

The Bible: Our True Story
Act Five—
“A Church of all nations”

Passages: Acts 11:19–26
Matthew 28:16–20

Last Sunday afternoon, Kim and I finished watching the 3-part DVD series of Tim Winton’s classic, **Cloudstreet**. It was simply beautiful! Despite the fact that I’d read the book 15 years ago and seen the stage-play 10 years ago, there was something different about it this time! You see, I was far more familiar with the overall story. That meant that I could be more aware of Winton’s genius as a writer in the way he weaved repeating themes and patterns throughout the story. The story is set on the Swan River in Perth. And so, a major theme in the book is the river, the water, the sky, the stars—all big open spaces...spaces beyond us...spaces which draw us in, and up, and away from ourselves.

Another key theme is the house—a living, breathing house...but with two families in it who are confined, crowded, chaotic, frustrated, confused, and conflicted. A third theme is chance, risk, uncertainty, blessing, bad luck, bad times, mistakes, misfortune, drowning, disability, death, despair, the unknown. One more theme is that of hope—hope in release, rebirth, reconciliation, new life, celebration, acceptance, appreciation, joy, tears and laughter.

(Take a look at the trailer!)

In **Cloudstreet** is the simple lesson that we’ve been trying to get across ever since we began this sermon series! It’s only by becoming more and more familiar with the story that you begin to marvel at how masterful it is. Your eyes begin to see patterns and themes that you never saw before! You begin to see the beauty of this Book and the genius of its Author!

That’s why we’ve tried to draw your attention to one overarching theme in the Bible, **the Kingdom of God**, and to the three key

strands that define it: **God's people** in **God's place** under **God's rule**. The more you read the Bible, the more you become aware of how these three strands so beautifully interconnect... how masterfully they are woven throughout the OT! **Most beautiful of all**, if you have the eyes to see it, is how these three strands find their perfection and fulfilment in the person of Jesus Christ!

This is where the New Testament comes into its' own! Indeed, Matthew's Gospel is particularly good at showing how Jesus is the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God. Not only does he show that Jesus is "**God's people** in **God's place** under **God's rule**", but he also shows us that **Jesus is God's people; Jesus is God's place; Jesus is God's rule!** Let me show you.

Starting with the genealogy of Matthew 1, Matthew is quick to point out that Jesus is God's people. Not only is He in the lineage of Abraham and King David, but He is the One who, when everyone else throughout history has failed to stay true to God, has remained faithful to His Father, even unto death! Moreover, as God's true people, Jesus has the authority to gather to Himself a new people of God (from every nation, race, tribe and tongue)! He is God's people!

Matthew is also keen to show us how Jesus is God's place. Back in the OT, God's place was always one of fruitfulness, abundance and life. Tragically, however, all of these places were forfeited and God's people were repeatedly exiled. But in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus comes on the scene and says, "**Come to Me, and I will give you rest.**" He is now the source of fruitfulness, abundance and life! He is the place where bread and fish are multiplied and water is turned into wine! He is the new 'Promised Land'... where all people on earth can find refreshment and new life! He is God's place!

Finally, Matthew reveals Jesus as the personification of **God's rule!** Back in the Old Testament, God ruled through covenants and laws; He ruled through prophets and kings. In other words,

God ruled invisibly and through mediators. But, now, in the New Testament, all this changes! Instead of being an invisible King, our King has taken on human flesh! Instead of speaking to us from a distant heaven or through mediators, our King now comes to us in person to reveal His will face to face!

This is a particularly strong emphasis in Matthew's Gospel! Matthew has a habit of regularly quoting from the many OT prophets who had been expecting the God of Israel to come down to earth and reign as King!

- Starting in **Matthew 2**, after Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, Matthew quotes from the prophet **Micah 5**—**“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah... out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”**
- In **Matthew 3**, John the Baptist is heard quoting from **Isaiah 40**, identifying himself as...**“A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord...”**
- In **Matthew 4**, another quote is given; this time, from **Isaiah 9**. **“The people living in darkness have seen a great light...”** Of course, those who knew this passage would have quickly remembered what follows:
“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given...He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.”
- In **Matthew 12**, Matthew drops another quote from **Isaiah 42** about the coming King. This time, however, there are universal overtones. **“Here is my servant whom I have chosen... and he will proclaim justice to the nations.”**
- In **Matthew 21**, on the day of His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Matthew quotes **Zechariah 9**: **“Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”**

- Then, in **Matthew 22**, in a debate over Jesus' identity, **Psalm 110** is quoted: **“The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”**”

What is clear from all these OT quotes is that Matthew is convinced that Jesus is the fulfilment of **God's rule!** He is **the King**, not only of Israel, but of the entire world!

