

THE DEFINITIVE APPEARANCE OF THE RISEN LORD TO HIS CHURCH

“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus directed them. And when they saw Him they worshiped Him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them: all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age”.

(Matthew 28: 16-20)

We find in this well-known passage of Scripture the “grand conclusion” of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as described by Matthew; that is, the “grand conclusion” of Christ’s ministry on earth after His resurrection and before His glorious ascension. It is yet to be followed, of course, by Christ’s return on the clouds of heaven. But here is the conclusion of what Christ did on earth for our salvation and justification.

It is indeed a *grand* conclusion. Christ here opens a mighty perspective to His disciples, His small church. I’d like you to notice in this passage the pervading and dominant use of the word “all”: all authority, all nations, all commandments, always. There is here no limited view of things but a catholic, universal, all-inclusive scheme. At the end of His earthly ministry, having risen from the dead in glory, Christ sets His goals high and His scope wide.

This is in keeping with the significance of Easter. The resurrection of Christ means His victory over sin and death. Christ begins to receive the homage and worship that is His due. And this victory of Easter has a forward thrust and momentum: we now may await the great and final victory, the full gathering of the Church and the perfection of the age. We even have our own specific calling in this gathering as members of the Church, also as officebearers in the Church.

CONCLUSION AND BEGINNING

The “grand conclusion” of Matthew is also an impressive beginning. Now it really starts. The worship of the Church. The true confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. The apostolic ministry of the Church. The work of the apostles, and when they fall away, that of elders and deacons. All is done under the authority of the glorious Head of the Church, who has conquered sin and death.

These are the elements which the text mentions. They are the elements on which we should focus each Easter. The passage deals with the definitive appearance of the risen Lord Jesus Christ to His New Testament Church. We read about the christian confession of the Church, the royal assurance for the Church, and the apostolic mandate to the Church.

BACK TO GALILEE

The Gospels give us various accounts of meetings between the risen Lord and His disciples. There is the meeting described in verse 9, which took place on Easter Sunday itself, on the evening of that remarkable day. There is the meeting which took place exactly one week later, where Thomas was confronted with the truth of the resurrection, as described in John 20. There is the meeting at the Sea of Tiberias, where the apostle Peter is restored to his office, described in John 21. And there undoubtedly have been many more meetings between Christ and His disciples, meetings at which He convinced them of the truth and certainty of His resurrection and also opened to them the Scriptures, so that they would understand the meaning and purpose of what had happened.

Matthew does not mention any of these meetings, except the first one on Easter Sunday. He takes us from Jerusalem right to Galilee. There Christ began the instruction of His disciples, and there He also finalized it.

We do not know exactly when the appearance mentioned in our text took place. Presumably it was shortly after Easter itself, for Christ already on that day directed them to Galilee (verse 10). The disciples listened to this directive, and went to Galilee to await further instruction. We read: "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them." Although it was not the first meeting in Galilee which Matthew describes here (the meeting at the Sea of Tiberias which John mentions as the third meeting between Christ and His disciples will have preceded this one – see John 21:14), it certainly was a definitive appearance of Christ. Definitive means: bringing the matter to an end, for here Christ provides conclusive instruction. The text gives us this instruction in a nutshell. It is, as it were, a summary of Christ's teaching after His resurrection.

WORSHIPING THE RISEN LORD

The disciples are waiting for Christ. When Matthew speaks here of disciples, he specifically means the eleven, for they are addressed first of all, although this manner of speaking does not necessarily exclude others. Christ is primarily concerned here with His eleven disciples, but in them He addresses the entire Church. So the eleven were on this occasion waiting for the Lord, perhaps with some of the other brethren (see verse 10).

And we read, "And when they saw Him they worshiped Him, but some doubted" (verse 17). By now it has pretty well become established that Easter is a tremendous reality: Christ has risen from the dead! And therefore the most obvious reaction to Christ's appearing is worship. Christ already received this worship on Easter Sunday; see verse 9, "And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him." He received it in Jerusalem, and He receives it also now in Galilee.

Here it means that they fall down before Him, thus recognizing Him as their Lord and their God. It was the Jewish way of giving the highest honour to God. The disciples so recognize, yes confess Christ to be the Son of the living God, the Messiah, the King of kings.

There is after the resurrection a deeper recognition of the mystery of the Messiah: that He is fully the Son of God, worthy of divine honour. The Christian confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," finds new depth and meaning on Easter Sunday and thereafter. And this will be the first task of the New Testament Church: to confess Christ as the true Messiah, as the only-begotten Son of God, as the only and complete Redeemer. So what characterizes this meeting in Galilee first of all is a profession of faith that Christ is risen Lord and Saviour.

