Sermon Stowe Feb 13 2022

We are just over half way through a sermon series entitled “The Great commission to make Disciples”. Hans gave an excellent sermon least week on the resurrection. He was right to focus on resurrection as the foundation of the outward thrust to spread the good news. I want to build on that and put the rapid, exponential expansion of faith & belief in Jesus into its context. So I do not propose to talk about the journeys by individuals as the new Christians scattered and spread the news around the Mediterranean world. I want to talk about the context for the dramatic growth of the church. The Gospel reading reminds us of what is called the Great Commission by Jesus and our first readings how Peter and then Paul carried out this command but they did it in a situation that was, I think, incredibly favourable.

I rediscovered this book on my shelves and it’s provided much of the background I will talk about. Chadwick begins with a statement that is both obvious and far reaching: “The first Christians were Jews.” The first Christians or Nazarites originally lived with, taught, convinced and converted fellow Jews. I had not realised how scattered the Jewish nation had become over many years before Jesus lived. Palestine had been under heavy Roman control and exploitation for many years. The country was basically poor and millions of Jews had left their homeland to go where they could prosper. You could find a synagogue anywhere from Cadiz in Spain to Crimea in Ukraine to Alexandria in Egypt. Chadwick says that there were over 1 million Jews in Alexandria. There were 12 synagogues in Rome. There were more Jews living away than lived in Palestine.

What made the Jews significant were their beliefs and practices. They were notorious for their stubbornness, their lack of flexibility and their inability to compromise about their faith. They were, indeed, willing to die rather than submit to forced conformity by their overlords. Jews refused to follow Roman orders to worship the Emperor because they worshipped Yahweh, the one and only God. They would not eat pork; they believed contact with Gentiles made them unclean before God – and they would die rather than submit. This unwavering confrontation led the Roman authorities to give them a unique position. Their beliefs and customs were tolerated so that across the Roman empire there were Jewish congregations with a strong identity and presence in their particular society and any Jew could come to their town or city and be accepted, if a Jew arrived at a synagogue he/she would receive 3 days food and lodging and no questions asked – even if they were members of this new and radical sect that became known as Christians.

Christians were not, as we know, accepted by orthodox Jews because of their faith and belief in Jesus and his resurrection. But the Jewish nation itself was split into several sects ranging from the Essenes who were based in the Jordan valley in Qumran and kept very strict observance of the Mosaic Law to Pharisees who built on Mosaic law and interpreted it and created the Talmud, the book of rules that defined what every pious Jew should do or not do, to Sadducees (upper class Jews) who stuck strictly to Mosaic law, did not believe in life after death – it was not mentioned in Mosaic writing so it could not happen. Sadducees despised the Pharisees for their relative liberality and both despised Essenes. All of them walked the tightrope of conformity to their belief and the necessary conformity to rule by the Romans.

So the early church fitted into this unique situation. They were more flexible in their belief and practise than the hardline Essenes though many Essenes were convinced and became believers; Christians were more radical and revolutionary than hardline Pharisees who could not accept that Jesus was the Messiah and that Temple sacrifices were meaningless – but many were convinced and joined the church. Christians were successful and gained converts from all sections of society so that the authorities felt they had to oppose and oppress the new sect and that led to an exodus from Jerusalem into the accepting Jewish communities elsewhere. The Gospel spread. And looking at the big picture the spread was made easier by the success of the Roman Empire. The Empire needed a road infrastructure to enable good travel so they could mobilise their army quickly; they needed good communications so that Rome could control and their businesses could prosper. That made it easier for new Christians to travel and spread the word. The more we look at what happened and the way it happened, the more we understand the structure of the world into which Jesus was born and lived, it all enabled His life death and resurrection to be the Big Bang that triggered the most wonderful change for humanity. You can see the flowering of a grand strategy, God’s strategy over decades or hundreds of years that ensured that His master plan happened in the best possible place at the best possible time for the best possible effect.

What I have described so far implies that it was an all Jewish affair but of course that was not the case. Every Jewish synagogue had Gentiles around it who were attracted to its teaching and ethos and then captivated by this new sect, this new religion. The church was based in Jerusalem and Christians there used the Temple for their worship and that created tensions. Orthodox non-Christian Jewish leaders set up an inquisition that persecuted Christians and executed them for blasphemy. Saul was a passionate diligent Pharisee who sought out Christians so they could be reconverted and punished; until he met Jesus on the road to Damascus and became a passionate advocate for him. But Paul’s ministry and calling, and the ministry and calling of many others whose work is not recorded but certainly occurred, was to spread the word to the Gentiles who were the vast majority of people. Unless the Gentile mission was approved, as it was in Jerusalem after a long and passionate debate, Christianity could not become a worldwide religion.

As the church grew some structural and organisational issues had to be addressed. When Paul was working it was possible to appeal to Jerusalem for guidance and decisions about the relationship and validity of Gentile membership and worship because some of the Apostles were still alive, were still around. The early church could rely on guidance from Apostles and disciples who had known Jesus but what was to happen as they died off, or as they followed their calling; St Thomas reputedly to India, Andrew to Southern Russia, James to Spain and Joseph of Arimathea to Glastonbury (all according to later myth but all possible). And as the church grew, different customs, different liturgies and theological insights grew up under different leaders. Who was to ensure that the Jesus’ teaching was accurately and honestly transmitted when those who were with Jesus had gone? Who was going to defend the faith against those who sought to corrupt it for their own benefit (yes it did happen – read 1 Tim 5). Who would challenge and argue the case against other religions particularly Gnosticism that was a growing challenge? Two things happened. Firstly a written record of the events of Jesus’ life was necessary and was created; Q and Mark then Matthew and Luke wrote their accounts. Many years later John’s Gospel wrote and together they gave doctrine and history some stability. And quite naturally, in each local church, leaders emerged who heard the gospel, were gifted as necessary for the ministry to their flock. They were called presbyters and as some men were perceived as being the right people were given the title bishop and the responsibility to lead and decide on matters as they arose and to keep and teach the faith.

I have tried to give you a rapid but manageable overview of what happened as the early church grew and some of the amazing factors that ensured that it did not fizzle out but flourished and spread to many countries and nations. Jesus’ command - to go and make disciples throughout the world was being honoured but is never achieved. Human life and activity is never static so there are always new people to hear the good news of Jesus. That’s the task we have in our time. I was very tempted to continue and try to draw conclusions from this wonderful story – conclusions relevant and applicable to today but that would be to encroach on whoever talks to you in 2 weeks time. So I leave this amazing story with you, hoping that it inspires your faith and trust and a belief that God was in control then and is now. AMEN