

## 18 All Power

After he was dead, and his last friends were all gone away and the great Sabbath of rest and thanksgiving was over, early in the morning as soon as the sun dawned on the first day of the new week, Mary of Magdala and another of the women came to the tomb to complete his burial.

Matthew was not happy with Mark's account of that day. It is clear that he thought it wanted a lot more writing up. A messenger dressed in white giving a simple message, and the women running away frightened! And, after all, how was the stone rolled away? Surely by the hand of an angel of God! How can you just pass over such matters? Jesus the Messiah had risen from the dead! As the Lord's angel descended from heaven to roll away the stone and expose the empty tomb, it must have shaken the very ground like an earthquake.

The Lord is not here, he is risen!

Surely not a fresh-faced young man dressed in white and sitting meekly on the dead man's ledge! Surely his face was like lightening and his robes were as dazzling white and fresh as snow! The Lord is risen, and even the mere messenger of his rising must have shone more brilliant and baffling than the new day's sun. And surely not inside the tomb, in the empty place of death, but outside, seated triumphantly upon the defeated stone!

"You don't need to be afraid. You've come looking for Jesus who was crucified. He isn't here. He has risen as he said he would. Go and tell his disciples that he has gone ahead of you to Galilee. You will meet him there."

And they can't have run away in fear – think of the joy that must have filled their hearts! Jesus their Lord is risen! Matthew somewhat clarifies the psychological state of the surprised women:

Hurrying away from the tomb with fear *and great joy*, they ran to tell his disciples. (Matt 28: 8)

The original gospel of Mark ends notoriously abruptly – almost as if you finished a book with the word "and". I sometimes have the mischievous thought that it was Matthew himself, with an early manuscript of Mark in his hands, who tore off the last page, muttering in exasperation "This won't do! Mark has no sense of the true shape, the spiritual structure of these events!" and used the back of it to scribble a few changes that would underline the real meaning of the miracle that had taken place.

But, joking aside, Matthew had a serious message to report before his gospel was complete. As they ran back to the city, the women saw Jesus himself coming to meet them. He was alive indeed. He greeted them and they fell down before him clasping his feet, but he repeated what the angel had told them:

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Don't be afraid. Go and tell my disciples to leave for Galilee. They will see me there. (Matt 28: 10)

Jesus who was crucified is alive. He has risen from the dead. None of the gospels tells us about the moment of resurrection. No one claims to have witnessed it. But Matthew, Luke and John all tell us of people who saw him, gloriously alive, and spoke with him and discovered that he was still with them: the Messiah and their friend.

But the events that followed Jesus' resurrection won't fit into any clear pattern or sequence. In Jerusalem and in Galilee and elsewhere, people met him and spoke with him. He showed himself to them and they were astonished, perplexed, overjoyed; but when and where and how gets reported very differently by each of the gospel writers.

It's as if space and time no longer have the same binding logic and there is no longer a common frame of reference for the witnesses to identify their experiences in. The common point of reference can now only be the utter and overwhelming reality of Jesus himself, the sheer power and love in which he identifies himself and is present with them. It's as if Jesus, who once, like every human being, was defined in time and space, located by towns and buildings, his movements measured with the passing flow of events and dated by the common calendar, is now himself the calendar, the one true measure of time and space, the overwhelming reference for everything else, and what people remember is that he ...

In all the accounts, Jesus comes to those who are ready to believe in him. He does not return to haunt or dismay those who will not believe in him, and even now there will be no spectacular descent from the temple parapets. But those who hear of him, perhaps only a whisper of his coming, and welcome it, believing perhaps only slightly and shakily, or if not believing at least wanting to hope, to them he comes, and they will see him and know him. It is when the women are hurrying back in fear and great joy, to tell his disciples what the angel had told them, that they meet Jesus. He greeted them and they worshiped him, and he had comfort and instructions to give them. He was still their Lord, and the Messiah still had business in hand.