BUT SOME STILL DOUBTED

We also read that some doubted. The Word of God is quite honest in this respect. We are told that not everyone believed right away. The four evangelists all make mention of this doubting attitude. We read in Mark 16: 4 that Christ “upbraided” His disciples for their unbelief and hardness of heart. We know from Luke that the disciples were frightened at His appearance, as if they saw a ghost. We know from John that the apostle Thomas publicly disbelieved Christ’s resurrection. And here, too, we read about doubt.

Some explainers see this doubt not as the outright unbelief in the resurrected Lord, as was shown at the beginning, but more as uncertainty as to whether this person on the mountain is really the Lord. Some, not sure that it was really Jesus, sort of “hung back,” took a “wait-and-see” attitude. In any case, they are not all equally convinced. The power of unbelief and doubt is always strong. The confession that Jesus is the Christ does not come as spontaneously as we would like. It takes time to come to this confession, as I remarked earlier. It takes a lot of convincing. The disciples have to *see the facts*, and be absolutely convinced that Christ has risen bodily from the grave. They must also learn to see these facts in the light of the Scriptures, otherwise they will begin to doubt again. They have to be led deeper and deeper into the Word so that doubt is replaced by awe and wonder.

DOUBT IS NOT THE NORM

We today, in our worship services, do not see Christ. He does not appear to us physically. We are not called to stand on a mountain in Galilee. But we do have the apostolic testimony. We have the full revelation of God, the entire Scriptures. The Lord Jesus Himself said to Thomas: blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe; those who believe and confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Lord and Master.

This is the confession which Christ expects and receives, on Easter and since Easter. It is the result of much work and much growth. With some of us it takes longer than with others. Everyone has his own personal history in coming to public profession of faith. And even then doubt has to be overcome day after day. The Holy Spirit must work constantly in us with the Word of God. Parents, teachers, officebearers have their task and concerns here, so that all our youth may come to this confession, and so that all members may persevere in this confession.

They worshiped but some doubted. It is said in all honesty. These are the facts; but this is not the norm. The norm is that all members of the Church believe and confess that Jesus Christ is their risen Lord and Saviour. They must all grow in this confession, in faith and in obedience.

This requires the constant watchfulness of the Church and of the office bearers. We may rejoice greatly whenever someone professes the Lord Jesus as the risen Lord and Saviour. But we also know that this profession will be sorely tested by our arch-enemies, Satan, the world, and our own flesh. Making profession of

faith is not the end of spiritual growth, but the beginning. Having confessed your faith, you cannot let down your guard as if you had reached the final destination. Now all the more you must fight against doubt and unbelief, temptation and sin. Now all the more you need the assurance that the risen Christ rules and governs your life and that through him you will persevere.

ROYAL ASSURANCE

We do not read here that our Lord admonished those who doubted on that mountain in Galilee. He did that earlier, in Jerusalem. There He admonished them severely. They had no reason, no right to doubt, for He had always spoken clearly to them. Perhaps He spoke here also words of admonition as well as encouragement, but we do not read of it. We do read of the royal assurance which He gives to His disciples.

It says in verse 18, “And Jesus came and said to them: all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Jesus came, it says, and this means that He drew near to them and bridged the gap that was there, physically, so that all could see that He was really the Jesus of Nazareth whom they knew. He again established that closeness, that communion which characterized His appearances as risen Lord.

Christ gives His disciples a royal assurance: all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. This is the declaration of a true King. It is not simply the authority which Christ always had as Son of God, but it is the power of the resurrection, the authority which He received through His perfect obedience.

COMPLETE CONTROL

Christ says: I have absolute authority. Complete control. It is not just restricted to the earth, it is also manifest in heaven. His is a kingship which combines heaven and earth and makes them one.

The word authority here means especially the *lawful right* to govern. With that right comes also the ability, the power to govern, but first the absolute right of Christ is established. It is a right which has been given to Him, by God the Father, as a fruit of His obedience and humiliation. He has now been given a Name above every name!

You may remember how Satan pretended that he had control over all the kingdoms of the earth. He offered to give Christ authority on earth, if only Christ would worship him. Christ would then not rule in heaven, but certainly over all the earth. But Satan does not even have the right to make such an offer. He is a rebel, a revolutionary, who has *taken* the kingdom by force. Christ *receives* the authority through obedience, directly from God.

