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Matthew 28:16-20 ¹⁶ The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus approached and said to them, “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

The Ascension History and Celebration

The observance of this solemnity is of great antiquity. Eusebius seems to hint at the already established celebration of it in the 4th century. At the beginning of the 5th century, Augustine of Hippo says that it is of Apostolic origin, and he speaks of it in a way that indicates it was the universal observance of the Catholic Church long before his time. In any case, representations of the Ascension are found in diptychs and frescoes dating to the 5th century. Hymns for this feast are found in the Georgian Chantbook of Jerusalem which also dates to the 5th century.

The celebrations of the solemnity have historically been on a Thursday, 40 days after the Resurrection - although there are ancient documents that indicate in some places it was celebrated in conjunction with Easter or with Pentecost.

This coming Sunday is either the 7th Sunday of Easter with the Ascension of the Lord having been celebrated on Thursday - or the Ascension has been transferred to Sunday, replacing the 7th Sunday of Easter. The older “Thursday” celebration is celebrated in the archdioceses and dioceses within the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Boston, Hartford, New York, Newark, Omaha, and Philadelphia. The other diocese transferred the celebration to Sunday in 1998 and 1999.

Why the change? This is a subject of great debate. Some say that, in recent history, attendance at Ascension Thursday Masses had been steadily declining. Others note that it is more the difference between metropolitan areas with large population centers (in the Northeast US) and the far less densely

populated areas of the nation in the Middle Atlantic, South, Midwest, mountain states, and west coast where people live greater distances from their parishes. In any case the Code of Canon Law (p.1246 §2) permits bishops to transfer a holy day of obligation to a Sunday.

What is an ecclesiastical province? In general, an ecclesiastical province consists of several dioceses, one of them being the archdiocese, headed by a metropolitan bishop or archbishop who has ecclesiastical jurisdiction over all other bishops of the province. For example, Philadelphia includes Philadelphia, Harrisburg, Allentown, Erie, Altoona, Pittsburg, Scranton, and Greenburg. What one should notice, except for Omaha, all are northeastern areas of the United States. The majority of United States dioceses celebrate on Sunday, as does the Diocese of Arlington - and so the readings for this coming Sunday can be found [here](#).

Galilee

In the Gospel according to Matthew, this is the first scene in which disciples have appeared since they fled during the arrest of Jesus (26:56). Since that point in the narrative, Jesus has been crucified, died and laid to rest in the tomb. In the verses just before our text (Mt 28:7 and 10), the tomb has been just found empty by the faithful women who reported that an angel of the Lord and Jesus himself has appeared with a message for the “*eleven disciples:*” “*Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.*” (v.10)

Presumably the disciples are following the message of Jesus, delivered by the women, to meet Jesus in Galilee. Thus, the disciples are not acting based on their own witness to the risen Christ, but upon the testimony of others. It is by that witness that the disciples take their next step on the journey of faith. Thus, there is already a nascent belief in the Resurrection, even if they do not yet fully comprehend the implications and consequences of that salvific act.

That sets the immediate context of our passage. But there is a larger context in play. R.T. France [1987, 417] writes that these final verses of Matthew 28 serve to complete the framework of the entire Gospel.

First, v. 18 presents Jesus as the universal sovereign. In 1:1–17 he was presented as the successor to royal dignity, and 2:1–12 portrayed him as the true ‘king of the Jews’. So in due course he entered Jerusalem as her king (21:1–11), but it is this very claim which has brought him to the cross, where it was mockingly displayed (27:37). But now the promise of chs. 1–2 is proved true after all, and on a far wider scale than a merely Jewish kingship, in ‘the enthronement of the Son of Man,’ whose rule is over ‘all nations’ (v. 19), indeed over both heaven and earth (v. 18). Secondly, and still more wonderfully, 1:23 presented Jesus the baby under the name ‘God with us’; now in the final verse Jesus the risen Lord confirms the promise, ‘I am with you always.’

Each of their essential points combine for an overarching consequence for the believer: universal kingship and accompaniment until the end of the age, means that there is a universal and timeless element to mission. We are a people *sent* into the world to proclaim the Good News.