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When the Passover lamb had first been sacrificed and God summoned his people out of slavery in Egypt, God had met with them at the mountain of Sinai, and there had confirmed his covenant with them. Now Jesus called his disciples from Jerusalem to go to Galilee, and there, on a mountain, they met with him (not just a God-chosen representative of them, as Moses had been for Israel, but all of them). As he had promised, they saw him there, and they fell down before him, worshipping him. But some of them still had their doubts. Was this man who had died and was now living and speaking in front of them really the Messiah? What could it possibly mean?

Jesus approached and said to them:

“All power is given to me in heaven and on earth. Go out and make disciples of all the nations. Baptise them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to keep the commands I gave to you. And be

sure of this: that I am with you thru all the days to come, until the very end of time.”  
(Matt 28: 18 – 20)

I have said before that we lose out whenever we conflate the gospels before we have allowed each one to speak unhindered for itself. Luke’s superior story-telling has fixed in our minds one picture of Jesus’ resurrection and the events that followed it over forty days and ten more. But what Matthew has to say, and the way he describes it – the commissioning of the disciples in Galilee and the beginning of the rule of the Messiah, is just as true and important. There is no thought in Matthew of Jesus being taken away and ascending up to heaven. The movement is all towards them: just as he came to meet the women running away from the tomb, Jesus now approached. He spoke to them and he promised that Now he would be with them always. As far as Matthew is concerned, Jesus comes, and he comes to stay.

He comes because he is the Messiah, and the Messiah is for the world, to rule it and to save it. He will not go away leaving his work undone. God raised him from the dead, gloriously confirming that everything he did and suffered was indeed according to God’s will, and that his perfect obedience has accomplished God’s purpose, that he is the Messiah. He has been given, to Jew and to gentile, as the Messiah, and that gift is for good. Not even death has been able to end it. Jesus rose not to some extra-terrestrial or purely spiritual existence, not to be removed to a distance in heaven, as if his new existence could only take place there. He is alive in our world now.

Let us be quite clear. We do not mean that Jesus’ soul goes marching on, like John Brown’s. A dead hero can “live” in their followers’ enthusiasm, but Jesus is alive in himself, in the power of God who makes all life, and he is alive as the Messiah, sent to rule the world under the covenant God has forged with it. We are not saying simply that a dead body was brought to life two thousand years ago. However astonishing that would be, it would be a wonder for its own time only. Even tho God had done it, it would have no relevance now. What has relevance is that Jesus the Messiah rose and is with us for all time as the Messiah. Far from being frustrated by his death, the work of the Messiah is now, on the mountain in Galilee, begun in earnest.

We cannot believe in the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah without rejecting the absolute claims of every law we know. That Jesus, dead, should rise again; that God should claim him in his grave and vindicate him as Messiah, as the ruler of God’s people; that God should raise him to life – to immortal life imbued with the very quality of God – is to move every principle and framework on which we might ever come to terms with or make sense of the world for ourselves. If we believe that Jesus is risen and rules in God’s power, we cannot believe that there is any other power, in our hearts, in our society, in our world and universe, that can overrule him. We cannot believe that money, that powerful media or armed forces, that fear of our enemies or the inevitability of greed, that economic necessity, or ignorance or apathy have any power left to shape the world. We cannot hope to temper the claims of Jesus Christ with a more practical realism: if Jesus is risen from the dead, his way is the only realism. Believing him is the only practical course and every counter claim to his, however manfully sustained, is only illusion.

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All power and all authority is his – all power in heaven and on earth. He is the Messiah, and as there is no separate sphere of Israel any more, all authority over all the nations on earth is now the authority of the Messiah, given to him by God. And there is no longer any safe and tidy domain of the sacred, for the rule of God to be confined there. The most sacred veil of the temple has been torn in two, its sanctity cancelled, because all the world is now the place of God's presence and holiness. There is no longer a secular world with its own separate rules and autonomous authority, where the Messiah's remit does not run. "All power is given to me, in heaven and on earth."

There are no longer sacred and secular domains separate from one another – only one world subject to one Messiah, whose hand makes everything fearfully and wonderfully subject to God. Separating religious and secular, sacred and profane, is like separating body and soul. You are left with a soul that can no longer touch the world, and a dead body. The Messiah's coming and the Messiah's power unites everything in vigorous life, gives wholeness and holiness to everything human, in the name of God its creator.