The Church receives this royal assurance that Christ alone has full authority. Whether He always demonstrates this in the world is a different matter. But He alone has it: all things lie in His almighty hand.

ALL AUTHORITY

It is of great importance to the Church to know that He is in charge of heaven and earth, and also of our own lives. That He has the kingdom and the power, lawfully, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, in perfect unity. This is our certainty and comfort.

Christ wants His Church to know this before He ascends to heaven. For if we did not know it, how could we stand in the faith?

To have all authority means that Christ will work out His victory over sin and death, bring it to completion, in the world and also in our lives. No one can stop Him or withstand Him. And this is said in order that we would not fear but fulfill our tasks as church, as believers, as office bearers.

THE GREAT COMMISSION

For the church has a task to fulfil. At this definitive appearance, Christ gives to His Church a mighty mandate, often called the great commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (verses 19 and 20).

It is from our vantage-point an impossible task. How could such a small and weak group of men ever undertake such a great mission? But Christ gives it anyway. He says: Go *therefore*. Because *He* has all authority, the disciples can approach all nations. The world that lies under the authority of Christ lies open to the preaching and teaching of the Church. That is the great connection in the great commission! Not just “Go”, but “Go therefore.”

Christ gives to His Church the apostolic mandate. And we do not have the space to deal with these words in depth, but we must make some general observations. The mandate is to preach the Gospel, to all people, and to do it in a certain manner.

THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH

We find the expression: make disciples. Disciples are not just people who learn about Christ, but people who *submit* to Christ. See the connection with the words: teach them to observe all that I have commanded you. Discipleship of Christ, membership in the Church is a commitment, a total commitment.

The mission of the Church is an urgent mission, and her teaching an urgent teaching. The eleven disciples here become apostles to make more disciples, whose lives will be completely subjected to Christ the Lord.

We sometimes restrict the apostolic mandate, the so-called “great commission,” to mission and to preaching. But notice all the elements: make disciples through the preaching of the Gospel. Baptize them, that is, seal the Word through the administration of the sacraments. Teach them to observe, that is, exercise the proper discipline of the Word. Preaching, sacraments, and discipline

are the three marks of the Church of Christ, and they are contained in this apostolic mandate. To do these three things is the task of the Church, and here lies the challenge for the officebearers of the Church.

A CLEAR MANDATE

It is the Church's mandate to go out with the Word so that people may submit to Christ. They are called out of the world by the Word. They are distinguished from unbelievers through Holy Baptism. And they are brought to a new life of obedience, keeping the commandments of the Lord.

In Christ's definitive Easter appearance to His Church He makes clear what He expects of His apostles. So it becomes also clear what He expects of the officebearers and other church members in our time. We are not apostles, but we are called to see to it that the ministry of the Church, evident in the preaching of the true Gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the faithful exercising of Church discipline, continues today in the Church of Christ, so that God's people may be a salting salt and a city on a hill. You are called to see to it that the love of Christ, working in His Church, is evident to all around.

I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS

It can be done. Is it not remarkable that this small group of disciples, standing on that mountain in Galilee so shortly after the resurrection, did go out and made a beginning with this apostolic mandate? And that beginning resulted in the world-wide preaching of the Gospel. Against all human odds it became clear that Christ indeed has all authority in heaven and on earth.

The Church experienced what Christ here adds, "And lo, I am with you always to the close of the age." Christ knew that He was placing a very tall order on the shoulders of these simple men. The office is always too great for the office bearers. But they do not have to do it in their own strength. Emphatically, Christ says: lo! That is, see, believe, that I am with you. Always. Under all circumstances. At all times. Whether there is peace and prosperity or persecution and adversity, I am with you. And He will be with His church until the close of the age, when He returns on the clouds of heaven. Until the perfection comes, when sin and Satan shall be no more.

The promise of Easter is that the Lord who rose from the dead will never be absent from His Church, but will always enable her to live in this world and fulfill her ministry. That He will never be absent from us in our personal lives, but remains IMMANUEL, God with us.

We see here how Christ, King of the nations and King of the Church, shows us His Church moving to the great Day of Christ; His Church, which is being gathered by the Gospel and shows forth new life in communion with Christ under the discipline of the Holy Spirit.

We are taken up in this wonderful work of Christ and see its glorious fruits.

Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim
And publish abroad His wonderful Name. . .

God ruleth on high, Almighty to save,
And still He is nigh, *His presence we have.*

Then let us adore and give Him His right. (Hymn 64, *Book of Praise*)