While those movies are – at least in Elizabeth’s opinion – pretty stale now, both the release of the original three movies and the three “prequel” movies were accompanied by much hype and excitement, not to mention huge sales of related paraphernalia such as light-sabers, model space ships and costumes. Many of those gadgets endure – for example, last weekend Elizabeth’s son James – a HUGE Star Wars fan when he was young - celebrated his 40th birthday, complete with a piñata that was a Darth Vader mask (and yes, he still has his original light-saber!) The sale of those related goodies made up one of the greatest marketing coups of all time – apparently George Lucas surrendered \$500K of his director’s fee on the first movie to obtain the marketing rights for the sequels and all the spin-off accessories, an investment that returned hundreds of millions of dollars.

For those of you who were totally isolated from this cultural phenomenon that swept the Western world at least, these movies made famous a number of weird characters (naturally, the heroes were humans!) such as the inverted-speaking Yoda (green and pointy-eared he was), the super-slug Jabba the Hutt, floppy-eared Jar-Jar Binks, the robots R2D2 and C3PO, and of course the menacingly evil Darth Vader with the permanent shiny black mask and raspy James Earl Jones voice. Vader was the perfectly dark ultimate power figure.

These images from Star Wars wormed into my mind as I read our gospel text from Matthew, at least in part because so many of today’s Christians tend to read it or hear it with Jesus speaking in a Darth Vader kind of voice: “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” Too many Christians have heard and continue to hear that pronouncement as the mother of all power statements, and have responded by implementing all kinds of ecclesiastical slavery, with armies of the church tromping forth in black-coated legions to subdue the heathen hordes. I’m not alone in this assessment – if you ever have the opportunity to plow your way through Calvin’s Institutes you will discover he also had some choice things to say about a certain pre-reformation branch of the church that he definitely considered the “Evil Empire”!

Sadly, for the past two thousand years, and even as recently as the past decade, people have heard this passage from Matthew as some kind of divine Presidential order to bomb and blast the nations into submission, until we have won their hearts and minds and turned them if not into faithful Christians, then at least into obedient slaves – I mean, disciples.

However, there are three little but ever-so-crucial words in this passage that cut that kind of militant interpretation to shreds. Those three little words: “And Jesus came...” At first we probably don’t even hear those words, or at best hear them as a kind of filler, a fluffy introduction to what He had to say. But those words are like a little hook in an otherwise smooth story, kind of like that single bread crumb underneath your crossword puzzle on the kitchen table. If we stop to briefly think about those three words, they seem out of place, and a bit confusing, because it seems that the disciples had already encountered the risen Christ on the mountain to which Jesus had directed them, and so to have Him “come to them” seems redundant, or a bit confusing. But if we stop to consider deeply those words, “And Jesus came”, a whole new dimension of understanding opens up.

You see, there are only two places in Matthew's gospel where Jesus comes to his disciples – all other times the disciples come to him – and both of those times that Jesus comes to his disciples are mountain-top experiences. The other time that Jesus approached his disciples, and they were frightened and doubtful and in awe then as well, was the Transfiguration, when Jesus met with Moses and Elijah on the mountain. Both that incident and now this one are accounts of the appearance of the glorified Christ. In both the disciples were in awe, and worshipped, although even here some doubted.

“And Jesus came ... to them” – instead of being some remote, God-like, aloof and cold power figure, here is Jesus coming up close and personal with his closest followers, reassuring them with his close and loving and friendly presence that they need not fear him. An assurance that Jesus seals with his promise to them that He would stay close with them forever, “to the end of the age” even.

So, quite apart from a drum-rolling, helicopter-whop-whop-whopping, guns blazing, fire and smoke-filled “Apocalypse Now” kind of conclusion to Matthew's gospel, what we have instead is a hugely powerful, love-filled turning point, the ultimate reconnection between Jesus and his disciples, an encounter in which Jesus directs them to turn from being disciples, from looking inward at their little group, to being apostles, turning them outwards to proclaim the message of mercy and grace and salvation offered by God through the risen Christ. This is the moment when the focus of those who would follow Christ, who would name themselves after Him, who would call themselves His, when their focus is radically changed, when Jesus turns their attention and their efforts outward.

Up until now the disciples have pretty much been looking inward, and that was appropriate, as they observed what Jesus had shown them, and discussed what Jesus had told them, and had learned and grown. Now it was time for them to take their new faith, as fragile as it was (note that some of them still doubted), and begin to turn towards those outside their own little circle, time to turn to the peoples of all nations and proclaim both with their words and with their lives the love of God and from God so clearly displayed in Jesus.

“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,” Jesus commanded them. Further, He instructed them to “teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” The question before us is, “what exactly did Jesus command them?” Those who prefer the Jesus-as-Darth-Vader approach will prefer to remember only that Jesus issued commandments like “go and sin no more.” Those who can hear Jesus coming near to his followers to calm their fears will remember more clearly Jesus' ultimate commandment to love God with all your being and to love one another as they have been loved by God. Those who have felt the love of Jesus lift them out of troubled times will remember his affirmations that the weak and powerless will be blessed with the kingdom of heaven. Those who can hear the risen Christ promising his followers that He will be with them for all time will also remember his declaration that He did not come into the world to condemn the world but that the whole world might be saved.

The disciples on that mountain in Galilee had heard Jesus teach and preach; they had seen Jesus display the power of God within him working miracles of healing and resurrection; and now they had even experienced the risen Christ coming to them, assuring them of His constant and continuing love and presence through the Holy Spirit. Now it was time for them to turn outwards, to move outwards from that centering in faith, to proclaim in word and in action all that He had commanded them.

The parallel is pretty clear. We also have heard the teaching and preaching of Jesus; we have experienced the miracle of God's love at work in our own lives, made possible through our faith – however doubting it may be – in Jesus the Son; we have felt the power of the Holy Spirit breathing life into us; and now we are reminded, just as those disciples were, to turn outwards, to step out into the world, into our neighbourhood, to display by our loving actions that they also are loved by God. We, as disciples of Christ, have learned to obey all that he commanded them – 'all', which includes feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, comforting the lonely, healing the sick; 'all', which includes forgiving the sins of others as we have been forgiven; 'all', which includes loving them as we have been loved – and so in turn are also urged to "go, therefore" and invite all nations to the well of the water of life from which we drink, to display the hope and promise and reality of abundant life that we have found in obedient service to the risen Christ.

"And Jesus came and said to them, go therefore ..." What a powerful few words to make a world of difference. Jesus still comes and says the same to us, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." What a powerful few words that can help us make a different world.