We cannot set aside the power of politics, of economics, of trade and finance to argue that, realistically, we don't expect the principles of Jesus to work there, any more than we would set aside the secret recesses of the human heart or the pains of the human body, and claim that Christ does not work there. Nor can we argue that the Messiah's power will only reach to the whole world when Jesus comes again. For Jesus has not gone away. "I am with you always, to the end of time." If Jesus were not the Messiah, then we would indeed be waiting still for someone to come and establish the rule of God in the works and structures of the nations; and perhaps that is what we really believe. Even in Galilee among those who saw him, there were some who doubted; for we do not find it easy to believe.

But the claim of Jesus is clear and those who believe in him will look for him to rule in the very operations that sustain and protect the nations: their trade, their finance, their storing and exploiting of resources, their finding and harnessing of energy, their laws, their treaties and the settling of their disputes. We will so engage with all these things, so approach them and seek to realise in them God's realism, that everyone will see (even if they think we're crazy) that we believe both our governments and our captains of commerce to be answerable to a vigorous new standard, the rule of Jesus the Messiah. For those who recognise the Messiah, oil and banking, newspapers, supermarkets and entertainment, national and international law belong to him, and are false when they do not work as his. We are not to avoid Westminster or the White House, the Bourse or the World Trade Organisation, but with the authority of prophets and priests we must claim them. "All power is given to me." We must claim them, and perhaps they will destroy us, for they do not wish to be claimed for anything but themselves; but even if they do destroy us, God will still claim them and change them into God's kingdom.

And just as surely, the human body, soul and mind, belong to him in their strength and their weakness, in their joy and their pain. Broken and whole, he has authority over them, to rule them under the covenant of God, to heal, to renew, to restore, to give power and energy, to break bonds, to loosen tongues and to set free the spirit.

And again as surely, the relationships between one and another, the precious links by which we are personal, are under his rule. “All power is given to me.” It is his to rule our being-together, as family, friends, lovers, colleagues, partners, neighbors. It is he who rules us and reminds us, as he taught us from the beginning, to welcome, to love, to forgive and to be forgiven. It is he who builds us into those relationships in which our communities and our society, our nations and our world will be renewed – rid of fear, of competition, exploitation, oppression, injustice and violence. All power, over bodies, minds, souls, families, communities, nations -

all power, even power in and over death. All the rules have changed and the Messiah’s rule stretches further than ever before understood. Death itself is no longer the limit. For the Messiah has endured it, and lives. Arguing in the temple, he had supported those who believed in the resurrection of the dead – that all the faithful would rise again into the kingdom of God. Now that whole question is renewed. No longer is it just the hope of resurrection in the end, but the Messiah himself already risen from death, his resurrection at the very beginning of his rule, a burst of unquenchable life to define and energise all life, all history, every future that is to come, and to carry it to a fulfilment that is beyond all deaths.

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“Go and make disciples from all the nations.” They are to teach not only Israelites but people from every nation, and their teaching is not a matter of theories or doctrines or rules. It is a way of life. They are to make disciples, and disciples do much more than gather information from their master. To be a disciple is to follow in your master’s way of life, and Jesus’ disciples are those who will learn to live like him. Now the Messiah, risen and alive, is telling them to make such disciples among all the nations. What he had been doing for a couple of years before his death, gathering followers who might learn to believe in him and welcome the kingdom as he revealed it, they are to continue doing under his authority until in all the world there are disciples who believe in and follow him, their transformed lives declaring the rule of God.

There is no more room for the dreams they might have had of lording it over lesser beings in a kingdom established by their master. No hierarchy nor aristocracy has been set up, but only this relationship: the Messiah and his disciples. They are to go out and make more disciples. He had spoken to them, when Simon recognised him as Messiah, of the assembly or “church” that he would establish, and now it is clear that this assembly will be a world-wide community of his disciples. They have already reached the peak of their career in the kingdom: they are disciples. What remains is for them to make many more disciples.