With this in mind, we can turn to today's reading, **Matthew 28:16–20**, and see the fullness of its beauty as the 3 strands of God's Kingdom all come together in Jesus! You see, in this very last paragraph of Matthew's Gospel we are witnessing the **Jesus' final exaltation and coronation as God's true King!**

Verse 16 sets the scene by telling us that Jesus has met His 11 disciples at a pre-arranged place-- a mountain in Galilee. Why has Jesus chosen a mountain? Already in Matthew's Gospel, certain key events have taken place on mountains (The Sermon on the Mount; the Transfiguration; the final discourse on the Mount of Olives). Mountains were generally believed to be the place where heaven and earth came together; and a place from which God could would speak and be heard. It makes sense, then, that Jesus assembled His followers on this mountain, because it would be from here that He would continue **His journey of exaltation** to His Father's throne in heaven. That's certainly what Matthew wants us to see: Going up on the mountain with Jesus was equivalent to a coronation parade, as they approached the time for Jesus' enthronement in heaven as King!

What this also means is that all the mockery that Jesus endured as he wore the purple robe and the crown of thorns; all the ridicule of the soldiers as they bowed down before the bleeding figure of Jesus carrying His cross; all the humiliation of His death by crucifixion and the irony of the sign which read, “This is the King of the Jews”; **all of that has finally been reversed. Jesus has now been vindicated as the true King!** And now, on this day of His enthronement, Jesus will finally be given the name He

deserves: **"the name that is above every other name", at which "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess"** His Lordship! (Philippians 2:5–11). He is finally going to be elevated as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

If this is, indeed, what is happening on that mountain in Galilee, then there's no wonder why **verse 17** says, **"When they saw Him, they worshipped Him."**

It's interesting to note that Matthew has already used this word, **'worship'**, several times in his Gospel to describe a number of people who came to Jesus.

- 8:2-- A leper! **"A leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."**
- 9:18-- A synagogue ruler! **"He came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live."**
- 15:25-- A Canaanite woman with a demon-oppressed daughter! **"She came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."**
- 20:20-- The mother of the sons of Zebedee! **"She came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."**

Did they think Jesus was divine? Who knows? But, at the very least, they knew that Jesus was in very close relationship with God! Why else would they ask Jesus for things that only God could give—like healing, deliverance, even life itself?

There were many other people mentioned in Matthew's Gospel who also worshipped Jesus:

- 2:11-- The 3 Kings from the east! **"On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh."**

- 14:33-- The disciples, after the great catch of fish! **“And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”**

And even when Matthew doesn't use the word "worship", we know that this is exactly what the people are doing!

- 21:8-9-- The crowd who was at Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem! **“Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”**
- 26:7 - The woman in Bethany, only days before Jesus' crucifixion! **“A woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table.”**
- 27:54 The centurion standing by the cross! **“The centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!”**

Matthew's story is clear! Many people saw something in Jesus that was simply “out of this world”. **Worship was the only response to this realization!**

In the same way, on this mountain in Galilee, as the pieces of the puzzle come together following His death and resurrection, this gathering of Jesus' followers begins to **worship Him!** After everything they've seen, they understand that He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is God, the LORD, come to earth. He is Emmanuel, God with us!

Indeed, you might even say that Jesus encourages this worship by boldly stating the fact of his Kingship. Look at **verse 18!** **“All authority in heaven and earth has been given unto Me!”** These are the words of a King! Jesus knows that not only is he the King of Israel, but of the whole Universe—of heaven and earth! Even more than that, He knows that **He has already begun to rule!** His authority to rule comes by virtue of His resurrection from the dead! Indeed, that is why He must now depart from their sight and be raised up in the clouds—for, as the King who now rules

the universe, **it is time for Him to be elevated to His rightful position** at the right hand of His Father.

Of course, people get very puzzled by this claim that **Jesus is already ruling the world**. But the claim is not that the world is already completely as Jesus intends it to be. Rather, the claim is that he is working to take it from where it currently is (under the rule not only of death but of corruption, greed and every kind of wickedness) to where He wants it to be! In Psalm 110, God says to His King, "**Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies Your footstool.**" Paul picks this idea up in 1 Corinthians 15:25 where he says that Jesus "**must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death!**" In other words, Jesus is engaged in a slow (and often painful) process of changing the world.

So, how is He doing it? How is Jesus changing the world and making His enemies bow down? Here is the shock: **The first enemy** (in a very real sense) **is inside of you and me**, in the very fact that our wills are not fully submitted to the will of God! We still have areas of rebellion and selfishness in our lives; areas of greed and deceit, of pride and arrogance. We have not fully given our lives over to Jesus' rule; Jesus' lordship. And that's a major aspect of the change process that Jesus is engaged in, right now! He's changing you and me by the inner working of His Holy Spirit; gradually making all His enemies bow down! So, are you giving in to His rule?