The Eleven

Jesus was from Galilee and since the beginning of his public ministry had moved from the northernmost reaches of Israel to its center in Jerusalem – the locus of the confrontation and rejection by the leaders of Israel. But now the “Galilean” has triumphed against all odds and in a manner none had foreseen. The preparation of the “twelve” was not lost in their abandoning Jesus at the Passion. They are now restored to their positions of trust and responsibility and given final instructions for fulfilling the mission to which they had already been called (*cf.* 10:1-15) – but the scope is now far wider than Israel and included all the nations: “*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations*” (Mt

28:19)

The baptism which John had originally instituted as a symbol of a new beginning for repentant Israel (3:1-12) is now to be extended to all peoples of the earth. At the heart of this new community of faith is the risen Jesus himself, as he said he would be (18:20). The new community will consist of his disciples who keep his commandments and are sustained by Jesus' abiding presence among them. The abiding presence of the one who holds *all power in heaven and on earth* – a power greater than that offered by Satan in the desert (4:8-10)

After Matthew's emphasis on the fate of Judas (27:3–10) it is appropriate that he now describes the 'inner circle' as *the eleven disciples*. While some scholars argue that more disciples were present, it seems to me that their arguments are to ensure that the commission and promises of vv.18-20 were given to more than the "eleven" – an argument constructed to "head off" any later succession arguments about who is to direct the early mission. To accept that only the eleven were present does not, of course, require us to believe that the commission and the promise of vv. 18–20 applied only to them; here, as often, they represent the whole body of Jesus.

Doubt and Hesitation

When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted. Many English translations offer "but some doubted." Unfortunately the word "some" does not appear in the Greek text. The only two valid translations are "they worshiped, but they doubted (hesitated)" or "they worshiped and they doubted (hesitated)." It is hard to avoid the simple statement of the text: those who worship are also those who doubt.

Mark Allan Powell writes about this verse in his book, *Loving Jesus* [121].

... I want to note that the word some is not actually found in the Greek Bible. Why is it in the English version? Well, Matthew uses a particular construction here that allows translators to think that the word some could be implied. He also uses that construction in seventeen other instances, though no one ever seems to think the word is implied in those cases. It could be implied here, but why would it be? I asked a Bible translator that question one time and got the following response: "The verse wouldn't make sense otherwise. No one can worship and doubt at the same time." I invited this fellow to visit a Lutheran church. We do it all the time.

However, this verse is understood, it illustrates that the separation of the wheat and weeds has not yet occurred (13:39, 40). Both worshipers and doubters are present in the community and/or in individuals.

It is also to be noted that whether worshipers and doubters are two groups of people, or a description of the whole group, Jesus gives the Great Commission to them all – to the worshipers and doubters alike.

The word translated "doubt" (*distazo*) is a verbal form of *dis* = twice, double. It is not "disbelieving" (*apisteuo*) so much as wavering between two (or more) strong possibilities. We might say, "to have second thoughts." Its only other occurrence in the NT is Mt 14:31, where Jesus after saving Peter from sinking, criticizes him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Peter, seeing Jesus and himself walk on water, knows that it is possible to do that; but Peter also knows the strong possibility that people sink in water. He wavers. He walks on water and he sinks into the water. After they get into the boat, the wind ceases, and then 14:33 states: "*And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'*" (The Greek for "worship" in 14:33 is the same word in 28:17). The two times that the disciples doubt Jesus, they also worship him.

Powell [123] writes more about this:

I think that worship is the essence of spirituality. But worship ... can sometimes be superficial. In Matthew 15, Jesus tells the Pharisees that they worship God with their lips while their hearts are far from God. The Pharisees, of course, are often the fall guys in this Gospel and they seem to *stay* in trouble the whole time. Still, say what you will about the Pharisees -- the one thing they never do is *doubt*. They are always certain about everything. They are the “God said it, I believe it, that settles it” people of the Bible. It never occurs to them that they might have overlooked something or misunderstood something. As a result, they are often wrong, but they are never in doubt.

By contrast, disciples of Jesus worship and doubt at the same time -- and Jesus doesn't call *their* worship superficial. It might be going too far to say that doubt is a *good* thing, but I do note that Jesus never rebukes anyone for it. I am tempted to believe that, just as fear seasons joy, so doubt seasons worship. Joy without fear becomes shallow, and worship without doubt can be self-assured and superficial. *Fear* and *doubt* are not good things in themselves, but they do keep us grounded in reality.

Eugene Boring (502-3) says this about the verse: “Whatever the nature of the resurrection event, it did not generate perfect faith even in those who experienced it firsthand. It is not to angels or perfect believers, but to the worshipping/wavering community of disciples to whom the world mission is entrusted.” We are commissioned even if we don't fully comprehend the doctrine of the Trinity or if we are unable to understand the Creed or even if we waver in our own faith.

We should note that in response to their ‘doubt/hesitation’ Jesus came and spoke to them in reassurance (just as he did in 17:7, the only other place where Matthew uses the verb ‘come’ of Jesus).

Universal Mandate

¹⁹ *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,* ²⁰ *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.*” One should be struck by the repetition of the word “all” in this passage:

1. Jesus has been given all power (v.18).
2. Disciples are to be made of all nations (v.19).
3. Disciples are to obey all that Jesus commanded (v.20).
4. Jesus will be with the disciples always (literally “all the days”; v.20).