It is our usual way to set up any long-term organisation or project in terms of careers: people have jobs to do commensurate with their skills, and the opportunity is there to work their way up the organisation, to higher responsibilities, status and rewards. If it were our church and they were our disciples, we would make arrangements for them to become, as they worked their way up in their job, supervisory disciples and arch-disciples and heads of disciples and Chairman of the Board of Disciples. And maybe we do have to make such arrangements, but if so, they are not of Jesus’ original and

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permanent commission. They can only ever be temporary and provisional, as we try to carry out his unchanging commission in passing and changing ages.

There is nothing in the great commission at the end of Matthew's gospel (or indeed anywhere in the gospels) that can be taken as the setting up of a permanent class of leaders or rules for the handing on of organisational leadership. Over the many generations since that commissioning, the followers of Jesus have organised themselves into churches with structures, rules, procedures, statutes, patterns of ordination and hierarchies, any or all of which may have proved their usefulness during the 2000 years since. Any or all of them may claim to be useful to the church in our day, but none of them can claim to go back to Jesus himself, when he lived and ministered in Galilee. For even after his resurrection, even at his final and definitive commissioning of the disciples, Jesus gave no instructions for the setting up of a "church" structure as we know it.

Both as leaders and as learners they were all disciples. They were sent as disciples – Jesus being with them still – to make disciples. The only "apostolic succession" that goes back to the beginning, to the risen Christ, is the succession of disciples empowered by the presence of Christ with them. By definition, that first generation of disciples who knew Jesus both before and after his death, is unique. By definition they have no successors, and no successors are needed. And there is no indication in Matthew's or in any of the gospels, that they had special powers or authority which should be passed on to particular members of a future church. They were disciples, sent to make others disciples, and as far as the account of Jesus' commission takes us, that is the beginning, the end and the whole of it. All who are disciples inherit their role and their responsibility.

Jesus sends them out as his disciples, and if they make disciples from all the nations, they will, with the authority of Jesus, be constituting others like themselves. That alone is essential.

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"Baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."  
Suddenly we are taken back almost to the beginning of the gospel, to the moment of Jesus' entry into public life and his own accreditation by God:

"This is my Son whom I love."

The Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit has not figured in Matthew's gospel except there in the description of Jesus' own baptism and here at the very end, as Jesus commissions his disciples. It's as if Matthew is suggesting that we go back to the beginning and see the whole story in a new light, now that we have seen in his rising from such a death, how and what kind of Messiah Jesus is.

He is certainly reminding us that there, in the baptism at Jordan waters, all Jesus' power and authority as the Messiah or Son of God was conferred on him and affirmed in him. The Messiah was declared in that moment, as he came up from the waters of baptism, and now he is telling his followers to do the same for the disciples they will make from the nations: "Baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

In a carefully measured and structured work like Matthew's there are two ways of giving prominence to a theme. One is to run it thru the whole story, like a recurring harmony, so that it is always in mind. This Matthew does with the idea of the "kingdom" or rule of God. We are reminded of it again and again. In almost every chapter, in conversation, in teaching, in comment "the kingdom" recurs, a declaration that echoes every time with richer, fuller meaning, a note not for one moment to be out of hearing, for it is the all-pervading reality of Jesus' mission.

The other way is to place the reference sparingly, but prominently, at the beginning, at the end, at the pinnacle, where it strikes you once-for-all like a sudden but unforgettable insight, and commands your attention from the way in which it frames or gathers up everything else that has been said, as if everything else is the spelling out of a tremendous significance exploding from this one revelation.

So it is with Matthew's treatment of baptism and the revelation of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It stands at the beginning: Jesus' baptism issuing in a moment of glory when the reality and presence of God is revealed, when Father, Son and Spirit are present, moving to shape the whole ministry and gospel that is to follow: "This is my Son, whom I love." And then at the end again, as the central line in Jesus' final and all-embracing commission to his disciples: the disciples they gather from all the nations, they too are to be baptised – in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. What his baptism meant in terms of authority and power is to be realised in them, all those who are baptised as his disciples.

They will be baptised in the name of that energy and authority that was revealed when Jesus himself was commissioned. God, who rules in the Son, the Messiah, will rule in them. They will not only tell of the Messiah, but they themselves will exercise his rule. The Messiah will rule, but he will rule thruout the nations in the persons of his disciples, who are themselves of all the nations.

