

Sermon for Trinity Sunday, Year A

The Text: Matthew 28:16-20

And the eleven disciples went to Galilee to the mount where Jesus had arranged for them to go. And having seen Him they worshipped Him, but some doubted. And having come up, Jesus spoke to them saying: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you all the days until the end of the age."

Today's Old Testament reading from Genesis 1 shows us the Triune God at work in creating the world. The Spirit of God is named as hovering over the waters. Creation comes about by God speaking it into existence. For us with the benefit of the New Testament we know that John's Gospel tells us that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us—a clear reference to Jesus—and that through Him all things were made. So Jesus is also at work in the Genesis creation account even though He is not named.

In our Genesis reading the Triune God creates the universe culminating with the creation of humanity. Human beings have the incredible dignity, honour, security, purpose and value of being created in the image of God. The ultimate purpose God created humanity for was relationship—to be in relationship with one another but ultimately to be in daily personal relationship with God, receiving His blessing.

It is only in today's Gospel reading that Jesus Himself gives us a clear name for the one God as three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In our gospel text for today we have the last of Jesus' appearances after His resurrection. The risen Jesus speaks to His disciples, saying: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you.

The assurance of this text is that Jesus has all authority, even authority over death, the wages of our sin. Jesus triumphed over the grave for us to free us from eternal separation from God and to restore us to the relationship God originally intended all people to have with Him. Just as all three Persons of the one God shared in the work of Creation, so too all three Persons of the one God participate in our salvation. We see that with the word 'name' being connected with each member of the Trinity—"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". The Triune God desires to save all people (making disciples; followers of Jesus from all nations) and each Person of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—actively participates in that universal goal.

This relationship with God happens through trusting in Jesus word' and following Him, trusting in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and His perfect fulfilling of the law for us for our righteousness. This is the promise of the gospel.

In baptism the Holy Spirit comes to us and gives us the faith to do what is humanly impossible for us humans to do in our own strength: trust in Christ, the Lord of all, as our crucified and risen Saviour. But in our text Jesus talks about Discipleship. Jesus doesn't strictly speak about baptism as a stand-alone matter. His focus is on making disciples; people who follow Him by trusting in His words of life throughout their life. We might be very good at focusing on baptism and all the gifts God gives us in baptism, but here Jesus shows us that baptism is the beginning of being a disciple; the rest of the journey is *teaching* and therefore *learning* the faith: "Go and make *disciples* of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you". Just like the wedding day is the first part of a marriage; God's ideal of two people living together with his blessing for the rest of their lives, so too baptism is the beginning of the rest of our life together with God, being nurtured by His Word. But many couples who marry focus on the wedding day to the exclusion of the marriage. They've thought about what 'the rest of life together' means, but they haven't really prepared for it.

I wonder too if there's a similar situation with discipleship? Do we focus on baptism and perhaps confirmation in isolation from life-long learning the faith and growing in it? But Jesus says that Baptism and even confirmation is a part, not the whole. He commands: baptise them in the name of the Father, and Son and Holy Spirit, *and teach them everything I have commanded you...*" Teaching *everything* Jesus commanded us is huge. It is a life-long exercise! We can never reach a point where we learn everything there is to know about God and who we are as His people and the mission and ministry He calls us to. Baptising is only the first step. To focus on Baptism without life-long teaching is to have a distinction that Jesus never intended. The two go together. We baptise children and adults. We teach children the faith after they are baptised and those who have come to faith as adults are confirmed in their Christian faith which leads to and desires baptism. Baptism, faith and teaching always go together.

In the creation of the world God blesses humankind and gives them the mandate to "rule over the earth and subdue it." He calls them to be His vice-regents as His representatives in preserving and sustaining His creation. Here in our text from Matthew, God also commissions His people to be His partners—for the purpose of the redemption of His creation: baptising sinners and teaching them the Scriptures to reconcile broken people to relationship with God and nurture them in faith as they grow to be more like Christ.

