JESUS THE EVANGELIST IN MATTHEW
Additional Handout for Leading Evangelism

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Some months ago I flew back into the United Kingdom from Berlin and arrived at Stansted airport late in the evening after a full day of speaking and then travelling. I was not wearing my clerical collar.

To my surprise, I was called over by a customs officer who examined my passport closely. What was my purpose in Germany? I told him I was an Anglican clergyman and I had been to Germany to address a conference on planting new kinds of churches. His eyebrows arched in disbelief.

I was a clergyman. So where was my parish? I don't have a parish, I said. I travel all over the country. Who did I work for? I took a deep breath. I work for the Archbishop of Canterbury. The eyebrows rise even more. Can I prove it? Did I have a business card or something? I had no papers except the e-mail inviting me to the conference.

The man thought for some time. Eventually he said this. 'I will let you go if you can name the synoptic gospels'. Matthew, Mark and Luke, I said, and was allowed back into the country, marvelling at the training given to customs officers on how to tell a true clergyman from a false one.

Jesus the Evangelist. But according to which gospel?

I've spent many years, as some of you know, reflecting on the ministry of Jesus as an evangelist in Luke and especially the Emmaus Road story. Alongside these I've thought quite hard about the pictures of evangelism which Luke offers to us in the Acts of the Apostles.

Luke offers us a picture of Jesus who gives priority to the lost, who walks and listens, who encourages and nurtures and often draws people rather gradually into the life of the kingdom of God and of the Christian community.

You've looked at Luke's portrait already this week. I want to set beside it in what I have to say the picture of Jesus the Evangelist a portrait drawn from the Gospel of Matthew, which has a rather different focus and one we need to hear.

The best way to focus the lens of Matthew's gospel is, as many people have pointed out, through the Great Commission: the final words of Jesus to his disciples. This is the NRSV translation:

'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.'

If ever a single verse could be said to have shaped the history of the world, this is the one. We should be careful as we weigh it and interpret it for today.

There are four verbs, four actions, in that sentence. Go therefore. Make disciples. Baptising. Teaching.

Except, as you may know, in the Greek there is only actually one verb, one imperative which governs the other three.

Make disciples of all the nations. That involves going, it involves baptising, it involves teaching and probably in that order. But the event, the action, which is commanded, according to Matthew, in that generation and every generation is the making of disciples.

According to Matthew, Jesus is not so much interested in those who begin the journey but in those who continue it to the end. He is not so much interested in the seed which begins to grow as that which bears lasting fruit. He is not so much interested in the very first steps along the journey, interesting and exciting though they are, but the longer pilgrimage, the formation of character in community, the challenges and difficulties of a whole life lived in obedience to Christ.

In order to understand the Gospel of Matthew and Jesus the Evangelist you need the lens of the Great Commission. But in order to understand the lens of the Great Commission you need to read and understand the Gospel of Matthew. What does Matthew mean by the term discipleship and the command to make disciples? He may not mean what we think he means. The clues are there in the commission itself but they are unpacked and expounded in the gospel.

We speculate about the context of Matthew's gospel because of its particular emphasis. We guess that Matthew has in mind a group of Christians who have begun the Christian journey but who have found it to be both immensely rewarding and also immensely challenging and difficult. Many of those who started out on the journey have turned back. The Christians Matthew is writing for find the road which leads to life narrow and difficult. Matthew is perhaps a gospel for Christian disciples who find that they are living against the grain of their culture

and society. Matthew is increasingly a gospel for today.

Through Matthew's account of the good news of Jesus we are given, I think, a clear portrait of Jesus the evangelist and of the ministry of evangelism. How is it that Jesus is able to make disciples who are able to live against the grain of their society and follow the ways of the kingdom? How is it that he is able to make disciples who reflect in their community his own nature and character – the character of the beatitudes. The logic of the gospel is that Jesus will have modelled the way you make disciples in the narrative and the body of the gospel: that his own disciples will need to do what he has done within his earthly ministry. The Jesus of Matthew's gospel is the kind of evangelist who will make disciples.

So let's look at the gospel through that lens of the Great Commission. What does Jesus do? What does Matthew tell us he is doing. The clue lies in the second part of the verse: "going make disciples" – so far so good. The rest of the verse is often understood as sequential. First go and make disciples then baptise them, then teach them. The ministry of the evangelist (we suppose) has to do with the first part of the sequence: going and making disciples. The ministry of the pastor has to do with baptising and teaching.

You might well be able to argue that distinction in Luke and Paul but I am not sure it holds up in Matthew. This is one sentence and four verbs used of the same group of people.

Suppose the sequence is not sequential. First go and make disciples and then baptise them and teach them. Suppose Jesus is actually talking about a single series of actions: this is what I want you to do: going, make disciples of all the nations. And this is how you do it: baptising them and teaching them…

That would seem to me to be the natural movement of the sentence. And I want to suggest that this is exactly what we see in the structure and patterns of Matthew's gospel. Matthew emphasises two elements in Jesus' ministry as an evangelist above all others and they are these.