As I said earlier, Matthew is at heart an architect, and an ambitious one at that. The great symmetries of his gospel are reflected in smaller symmetries like that of the final commission:

"All power is given to me in heven and on earth.

Go out and make disciples of all the nations.

Baptise them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Teach them to keep the commands I gave to you.

And be sure of this: that I am with you thru all the days to come, until the very end of time."

At the end of the gospel and at the centre of the commission, the great flood of power that began and flowed thru Jesus' own mission breaks upon the nations of the world empowering and authorising disciples for everything that fulfils the Messiah's rule – even God's rule – upon earth. They too are to enter into that same adventure of the power of God, the life and adventure of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit that Jesus was entered upon in his baptism. Nothing less is their calling.

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“Teach them to keep the commands I gave to you.” The manifesto of Jesus, far from being an idealistic wish-list, is the Messiah’s command to his followers, for them to pass on to others. It is impossible, of course. They cannot keep those commands themselves, let alone teach others, unless the whole creative power of the universe were to be with them, supporting them.

And that is exactly what is promised: “I am with you always.” “All power is given to me in heaven and on earth.” The command of Jesus is not a law but a permission and an empowering. He is with them precisely so that everything set before them in that astonishing manifesto will be possible for them. In his power, they are free to live like that – and not only them but the disciples whom they will teach. No longer will they be bound to the fearful, sad and cynical limits within which the world measures its expectations, but the boundless proposals of God are open before them, for action, for doing, for living. So the kingdom of God will come, and is already coming. So, even the unimaginably adventurous and flawless will of God will be done, and already begins to be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

That enormous freedom is theirs in the Messiah and it is their teaching for all the nations. Learning from him and teaching others to learn from him, they are not the great repository of wisdom but disciples whose very discipleship will shock and astonish the world out of its prison. Or perhaps, rather than “learning” and “teaching”, we should say “practising” and “training”, for it is not thoughts and statements but the experience of a life lived. The kingdom is not to be “understood” or even contemplated, but lived. It is whatever and everything that is life, and vastly more than we ever thought life could be.

Jesus did not give them mental or spiritual disciplines to be practised in an individual, private sphere. He gave them a personal and relational life to be lived in the freedom of God and a public new politics of commitment and love, a revolutionary new economy of giving and sharing to shape their society. He had given them the power that radically changes the world and he had already promised them that the death-dominated world itself would not be able to hold out against them.

Our teaching as disciples of Jesus, the good news that we take throughout the world, is the training that will change it completely. It is to be effective and the world that so effectively shapes us and defines our relationships: between rich and poor, powerful and weak, informed and ignorant, in all the walks of life, is to be radically renewed: taught to live the life that opens up in Jesus’ teaching. Such teaching, such authority, such changes cannot be limited to the small, restricted territory of religion or the sacred, as an area where some clerical remit runs and a church hierarchy exercises its authority to teach. The remit of the Messiah is vaster far, and only the whole following of Jesus, engaged in every dimension of human life, can live it together in his name and so show the world with authority what it is he teaches.

As Jesus and his first friends moved about in Capernaum and Galilee, thru dinner parties, village meetings and sabbath-day worship, sharing their lives in a common culture and tradition with the people they taught, and speaking from that culture, of seeds and crops and pearl merchants and kings and burglars, of God’s Law and families and weddings, of temple and taxes, so we will speak of and from the cultural and traditional life, the society, in which we live and move, and we will speak and act

with God's authority, in the name of God who claims it, who gives the Messiah for its teacher.

We will speak to our world and dare it to change, for we are commissioned to live for the world and to teach it a new way of living, the rules of a repentant heart, and the pattern of a radically changed society. For God has embarked on a revolution – God's rule can be nothing less – changing the world and changing the hearts of all the nations in the new ethos of God's kingdom.

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“And be sure of this: that I am with you thru all the days to come, until the very end of time.” Jesus the Messiah is with us. This is the only real evidence of his resurrection: that he is with us and that his power at work in us changes the world. I don't mean that the kingdom of God is reduced to apologetics. I mean that everything we have to say about him, everything we say we believe about him, will make no impression, will actually be without meaning, unless our lives, and the world into which we are sent, are being changed.