Just as Creation came into existence through God speaking, so too the church comes into existence through God speaking—God saying: “I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” as Mum or Dad or Godparent holds a precious child over the font - God speaking and shaping His baptised people into disciples; followers of Jesus and His word. As parents and Sunday school teachers, [and] Christian studies teachers and Bible study leaders, [and] people who read the Sunday texts at the lectern and when the pastor preaches and leads the liturgy God is speaking and shaping His baptised people into disciples.

What Jesus gives in our text is often called the "Great Commission". It is not the "Great Suggestion", or even, the "Great Omission." Often there is a disconnect between baptism and teaching—and a confusion over whose role that is. There I think is a problem. That we think of church in terms of a building rather than people. So discipleship happens in the church building on a Sunday and not through the week at home. Discipleship really begins in the home. When parents bring their children for baptism they are asked to promise if they will teach their children the Lord's Prayer, the Creed and the Ten Commandments, if they will remind their children of their baptism (and what it means) and bring them to the services in God's house.

The church can be pretty good at pointing out and judging those who, for whatever reason, fail to do that. But we need to realise that none of us do it perfectly. For those whose absence from the divine service we lament, we need to consider: what have we actually done to encourage them to the divine service and help them feel welcome here? How have we helped them as the family of God see the urgency of what they have promised? As Christ's church we need to help them find a place in their hearts for the word of the Lord and the holy things He serves us in His church.

Most churches in the Western world are struggling with declining numbers as they try to combat the decadence of a society lost in affluence and materialism and a pick-and-mix spirituality, with many other things vying for attention on a Sunday morning. Most churches in the West are in the same struggle we are—of not just keeping the younger generation connected, but all generations connected. If the parents aren't coming to church, their children won't be.

In our Gospel reading Jesus did not say: wait for more disciples...or lament that disciples aren't coming. He said "Go and make disciples." As Christians we are called to bear witness, to testify to the hope we have in Christ, to tell people about Jesus--to make disciples. This is a daunting thought! For fear of failing or not knowing where to start, parents and church alike retreat and the Great Commission becomes the Great Omission. But take heart and listen closely—none of us do this in our own strength or authority, but by the grace of Jesus. Knowing His Word is the starting place. As we read and study, Jesus comes and guides us and grows us on our own discipleship journey. Soak up His Word, for Jesus said: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. *And surely I am with you until the end of the age.*"

We who are baptised in the name of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit are brought into the very life and presence of God. We have God as our Father, we are united to Christ and His death and resurrection and receive all the benefits of it through his means of grace. At the font and through the Word we receive the life-giving, life-sustaining presence of the Spirit who leads us to trust in Jesus so that we can have access to God as our Father as His sons and daughters and have a family relationship of permanency with our God, enjoying the privileges that a child has with their father. As parents, if there were two people outside your house, knocking on your door wanting to come in, one is your son or daughter and the other, a person you've never met—which one will you let in and give family privileges to? Your son or daughter, of course!

That's the reality that God brought about for you through the Cross. We confess that the Triune God is truly with us each Divine service, by using His name at the beginning of the service. And when we hear the invocation, you are reminded that you come into the presence of the Triune God as His forgiven, redeemed, holy and precious child only by virtue of His grace given to you in your baptism. That's the basis for our growth as followers of Jesus. God's love. His love which will lead us to freely sacrifice more and more of the self and follow Him in joy.

The Triune God doesn't wipe us off when we don't measure up to what He has called us to. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit in perfect communion of love has brought you into His life, drawing you deeper into His unconditional love, so that through Jesus, no matter where you are on your discipleship journey, no matter what your failings have been, no matter how much your faith flickers, no matter what assails you, no matter what fears or doubts you may have, you are all sons and daughters through the faith in God's Word given to you by the Holy Spirit in your baptism into Christ, the One who promises you: "Surely I am with you to the very end of the age." Amen.