

Matthew 28:16-20

Making Disciples

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Trinity Sunday traditionally marks the start of the non-festival half of the church year. From Advent, to Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter, and finally to Pentecost, the focus is on the story of Jesus coming into this world to bring salvation. But now we enter a time where the focus is on the church, on our growing in the faith. And we start with the Great Commission from Matthew's gospel. Obviously, this text fits for Trinity Sunday because it refers to baptism in the name of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But this name is given in the context of making disciples.

The eleven who were here meeting with the risen Jesus were told to go and make disciples. And Jesus gave them two parts to how this was to happen. Baptise in the name of the Triune God. And teach them to obey everything he had commanded. So, a disciple is one who is taught, and this is literally what the word disciple means. The great commission is not about making converts or getting people to join a church, but about people becoming disciples, becoming someone who learns.

The concept of an apprentice is quite similar. Just as an apprentice is attached to a master for the sake of learning, so a disciple would attach himself to a teacher, identify with him, learn from him, and even live with him so that every moment was a chance to learn. The disciple learns, not simply by listening, but also by doing. And our Lord Jesus called twelve disciples and taught them so that they might be able to teach others.

Just as Jesus called the fishermen by the sea of Galilee, and trained them up as 'learners', as disciples, imitating his way of life and coming little by little to understand his kingdom-message, so his followers ever since have the responsibility of calling men, women and children to follow him, and training them to understand and follow his message and his way.

We might paraphrase the great commission as, "Be busy constantly making disciples of all nations." This is not just about getting people into this new community of faith, but a lifelong commitment to growing as disciples, continually learning, continually being fed and nurtured by the good shepherd. We see this even in the moment where Jesus gives this great commission to make disciples of all nations.

If you recall, the eleven apostles had made the long journey from Jerusalem to Galilee, as the risen Lord Jesus had instructed them. A bit over a hundred kilometres on foot. And only eleven at this stage because Judas had taken his own life after betraying Jesus, and they had not yet appointed Matthias as his replacement. And so here in Galilee, they have another encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. The text says, "When they saw him, they worshipped him". As you would.

The one who proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand, who healed the sick, who forgave penitent sinners, and who was put to death on a Roman cross and raised to life again on the third day is certainly worthy of worship. Here he was. Alive. Standing before them again. Surely now they believe everything he said.

"When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted." Some doubted. Surely these eleven had the greatest faith of anyone. They had seen firsthand all that Jesus did and said. They were there for the miracles, for the sermon on the mount, for the last supper. They had three years of being his disciples, spending every day with him. How could they be in doubt about any of it?

By the way, this is not the doubt of unbelief. The Greek word here literally means being of two minds. It's about hesitation or indecision, rather than unbelief. The disciples are struggling to comprehend what they are witnessing. Meeting the risen Jesus on yet another occasion still leaves them unsure about what's going on.

This is a normal part of being a disciple. There are times when we all struggle to comprehend the astonishing work of God in Christ. But sometimes we get the idea that a Christian is not allowed to doubt, to question, to not understand. And yet, that doesn't fit with being a disciple. A disciple is a learner, someone who doesn't yet understand everything, who needs to question so that they can learn. And this does mean living with a lot of uncertainty. And in this life, you'll never manage to understand it all, but that just means there's always something new to learn tomorrow. There's always another aspect of God's mighty works that you can explore. But don't let that make you feel lost and hopeless. We mere mortals cannot fully comprehend everything of God, and that might just seem overwhelming to you.

Remember there is another part to this making of disciples – being baptised into the name of the Triune God. This is not just some optional extra, but a defining moment. Baptism is what ties us to Jesus our Lord. Not just as disciples who learn from him, but as his people who share in his death and resurrection.

We hear it at every funeral, read from Romans 6:

Don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.

Being a disciple means living a life of learning that is grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It's not learning so that one day we might become something, but learning to be what Jesus has already made us. As baptised children of the Triune God, we already have the new life, the life that will be ours for all eternity. And we are continually learning how to live this new life. Knowing that when we get it wrong, the forgiveness that Jesus won for us on the cross is ours. Knowing that God has placed his name on us, and even if we walk a different path for a while, his promises remain sure.

When we have doubts, when we don't understand, we are free to question, to learn, to seek the one who is Truth. And to rest securely in our baptism, knowing that God holds us safe. So, on this Trinity Sunday, as we marvel at a God who is beyond our human understanding, we also find great comfort. The Father has sent the Son and the Spirit for your sake. Jesus has paid the price on the cross for you. The Holy Spirit has been sent to grow faith in you.

The Triune God, into whose name you have been baptised, is at work in your life, bringing you to greater understanding, but more importantly, holding true to the promises made to you at your baptism. And so we join the church throughout the world in praising our Triune God. Giving thanks for all that our God does for us. And rejoicing that God is at work making disciples of all nations, including us. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.