

**“Turn Outwards” – Mat 28:16-20 – Trinity Sunday – May 22, 2005**

An old phenomenon, it is. That people excited over a sequel movie would be. That they in stilted reverse grammar like Yoda would speak. There is, of course, much excitement over the release of the final of six films in the Star Wars double-trilogy, and there will no doubt be at least a brief revival in the sales of the various masks, light-sabres, and other goodies that made up the greatest marketing coup of all time (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).

For those of you who are totally isolated from this cultural phenomenon that has swept the Western world at least, these movies made famous a number of weird characters (naturally, the heroes were humans!) such as Jobba the Hutt, Jar-Jar Binks, robots R2D2 and C3PO, and the menacingly evil Darth Vader with the permanent shiny black mask and raspy voice, the perfectly dark ultimate power figure. (I think it was John Stewart who quipped about CNN now having the voice of the dark side, but I won't go there!)

These images from Star Wars leaped 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 hear and have heard that as the mother of all power statements, resulting in all kinds of ecclesiastical slavery, as the armies of the church have tromped forth in black-coated legions to subdue the heathen hordes. I had opportunity yesterday to slog my way through a chunk of Calvin's Institutes, and he had some choice things to say about a certain pre-reformation branch of the church that he definitely considered the “Evil Empire”!

For the past two thousand years, and even as recently as the past three years, 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. I have to be careful what I say here – I think I just felt a ripple in the Force!

However, there are three little but ever-so-crucial words in this passage that, if one has ears to hear, slice through hearing a Darth Vader-like Christ like a light saber through a blast door. 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-whopping “Apocalypse Now” kind of conclusion to Matthew’s gospel, what we have is a huge, 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 turned outward.

Up until now they 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 (some of them doubted), and begin to turn to those outside their little circle, 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.” Those who prefer the Jesus-as-Darth-Vader approach will 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 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 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 called, just as those disciples were, to turn outwards, to step out into the world, to invite all nations to the well of the water of life from which we drink, to convince them that because we are loved we love them too, 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 ...” What powerful few words to make a world of difference. Jesus comes and says the same to us, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”