



Holy Trinity Sunday

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.”

Context

Historical Context. As part of the liturgical cycle of readings, this gospel is well chosen for celebrating the Solemnity of the Holy Trinity, the first Sunday following Pentecost. The Solemnity is a celebration of the revelation of God as three-persons-in-One: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The origins of the celebration of Trinity Sunday can be traced to the time of the Arian heresy of the early fourth century. Arius believed that Christ was a created being, and in denying the full divinity of Jesus, he denied that there are three Persons in God – essentially arguing that Jesus was as though a “lesser god.” Arius' chief opponent, St. Athanasius, upheld the orthodox doctrine that there are three Persons in one God, and the orthodox view prevailed at the Council of Nicaea, from which we get the Nicene Creed, recited in most Christian churches every Sunday.

For many centuries, the Athanasian Creed, traditionally ascribed to St. Athanasius, was recited at Mass on Trinity Sunday. While seldom read today it is a testimony to the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

The Athanasian Creed

Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled; without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son,

and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is; such is the Son; and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreated; the Son uncreated; and the Holy Ghost uncreated. The Father unlimited; the Son unlimited; and the Holy Ghost unlimited. The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals; but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated; nor three infinites, but one uncreated; and one infinite. So likewise the Father is Almighty; the Son Almighty; and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighty; but one Almighty. So the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods; but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord; the Son Lord; and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet not three Lords; but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity; to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord; So are we forbidden by the catholic religion; to say, There are three Gods, or three Lords. The Father is made of none; neither created, nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made, nor created; but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten; but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. And in this Trinity none is before, or after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid; the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped. He therefore that will be saved, let him thus think of the Trinity.

Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation; that he also believe faithfully the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess; that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God, of the Essence of the Father; begotten before the worlds; and Man, of the Essence of his Mother, born in the world. Perfect God; and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the Father as touching his Manhood. Who although he is God and Man; yet he is not two, but one Christ. One; not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh; but by assumption of the Manhood by God. One altogether; not by confusion of Essence; but by unity of Person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man; so God and Man is one Christ; Who suffered for our salvation; descended into hell; rose again the third day from the dead. He ascended into heaven, he sitteth on the right hand of the God the Father Almighty, from whence he will come to judge the living and the dead. At whose coming all men will rise again with their bodies; And shall give account for their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire. This is the catholic faith; which except a man believe truly and firmly, he cannot be saved. Amen

To further stress the doctrine of the Trinity, other Fathers of the Church, such as St. Ephrem the Syrian, composed prayers and hymns that were recited in the Church's liturgies and on Sundays as part of the Divine Office, the official prayer of the Church. A special (votive) Mass text in honor of the Holy Trinity was introduced and incorporated in the Roman liturgical books. This Mass was not assigned for a definite day but could be used on certain Sundays according to the private devotion of each priest. During the first thousand years of Christianity there was no special feast day celebrated in honor of this mystery, but, as Pope Alexander II (1073) declared, every day of the liturgical year was devoted to the honor and adoration of the Sacred Trinity.

It was however in the ninth century on, various bishops of the Frankish kingdoms promoted in their own dioceses a special feast of the Holy Trinity, usually celebrated on the Sunday after Pentecost. Eventually, a special version of this office began to be celebrated on the Sunday after Pentecost, and the Church in the England isles, at the request of St. Thomas à Becket (1118-1170), was granted permission to celebrate Trinity Sunday. The celebration of Trinity Sunday was made universal by Pope

John XXII in 1334.

Theological Context. As some critics rightly point out, nowhere in Scripture does the word “Trinity” appear. Their argument is then that the idea of a Holy Trinity is a human doctrine. Yet, Christians are baptized in the *name* of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: not in their *names*, for there is only one God, the almighty Father, his only Son and the Holy Spirit: the Most Holy Trinity. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains: “The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them. It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the hierarchy of the truths of faith. The whole history of salvation is identical with the history of the way and the means by which the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, reveals himself to men ‘and reconciles and unites with himself those who turn away from sin.’” (CCC§234).

The Church distinguishes between theology (*theologia*) and economy (*oikonomia*). “Theology” refers to the mystery of God's inmost life within the Blessed Trinity and “economy” to all the works by which God reveals himself and communicates his life. Through the *oikonomia* the *theologia* is revealed to us; but conversely, the *theologia* illuminates the whole *oikonomia*. God's works reveal who he is in himself; the mystery of his inmost being enlightens our understanding of all his works. So it is, analogously, among human persons. A person discloses himself in his actions, and the better we know a person, the better we understand his actions.

And while the critics are correct, it is the *oikonomia* of what is revealed in Scripture that forms the *theologia* of what we profess and proclaim – as well as the readings selected for the Solemnity. The readings for Holy Trinity Sunday varies with the liturgical year:

- A: John 3:16-18, “*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son....*”
- B: Matthew 28:16-20, “*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*”
- C: John 16:12-15, “*But when he comes, the Spirit of Truth, he will guide you to all truth*”

Clearly, the “Great Commission” of Matthew 28, including the “name” of the “persons” of Trinity is a pre-eminent gospel to read for this day. Yet there are so many readings that are part of the *oikonomia* about the full nature of God. Yet the Year B readings for Holy Trinity Sunday also share a characteristic with the other years – a selection of readings that reveal the *oikonomia* of the Holy Trinity, often emphasizing one of the “persons” of the Holy Trinity. In the first reading from Deuteronomy we see an emphasis on God as creator, often a role theologically associated with God the Father. The second reading from Romans 8 speaks to the role of the Holy Spirit in joining us to the “inner life” of the Holy Trinity as heirs. In the gospel, the mission of the Church is placed in the commissioning in the name of the Trinity.

Scriptural Context. 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, 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.*” 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.

Commentary

Jesus was from Galilee and since the beginning of his public ministry had moved from the northern most 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 (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)

Eleven not twelve

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/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 worshipped 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 sinking Peter, 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).

All power...all nations... all that I have commanded you...with you always

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

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.

Therefore

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).

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...worshipped: 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 “hesitated” or “wavered.” There is some grammatical debate if all eleven worshipped and doubted or some worshipped 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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