First the formation of community, the formation of the church – the word which is actually used only in this gospel. This is, for Matthew's gospel above all, one of the absolute foundations of Jesus' ministry. Baptism in the Great Commission is the sacrament of entry, incorporation into the Christian community and into the name and nature of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When Jesus talks about baptising people into the threefold name he is talking about the formation of the Christian community.

And second the importance of teaching: clear, imaginative, apposite, challenging instruction within the community which is living out and modelling Christian faith.

I want to suggest in what I say this morning that these are the hallmarks of Jesus the evangelist as Matthew reveals them and I will take each in turn. First, forming community. Second teaching in the context of community. This is how we make disciples. In the final part of what I say, I want to offer an apologetic, a rationale, for fresh expressions of church based not upon the need to draw in those whom the church is not reaching (not based on evangelism) but on the need for thorough and life changing discipleship.

What does Matthew's gospel tell us about the importance of forming community? There is an old and often misused saying in New Testament scholarship. Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God – the kingdom of heaven in Matthew – and what emerged was the church. In its original context, I am told, that saying is a positive one. But it has often been used to twist and disparage the Christian community in a way which would not be recognised by Matthew himself.

I dare anyone to read Matthew's gospel honestly and deny that Jesus came to found a living community of people as a first priority according to this gospel. What is the first action of Jesus' ministry according to Matthew? The call of Peter and Andrew, James and John: a community. Before we read of a single specific miracle of healing we are given three chapters, 111 verses of teaching addressed not to the crowds but to the disciples: mathetai (5.1). We read the Sermon on the Mount through our Western individualism but these are words to a community. It is not blessed is the one who is poor in spirit but blessed are the poor in spirit (plural). These verses are about the character and perfection of community. It is not you (singular) are the salt of the earth but you (plural) are salt and light. It is not "my father who art in heaven" but our father who art in heaven. Jesus gives this community a prayer to be prayed every single day, which they are to pray together in a journey which is marked by forgiveness in community.

This community is marked by a particular character which is caught in the beatitudes and it lives according to a particular ethic summarised in the sermon on the mount. It is entrusted with a particular and difficult mission explored in Matthew 10. It is to be marked by a particular set of virtues in the great discourse of Chapter 18. You may want to turn to that passage and refresh your memory.

The community is to be marked by humility and a particular order in which the youngest child is treasured and valued. It is to place a profound value on that which is lost, reflecting the mercies and the priorities of God himself. It is a community marked by the maturity of practising its own discipline and to some degree determining its own ethics. And it is to be a community above all which is marked by the practice of forgiveness of my brother and sister – even to seventy times seven.

And finally, moving on to the great discourses of chapters 23 and 24 it is to be a community of people who know that they are living in the tension between Jesus' first coming and his return as king. This is the time of waiting, of preparation, for the coming of the king and the kingdom.

There is very little in Matthew about public worship and evangelistic campaigns and finance and the ordering of ministry and the things which occupy our time and attention in the life of the churches. But there is a great deal about love and forgiveness and mutual respect and real community. The gospel is much closer to the picture of common life envisaged by the Rule of Benedict: a close knit group of disciples supporting one another in a radical way of living in opposition to the world around them. It is this community which itself forms and shapes disciples.

To make disciples, according to Jesus in Matthew, form communities which are really and truly church: baptising them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Form communities which pray the Lord's prayer and live it. And then the second emphasis: teaching them everything I have commanded you.

You will know that Matthew lays great emphasis on the teaching ministry of Jesus and that his teachings are collected together into five great blocks – some think like the five books of Moses. Jesus lives with his disciples but, as is apparent from what is said so far, he teaches them both through direct instruction, through dialogue, through challenge and through parables. In a context and society which is itself drifting further from its Christian past, making disciples must involve extensive Christian teaching and instruction in a way which is life centred, engaged and engaging, imaginative and memorable and which is brought to life in the disciplines of community.

The ministry of Jesus as an evangelist in Matthew cannot be isolated to direct encounters with individuals though there is much to learn from his compassion and patterns of conversation. The portrait we find is that Jesus makes disciples through calling and forming a real community, through spending time with that community and teaching in the context of shared lives. If you had the opportunity to read and digest the Thornleigh lecture which was circulated in advance of this gathering, you will find I think the same themes as in the portrait there of the deacon-evangelist Paul except for the stronger explicit references in Matthew to community as the medium for forming disciples. In Acts 20, the speech to the Ephesian presbyters, there is no separation between the evangelist and the pastor. Paul who calls individuals to Christ remains to live with them and nurture their community and order their common life and teach them for a period of several years and raises up others who are then able to do the same.