The universality of Jesus' power and his continuing presence provide the dynamic for the universal discipleship mandate. The disciples will be able to make disciples of all the nations only as they recognize that Jesus has been given all authority and that he will be with them all the days until the end. The universal task is daunting, but it can be done because of the continuing power and presence of Jesus.

Baptizing and teaching (v. 20) are the constituent actions within the larger command to *make disciples*. Baptizing has been mentioned in this Gospel only as the activity of John, though the Fourth Gospel makes it clear that it was a characteristic also of Jesus' ministry at least in the early days while John was still active (John 3:22–26; 4:1–3). It was against the background of John's practice that it would be understood, as an act of repentance and of identification with the purified and prepared people of God (3:6, 9, 13). But while John's baptism was only a preparatory one (3:11), Jesus now institutes one with a fuller meaning. It is a commitment to (*in the name* is literally ‘into the name’, implying entrance into an allegiance) *the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit* (all three of whom, interestingly, were involved in the event of Jesus' own baptism, 3:16–17). Jesus thus takes his place along with his Father and the

Spirit as the object of worship and of the disciple's commitment. The experience of God in these three Persons is the essential basis of discipleship. At the same time the singular noun *name* (not 'names') underlines the unity of the three Persons.

Jesus alone had been the teacher, and the verb has not been used by Matthew of his disciples' ministry. Now they take over his role of teaching, which is the necessary application of his 'authority' (v. 18). They are to teach not just abstract ideas, but *to observe all that I have commanded you*, the latter verb being from the same root as the noun for 'commandments' in 5:19; 15:3; etc. (and cf. the same verb in 15:4; 19:7). There is thus a strongly ethical emphasis in this summary of Christian mission and discipleship, as there has been in Jesus' teaching throughout this Gospel. To 'make disciples' is not complete unless it leads them to a life of observing Jesus' commandments.

Jesus' universal reign demands a universal mission. The restriction of the disciples' mission to Israel alone in 10:5–6 can now be lifted, for the kingdom of the Son of man as described in Daniel 7:14 requires *disciples of all nations*. *Ethnē* ('nations') is the regular Greek term for Gentiles, and it has been argued that this command therefore actually excludes the Jews from the scope of the disciples' mission. But to send the disciples to 'the Gentiles' is merely to *extend* the range of their mission, and need not imply a cessation of the mission to Israel which has already been commanded, and can now be taken for granted. Moreover, the phrase *panta ta ethnē* ('all nations') has been used previously in 24:9, 14; 25:32 in contexts which include Israel in 'the nations'. And surely there can be no suggestion in Daniel 7:14 of the exclusion of Israel from the dominion of the Son of man, who himself represents Israel. This then is the culmination of the theme we have noted throughout the Gospel, the calling of a people of God far wider than that of the Old Testament, in which membership is based not on race but on a relationship with God through his Messiah (3:9; 8:11–12; 12:21; 21:28–32, 41–43; 22:8–10; 24:14, 31; 26:13).

Christmas and Ascension - Life Lessons

Fr. Antony Kadavil, in a 2019 post from Vatican News, wrote: "The Ascension is most closely related, in meaning, to Christmas. In Jesus, the human and the Divine become united in the Person and life of one man. That's Christmas. At the Ascension, this human being – the person and the resurrected body of Jesus – became for all eternity a part of who God is. It was not the Spirit of Jesus or the Divine Nature of Jesus that ascended to the Father. It was the Risen living Body of Jesus: a Body that the disciples had touched, a Body in which He Himself had eaten and drunk with them both before and after His Resurrection, a real, physical, but gloriously restored Body, bearing the marks of nails and a spear. This is what, and Who, ascended. This is what, now and forever, is a living, participating part of God. That is what the Ascension, along with the Incarnation, is here to tell us – that it is a good thing to be a human being; indeed it is a wonderful and an important and a holy thing to be a human being. It is such an important thing that God did it. Even more, the fullness of God now includes what it means to be a human being."

Fr. Kadavil went on to offer "life messages" from the gospel of the Ascension:

1) We need to be proclaimers and evangelizers: In today's Gospel, Jesus gives this mission to all the believers: "Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature." This mission is not given to a select few but to all believers. To be a Christian is to be a proclaimer and an evangelizer. There is a difference between preaching and proclaiming. "We preach with words but we proclaim with our lives." As we celebrate the Lord's return to His Father in Heaven – His Ascension -- we are being commissioned to go forth and proclaim the Gospel of life and love, of hope and peace, by the witness of our lives. On this day of hope, encouragement and commissioning, let us renew our commitment to be true disciples everywhere we go, beginning with our family and our parish, "living in a manner worthy of the call [we] have received."