“I am with you.” It is not that he is with us as a memory or a text, a little voice from the past, loved and cherished but soft with distance; or even that his power speaks to us in our hearts, a private friendship undiscernable to others. He is with us beside us, outside of us, ahead of us, coming to meet us. Jesus is with his followers not as a power locked within them but as the one whose eager engagement runs ahead of them and leads them, to be in Galilee before them, to meet them when they arrive among the nations. He is already there, in cosmopolitan Galilee, when they arrive.

Our relationship with Jesus the Messiah, a strong love that commits him to be with us forever, does not shrink him to the size of our private world, or divide him up to be a separate Messiah for each separate soul that desires salvation. Rather, it opens our whole lives up to the possibility of his rule in our history and our world.

“I am with you ...” There is no question of Jesus leaving us, of his power on earth diminishing as his time slips behind into history. There is no distance between his time and our time, for all times are now his times and his power is at work in them all. That universal power that created the universe and breathed into it life, the attractive energy that binds heart to heart and builds families, communities, nations, has all been breathed into him, and in that authority he is now with them. By his death he has shown what power is and the emptiness of almost everything we call power, and his disciples, believing in him, know what kind of power is with them to change the world. They know that he has all the authority of God, and that his power could be crucified like a slave, and that his power is God's life and God's rule against which even death cannot hold out.

He is with us. As no one and nothing else can be with us, he is with us. He is the one who knows God and reveals to his followers the reality of God:

No one knows the Father but the Son, and those to whom the Son reveals him.  
(Matt 11:27)

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He has a task and a command to give us which will never crush us, because his strength is with us to make it lite:

Put on my yoke and be my disciples, for my yoke is easy and my burden lite.  
(Matt 11: 29 – 30)

We who learn from him, and so learn that we teach the world, learn humility not pride, and service not aggression

Learn from me: learn humility and gentleness in my heart. (Matt 11: 29)

He is with us, and in that “with” is all our belonging, identity and security. Here is the relationship in which we become most truly ourselves, where every other claim on us, on our loyalty, and every other offer of meaning and value is relativised: family, tribe or gang, church, party or nation, every grouping or context that makes up for us a domain where we are someone, and matter, is placed under the light and tested, and judged and refined until it is fit for the companionship of the Messiah in the kingdom of God, where we really are the greatest thing of all: his disciples.

“I am with you.” The one who is with us is the Messiah, to whom all power in heaven and on earth has been given. All the liberating power of God is with us to realise and accomplish the rule of God. Nothing is held back or kept in reserve. There is nothing now in waiting for a future, better, stronger intervention of God or for a future return of the Messiah. He is with us, and all the power of heaven and earth is with us already, to realise the desires of God.

No further or future intervention of God, no other coming of the Messiah will release any new or different powers into human history. Much, very much, remains to be done, but it will all be done in the power already given to us. Jesus’ work is not yet ended, but he has already given his whole self to it, and in him God’s whole self is committed. The Messiah has come, his work is in hand, and he is with us carrying thru that work into all the world and into all time.

Now is his time. It is the work of the Messiah, the work God lays upon him, to bring about the rule of God on earth, making it effective everywhere and so bringing well-being and salvation to all God’s people. It is not a job the Messiah can postpone until the time is right, for if he has come, the time is right. If the time is not right, as the Rabbi Lapide explained, then he is not the Messiah. But the Messiah is with us and Jesus has not gone away to come back when he can be the Messiah. He has already returned to Galilee and his mission will not now be curtailed.

All the power of God is now with his disciples, and they are sent out not like the Roman legions, to impose the will of an iron command, forcing the obedience of the nations; and not like a British gunboat teaching lessons to the empires of India or China; and not like the US Air Force, obliterating opposition with daisy cutters. Tho their authority, the Messiah’s authority, knows no limits, theirs is a power that strikes no terror – no more than Jesus could terrify Pilate or the High Priest – but can reach and change hearts, winning the adhesion of love and the alliances of joy. For they will teach the world to live a life of glad adventure, seeking and finding, at the cost of absolutely everything, the rule of God that is worth everything.