Historic Commentary

(Trinity Sunday - Year A)

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 28:16-20 from Selected Church Fathers and Calvin

Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 28, from a 13th century document called the *Catena Aurea* that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

Jerome: Jesus approached them and said, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me." This authority was given to one who had just been crucified, buried in a tomb, laid dead and afterwards had arisen. Authority was given to him in both heaven and earth so that he who once reigned in heaven might also reign on earth through the faith of his believers.

"Go therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." First they teach all nations; then they baptize those they have taught with water, for the body is not able to receive the sacrament of baptism before the soul has received the truth of the faith. They were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit so that the three who are one in divinity might also be one in giving themselves. The name of the Trinity is the name of the one God.

"Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you." What a marvelous sequence this is. He commanded the apostles first to teach all nations and then to baptize them in the sacrament of faith and then, after faith and baptism, to teach them to observe all that he had commanded. Lest we think these commandments of little consequence or few in number, he added "all that I have commanded you," so that those who were to believe and be baptized in the Trinity would observe everything they had been taught.

Chrysostom: After that, because he had enjoined on them great things, to raise their courage he reassures them that he will be with them always, "even to the end of the

world." Now do you see the relation of his glory to his previous condescension? His own proper power is again restored. What he had said previously was spoken during the time of his humiliation.

He promised to be not only with these disciples but also with all who would subsequently believe after them. Jesus speaks to all believers as if to one body. Do not speak to me, he says, of the difficulties you will face, for "I am with you," as the one who makes all things easy. Remember that this is also said repeatedly to the prophets in the Old Testament. Recall Jeremiah objecting that he is too young and Moses and Ezekiel shrinking from the prophet's office. "I am with you" is spoken to all these people.

Chrysostom: Observe the excellence of those who were sent out into the whole world. Others who were called found ways of excusing themselves. But these did not beg off.

Jesus reminds his disciples of the consummation of all things. He seeks to draw them further on, that they may not look at the present dangers only but also at the good things to come that last forever. He is in effect saying, "These difficult things that you will undergo are soon to be finished with this present life. For this world will come to an end. But the good things you are to enjoy are immortal, as I have often told you before." Having invigorated and roused their minds by the remembrance of that coming day, he sent them out. Those who live faithfully, with good works, should strangely desire that day even as those who lack good works should fear it.

So let us not fear and shudder. Let us repent while there is opportunity. Let us rise out of our sins. We can by grace, if we are willing.

John Calvin: vs 17. But some doubted. It is wonderful that, after they had twice seen Christ, still some doubted. If any one choose to view this as referring to the first appearance, there will be no absurdity in that opinion; for the Evangelists are sometimes in the habit of blending a variety of transactions. But neither would it have the appearance of absurdity to suppose that in some of them the remains of their former terror led them again into hesitation; for we know that, when Christ appeared, they were struck with fear and amazement, till they had recovered their minds and had become accustomed to his presence. The meaning, therefore appears to me to be, that some at first hesitated, until Christ made a nearer and more familiar approach to them; but that when they certainly and absolutely recognized him, then they worshipped, because the

splendor of his divine glory was manifest. And perhaps it was the same reason that suddenly caused them to doubt, and afterwards led them to worship him; namely, that he had laid aside the form of a servant, and had nothing in his appearance but what was heavenly.

Vs 18. And Jesus approached and spoke to them. His approach unquestionably removed all hesitation. Before relating that the office of teaching was committed to the disciples, Matthew says that Christ began by speaking of his power; and not without reason. For no ordinary authority would here have been enough, but sovereign and truly divine government ought to be possessed by him who commands them to promise eternal life in his name to reduce the whole world under his sway, and to publish a doctrine which subdues all pride, and lays prostrate the whole of the human race. And by this preface Christ not only encouraged the Apostles to full confidence in the discharge of their office, but confirmed the faith of his gospel in all ages. Never, certainly, would the Apostles have had sufficient confidence to undertake so arduous an office, if they had not known that their Protector sitteth in heaven, and that the highest authority is given to him; for without such a support it would have been impossible for them to make any progress. But when they learn that he to whom they owe their services is the Governor of heaven and earth, this alone was abundantly sufficient for preparing them to rise superior to all opposition. As regards the hearers, if the contemptible appearance of those who preach the gospel weakens or retards their faith, let them learn to raise their eyes to the Master himself, by whose power the majesty of the Gospel ought to be estimated, and then they will not venture to despise him when speaking by his ministers.

He expressly calls himself the Lord and King of heaven and earth, because, by constraining men to obey him in the preaching of the gospel, he establishes his throne on the earth; and, by regenerating his people to a new life, and inviting them to the hope of salvation, he opens heaven to admit to a blessed immortality with angels those who formerly had not only crawled on the world, but had been plunged in the abyss of death. Yet let us remember that what Christ possessed in his own right was given to him by the Father in our flesh, or—to express it more clearly—in the person of the Mediator; for he does not lay claim to the eternal power with which he was endued before the creation of the world, but to that which he has now received, by being appointed to be Judge of the world.