2) We need to live a life of Christian joy in the presence of the ascended Lord. According to Luke, the disciples "returned to Jerusalem with great joy." Apparently Jesus' exaltation and final blessing gave them, as it gives us, the assurance that, though absent, Jesus is still present, present even in the pain and sorrow we undergo. That is why St. Augustine assures us, "Christ is now exalted above the Heavens, but he still suffers on earth all the pain that we, the members of his Body, have to bear. He showed this when he cried out from above: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?' and when he said: 'I was hungry and you gave me food.' While in Heaven he is also with us; and while on earth we are with him. He is here with us by his Divinity, his power and his love. We cannot be in Heaven, as he is on earth, by divinity, but in him, we can be there by love."

3) We have a teaching mission: Jesus taught us lessons of Faith, Hope, forgiveness, mercy, redemption and Love. We cannot put these lessons on a shelf and ignore them. They stand before us in the person of Jesus. Although no longer visibly present in the world, Jesus is present in his words., and we must make these words real in our lives as well as in the lives of others. Christianity was meant to be a Faith in which Jesus' followers would help and care for others, just as Jesus had done. But the spreading of the Good News to all nations is not a goal that can be attained by human might and craft. This is why Jesus promises to empower the Church with His abiding presence and that of the Holy Spirit. The challenge of sharing the Good News with all mankind should, therefore, begin with our admission that we have often been arrogant and overbearing. We must learn to be humble and let the Holy Spirit lead the way.

4) The ascended Jesus is our source of strength and encouragement: Perhaps some of the nagging doubts which inevitably accompany the journey of Faith could be lessened by our meditating on the Ascension and its implications. When we are too far from Faith to pray on our own, let us remember that we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous, praying for us. When the trials of life feel too heavy to bear, we must remember that Christ will come again in glory, the same glory in which Jesus arose from the tomb, the same glory to which Jesus ascended, and the same glory in which Jesus currently abides. Though our limited perception might find him absent, Jesus is fully present, participating in every moment of our lives. By His Ascension, Christ has not deserted us but has made it possible for the Holy Spirit to enter all times and places. In this way it is possible for each of us to be transformed by the power of the Spirit into agents or instruments of Christ. We become enlivened, and our actions become animated in a new way by the Spirit of the God we love and serve. We have become other Christs in the world. (Fr. Antony Kadavil)

Notes

Matthew 28:16 to Galilee: The meeting in Galilee is fitting since the disciples were native Galileans and would normally return home to Galilee after their pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. **mountain:** the location/name of the mountain is speculative at best. The mountain likely corresponds to the mountain of Mt 5:1 and 17:1 and should be considered primarily in a theological (rather than geographical) context.

Matthew 28:17 saw...worshiped: in the Greek the emphasis is not upon the "seeing" but upon the "worship." **doubted:** The word translated as "doubted" (*distazō*; also validly translated as "hesitated") occurs previously in 14:31 to describe the little faith of Peter in doubting as he walked on the water and saw the wind. It can be translated as "hesitated" or "wavered." There is some grammatical debate if all eleven worshiped and doubted or some worshiped while others doubted. Scholars lean toward the latter understanding.

Matthew 28:18 All power: God's bestowal of authority or power upon Jesus echoes Dan 7:13–14, 18, 22, 27 (cf. Eph 1:20–23; Phil 2:6–11; Col 1:15–20; 1 Pet 3:18–22). In Daniel 7, the authority of the Son of Man passes from him to his community, and so it is in Matthew. Matthew has stressed repeatedly that Jesus is the king who has authority to forgive sins and to save his people (Matt 1:1, 17, 21; 2:2; 7:29; 8:8–9; 9:6–8; 10:1; 11:27; 21:23; 24:14). Jesus demonstrated his authority by word and deed.

Matthew 28:19 Go, therefore....: Jesus, having been exalted and given all authority, now sends disciples forth in mission. Jesus had already commissioned his disciples to take the message of the Kingdom to Israel alone (10:5–6; cf. 15:24ff), but now he commands them to take it to all the nations (cf. Gen 12:3). Universal Lordship means universal mission. **make disciples...baptize...teach:** The essential mission is to propose the Good News so that others may freely choose to become disciples in Jesus. Baptism sacramentally marks their entry into the family of God. Teaching is a generic expression meant to convey all they Jesus had taught his disciples. **baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.** Baptism will be the key that initiates them into the church. The Triune formula has been evident since the earliest extra-biblical records of the church (cf. *Didache* 7:1).

Matthew 28:20 I am with you: Jesus' promise serves as an inclusion with the name "Emmanuel" ("God with us") in Mt 1:22-23, as well as his promise to be present where two or three are gathered in his name (Mt 18:20). **until the end of the age:** The promise assumes the division between "this age" and "the age to come," which is a familiar Jewish apocalyptic expression.

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