But there's another way, as equally impressive, that Jesus is making His enemies bow down—that is, **through the church!** Indeed, that's why the church is so important in God's eternal plans! Back in Matthew 16, Jesus told His disciples, "**I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it!**" The church is not an optional extra or a secondary idea in God's plans. It takes centre stage, for it is primarily through the church that Jesus plans to exercise His universal rule, by promoting justice and truth, integrity and faithfulness through her! This idea takes us back to **Matthew 28**, and to that group of Jesus' followers as they stand around Him on the mountain. Who are they? Quite simply, **they are the church...the church that Jesus is building!** And they are gathered around Him because

they have caught a glimpse of the big picture—they see the glorious strands of God’s Kingdom coming together in Jesus! That’s why they have given in; that’s why they’ve gradually submitted their lives to Christ’s rule. That’s why they worship, for worship is a sign of submission! This motley crew is His body; His people; His bride; His church!

It is to **this** group that Jesus makes these concluding remarks in **verses 18–20**: (Here’s my paraphrase.)

“Because you know that I am this world’s Lord and King; because you see that I am the One with all authority in heaven and earth, it is therefore your responsibility to go and tell the world who I am! Help them to see what you see. Help them to respond to My rule in their lives as you have responded to My rule in your life. Draw them in; initiate them into this new life through baptism; teach them everything I’ve taught you-- the ways of the Kingdom and the abundant life that flows from heaven! Go... to every nation on earth...and live out My life before a watching world!

At this point, let me stop and ask you: Can you see the beautiful Kingdom patterns coming together in Jesus? Can you see that **He** is God’s people, **He** is God’s place, **He** is God’s rule! Can you see that His universal Kingship is being exercised right now, as He gathers His people (the church) from every nation, race, tribe and tongue... as He establishes His place (the church) all over the world...as a growing number of people around the globe submit to His rule (as the church) and become worshippers?

Clearly, this story of the Bible is far bigger and far more intricately woven than **Cloudstreet**! The Bible tells a universal story of hope, glory, and the eternal destiny of humankind.

Before I finish, I want to draw your attention to one last detail of this passage—a detail that might surprise you. You see, in the midst of all this coherent beauty, Matthew subtly includes a very

short statement at the end of **verse 17**...a statement about doubt. Even as the church bows low before Jesus in submission to His universal rule, Matthew says, quite simply, “**But some doubted**”. What did they doubt? Did they doubt whether this man standing before them was truly Jesus? Did they doubt whether they, as good Jewish monotheists, should actually worship Jesus? It doesn't really matter—for regardless of their specific problem, these doubters had, essentially, one common issue: **They weren't able to see what the others saw!** They weren't convinced of the big picture!

On Easter Saturday, we went bushwalking with Kim's family in the Blue Mountains. During the walk, I had a long chat to her nephew, Daniel. Daniel is a PhD student in Mechanical Engineering—a very intelligent young man—but, as he said to me, he just doesn't “get Jesus”! Although he tries, he can't see the big picture! And obviously, it's not a question of intellect—he just can't see what I see! Of course, my hope is that Daniel's eyes will be opened some day...but until that happens, I pray that he will be welcomed by Christians; not shunned or Bible-bashed; not treated as a project, or a soul to win...but simply accepted as a doubter!

The fact that there were doubters in the midst of the first church is a very encouraging thing to me! It means that, despite their doubt, they were accepted and included...even considered as part of the church... without any judgement or pressure to believe. That should certainly make us reflect on our churches, 2000 years later! I mean, would Daniel feel safe here? Would he feel loved and welcomed without pressure? **Most importantly**, would he feel it was safe enough here for him to come back, again and again, with questions because he saw something in us that drew him...compelled him to come...even though he has not yet really understood what we are on about?

I get the impression that Matthew deliberately included this little comment about **doubt** as a way of introducing the Great Commission. It was Matthew's way of saying to the church; “Now,

you who are stronger in your faith... you who have had an experience of Jesus and thus know Him more fully and are able to worship Jesus with more engagement...; remember to turn to your weaker brother or sister; nurture them, don't reject them. Help them to see what you see. Be the image of God for them and, above all else, point them to My loving rule." As Karl Barth once said, "belief is the only thing that can conquer unbelief!" We need each other—that's what it means to be the church!

Indeed, by passing on this Great Commission to a group of disciples at varying points along the scale of doubt and fear, Jesus was making it clear that His mission to the world would not be exclusively for those at advanced stages of discipleship. We are all on this journey together...even doubters have a place!

With all this in mind, it's no wonder why Jesus finishes His final discourse with one final, incredibly beautiful, statement: **"And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age!"** Only Jesus has the sort of patience, love and understanding that is needed to hold His church together and to motivate her to be His agent of grace in the world! Without Jesus going with us, this glorious mission to promote His rule in all the world will never succeed!

God's people, in God's place, under the rule of the Lord Jesus!

Let's pray.

"Jesus, show us the intricate patterns and the glorious beauty of Your kingdom as You lead us all forward in the proclamation of Your rule to the ends of the earth!"