The meaning amounts to this, that by proclaiming the gospel everywhere, they should bring all nations to the obedience of the faith, and next, that they should seal and ratify

their doctrine by the sign of the gospel. In Matthew, they are first taught simply to teach; but Mark expresses the kind of doctrine, that they should preach the gospel; and shortly afterwards Matthew himself adds this limitation, to teach them to observe all things whatsoever the Lord hath commanded.

Baptizing them. Christ enjoins that those who have submitted to the gospel, and professed to be his disciples, shall be baptized; partly that their baptism may be a pledge of eternal life before God:, and partly that it may be an outward sign of faith before men. For we know that God testifies to us the grace of adoption by this sign, because he engrafts us into the body of his Son, so as to reckon us among his flock; and, therefore, not only our spiritual washing, by which he reconciles us to himself, but likewise our new righteousness, are represented by it. But as God, by this seal confirms to us his grace, so all who present themselves for baptism do, as it were, by their own signature, ratify their faith. Now since this charge is expressly given to the apostles along with the preaching of the word, it follows that none can lawfully administer baptism but those who are also the ministers of doctrine.

But as Christ enjoins them to teach before baptizing, and desires that none but believers shall be admitted to baptism, it would appear that baptism is not properly administered unless when it is preceded by faith. On this pretense, the Anabaptists have stormed greatly against infant baptism. But the reply is not difficult, if we attend to the reason of the command. Christ orders them to convey to all nations the message of eternal salvation, and confirms it by adding the seal of baptism. Now it was proper that faith in the word should be placed before baptism, since the Gentiles were altogether alienated from God, and had nothing in common with the chosen people; for otherwise it would have been a false figure, which offered forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit to unbelievers, who were not yet members of Christ. But we know that by faith those who were formerly despised are united to the people of God.

It is now asked, on what condition does God adopt as children those who formerly were aliens? It cannot, indeed, be denied that, when he has once received them into his favor, he continues to bestow it on their children and their children's children. By the coming of Christ God manifested himself as a Father equally to the Gentiles and to the Jews; and, therefore, that promise, which was formerly given to the Jews, must now be in force towards the Gentiles,

I will be thy God, and the God of thy seed after thee, (Genesis 17:7.)

Thus we see that they who entered by faith into the Church of God are reckoned, along with their posterity, among the members of Christ, and, at the same time, called to the inheritance of salvation. And yet this does not involve the separation of baptism from faith and doctrine; because, though infants are not yet of such an age as to be capable of receiving the grace of God by faith, still God, when addressing their parents, includes them also. I maintain, therefore, that it is not rash to administer baptism to infants, to which God invites them, when he promises that he will be their God.

There are good reasons why the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, are expressly mentioned; for there is no other way in which the efficacy of baptism can be experienced than when we begin with the unmerited mercy of the Father, who reconciles us to himself by the only begotten Son; next, Christ comes forward with the sacrifice of his death; and at length, the Holy Spirit is likewise added, by whom he washes and regenerates us, (Titus 3:5,) and, in short, makes us partakers of his benefits. Thus we perceive that God cannot be truly known, unless our faith distinctly conceive of Three Persons in one essence; and that the fruit and efficacy of baptism proceed from God the Father adopting us through his Son, and, after having cleansed us from the pollutions of the flesh through the Spirit: creating us anew to righteousness.

And, lo, I am with you always. As Christ gave to the apostles a commission which they were unable to discharge by reliance on merely human power, he encourages them by the assurance of his heavenly protection. For before promising that he would be with them, he began with declaring that he is the, King of heaven and earth, who governs all things by his power and authority.

The pronoun I must be viewed as emphatic; as if he had said that the apostles, if they wished zealously to perform their duty, must not consider what they are able to do, but must rely on the invincible power of those under whose banner they fight. The nature of that presence which the Lord promises to his followers ought to be understood spiritually; for it is not necessary that he should descend from heaven in order to assist us, since he can assist us by the grace of his Spirit, as if he stretched out his hand from heaven. For he who, in respect of his body, is at a great distance from us, not only diffuses the efficacy of his Spirit through the whole world, but even actually dwells in us.

Even to the end of the world. It ought likewise to be remarked, that this was not spoken to the apostles alone; for the Lord promises his assistance not for a single age only, but even to the end of the world. It is as if he had said, that though the ministers of the gospel be weak and suffer the want of all things: he will be their guardian, so that they will rise victorious over all the opposition of the world. In like manner, experience clearly shows in the present day, that the operations of Christ are carried on wonderfully in a secret manner, so that the gospel surmounts innumerable obstacles.