There are many implications in Matthew's portrait for the ministry of the evangelist today and I hope you will be able to explore the implications for your own many and various ministries in the coming months. I certainly warmly commend the habit of reading Matthew's gospel from cover to cover simply exploring what it says to you about the making of disciples.

But I want to take a few moments in the final part of what I say to draw some lines of application to my own particular area of ministry – the encouraging of fresh expressions of church in every place as part of a mixed economy church.

For the past two and a half years, I have urged and argued the need for the development of fresh expressions of church everywhere. We think as a team we have spoken to something over 20,000 people. These new communities are not some kind of optional extra or a minority interest. They are one of the principle ways in which people will hear and are hearing good news in Britain in the early 21st Century. The Church of England will release statistics next week which show that a quarter of its parishes have begun a fresh expression of church since the year 2,000 which is engaging with those outside the present congregation. If you include the parishes which have begun something new as a form of church including for those already part of church the proportion rises to one third. If you include the parishes planning something in the next two years, the proportion rises to more than half. This is already a widespread, creative and wonderful movement, alongside traditional forms of church, and I thank God for all that is happening. Of itself it demands a reappraisal of the role of the evangelist which is what is outlined in the Thornleigh lecture.

But if you have read mission shaped church or heard me speak you will be very familiar with the rationale for this which argues for fresh expressions of church in order to bring us into meaningful contact with those who are out of reach of traditional congregations. Because of major shifts in our society a proportion of people can hear the gospel proclaimed in traditional ways. They are on the edge of church. But many cannot – getting on now probably for two thirds of the population. To connect with those people its not enough simply to invite them to come to where we are. It is not enough simply to offer the gospel in sermons or tracts. We need to go to them, to serve and live alongside and share the good news and form new and different communities: fresh expressions of church. The gospel is seen as it is lived in community.

At its simplest that is the logic and rationale for the mixed economy church. It's not hard to grasp and actually the evidence is that most people have grasped it. It's as basic as the need for extended nurture groups was a decade or so ago and seems to be spreading as rapidly – although the call to begin a fresh expression of church is considerably more complex than running an Emmaus course and hence the need for greater training and

support.

It is an argument and a logic which cherishes both parts of the mixed economy: we are saying a flourishing parish church is vital alongside several different fresh expressions of church. This kind of mixed economy parish is rapidly becoming the norm.

But there is another argument and rationale for fresh expressions of church forming in me from this dialogue with Matthew. It sits alongside the first and doesn't replace it. This argument begins with the challenge to make disciples: people able to live counter culturally, differently, against the grain of their society. If we read Matthew through the lens of the Great Commission, there are two things that are vital. It is not a case of simply communicating a core of the gospel and inviting a prayer of commitment whether that is offered after an evangelistic service, over a cup of coffee or during an Alpha weekend. What is required is the formation of a real, deep and lasting Christian community signified in the Great Commission by baptism and in the context of the lived hermeneutic of that community, teaching which is extensive, practical and life changing.

For that to happen, I want to argue, new forms of church, fresh expressions of church, are needed. What is essential for bringing us into contact with much of the population is also essential for effective discipleship and nurture in a post Christian society.

Very often, viewed through this lens, fresh expressions emerge and co-exist within the shell of the old form of church. Cells or small groups grow up within existing congregations. Pilgrimages, residentials, festivals create community in an annual pattern alongside a much weaker local community. The old parish structure is maintained in addition to the new communities which are giving life. But we are also beginning to see fresh expressions of church emerging which do not have those old structures which sustained the church in Christendom or which are uncomfortable with them.

I think I want to argue, on the basis of Matthew, that the traditional pattern of church life on its own which emphasises public worship in the Sunday congregation, a hierarchical layered organisation and coming midweek to committees is inadequate to the task of making and sustaining disciples. To coin a phrase: it is no longer fit for purpose in our present context. We need the means of building real relationships and community and extensive teaching and dialogue and growing in holiness of life. These elements are needed every bit as much in a so called traditional congregation which makes disciples as in a fresh expression of church. They are not optional.

I would also want to argue, on the basis of Matthew, that the idea that fresh expressions of church can be some kind of shallow playground to dabble on the edges of Christianity and stay there is a trap and a parody of what the church is called to be. Although I am encouraged by the statistics I have just quoted and by all the energy I see around this agenda, I am also cautious because I think we are actually just at the beginning of learning how to build disciple making communities.

If fresh expressions of church cannot grow mature disciples then we should not go down that road. They will simply become another version of consumer Christianity.

But if I am to follow Matthew's gospel, I believe with all my heart that we will be drawn to develop new and living structures for community life which can sustain all of us in our Christian living in a demanding and difficult world.

Fresh expressions of church would be essential for our disciple making even if the whole population could access the church as it presently is.

'Going therefore make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.'