

The Holy Trinity

MISSION STARTS

Matthew 28:16-20

The Holy Trinity

Analysis by Jerome Burce

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority 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 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

DIAGNOSIS: Going Nowhere

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Much Too with It*
Consider Matt and Mary Mainline (Protestant, that is). They want so much to be "with it" in a thoughtful sort of way. Indeed they pride themselves on that. So when Jesus says "go" (v. 19) they dither and doubt, and for much the same reason that the post-Easter eleven doubted on their Galilean hilltop (vv. 16-17). This Jesus they see or hear of doesn't fit the fundamental rules of Things As They Must Be that wise ones everywhere regard as axiomatic. In Century One it simply cannot have been that divinity intertwined with a man who bled and suffered. In Century Twenty One it cannot be that saving divinity is restricted to a particular one-and-only avatar, so to speak. To

worship Jesus that profoundly, dear though he be, would put absurd limits on god-ness, yes? And wouldn't it disrespect "the nations" (v. 18) who take their god-ness in different forms? "Who are we," say Matt and Mary, "to peddle our Jesus to them?" Needless to say, Christian world mission in the classic sense is not on the list of things the two of them pitch in for when the offering plate passes by on Sunday morning. They don't invite their friends to church either. Doing that is "so not with it," as American folks might say.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *In with God, Supposedly*

Matt and Mary, of course, are nothing if not American, and that to the core. Hence a certain blithe serenity that drives their doubting. God is not much feared among the "nations" that comprise their land. To do so would be a slap at the deeply American proposition that we're quite capable of sorting out problems with anything and anybody, deity included, all on our own. Come to think of it, Ed and Emma Evangelical (likewise Protestant) believe that notion too, and with much the same serenity. So did lots of ancient others in the days of Jesus' sojourn. A rich young man comes to mind (19:20), as do Jesus' Pharisaic opponents (6:2, 5, 16; 22:35). God gives commandments to keep, the thinking goes, and we for sure are keeping them, or certainly well enough to expect the blessing that anyone "with it" where God is concerned has a right to expect. What then of commands specific to Jesus ("everything that I have commanded," v. 20a)? Aren't these extraneous and beside the point? Who needs to learn them? Why bother to teach them? Which brings us to a doubt still deeper: when we, like the eleven, "worth-ship" Jesus (v. 17), is it really because he's divinely worth it, or are we simply being polite?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *With IT? No Way*

And if you push the envelope with Matt and Mary, chances are

they'll blurt their deepest suspicion, that to worship Jesus is at base unlawful, and not merely from a cultural point of view. They might even quote Jesus quoting Moses on the day the devil tempted him with "all authority...on earth" (v. 18; 4:9): "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him" (4:10). But don't those words apply also to the man Jesus? If so, how dare he play the devil with us, inviting our misdirected worship by seizing hold of the great "I AM," God's self-designation (Exod. 3:14), and applying it to himself (v. 20b; see also the Greek, *ego eimi*, at 14:27). Suspicions like these drove his Century One opponents to crucify him (26:65-66; 27:40). In Century Twenty One the opponents demote him and insist that others do the same. Some in Matt and Mary's crowd will flat out deny his divinity or, being "with it," they may applaud when others do. In Ed and Emma's camp they lower him to Moses' level as one among many voices in the Bible (let's not forget the Proverbs) that we take our cues from. What then of the One Voice, heard from heaven at Jesus' baptism (3:17) and again from the mountain-top cloud (17:5)? "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him." That word gets echoed by some savvy out-of-the-loop Gentiles when, seeing the earth in tumult, they tumble suddenly to the deicide they've just committed. It leaves them chattering with fear (27:54). Matt and Mary, listen up. You too, Ed and Emma. You might ask perhaps if the tumults of our American spring 2011, are really nothing more than the accidents of undirected nature that all "with it" persons will insist to the death that they are. And no matter the answer to that one, an even tougher question remains. How can It-the Ultimate It, faceless deity-be with us in anything other than a savage way when we as "with-it" ones (ha-ha) doubt Its veracity, mock Its righteousness, and sideline the Son It sent to "save [God's] people from their sins" (1:21)?

PROGNOSIS: Unleashed

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Sticking with It*

(for Once)

Yet didn't God send that Son to save us also from this sin, the one that calls his Christ into question? But of course. Hence the birth that drops him-not only as God's Son but Mary's too-into a human experience that has always entailed a steady struggle between worship and doubt, between wholehearted, unwavering trust in the word of God (that's what true worship is) and persistent skepticism fed and stoked by a nagging tempter. And Jesus suffers this. In his case the hiss in the garden (Gen. 3:1) becomes the hiss in the desert (4:3) and later the angry brutal hiss that assaults him on the cross (27:40). "If you are the Son of God," the Cherished One and Only (3:17, 17:5), what brings you to this pass? Or again, "By what authority are you doing these things" (21:23), presuming to forgive sins (9:2-3), or asserting the power and right to "destroy the temple and build it in three days" (26:61, 27:40), as if you have it in you to gin up an alternative scheme for keeping things right between sinners and God? "Get with it," the voices say. "Either strut your stuff-a loaf of bread would be nice; a descent from the cross, that too-or else prove that the God you claim to speak for has your back. Or failing both of these either worship the devil or shut up and die" (cf. 4:3-9; 27:39-43). Is the struggle to keep trusting the Father's voice against these others as real for Jesus as it is for the rest of us? The appearance of nursing angels in the desert would suggest this (4:11). All the more suggestive is his dying shriek, the cry of one on the brink of cracking yet somehow praying as worshipers do, "My God, my God..." (27:46). Notice how in that prayer the One Man does as a True Son will. He keeps faith. By doing so he unleashes the Father's joy that erupts in his resurrection, "all authority in heaven and on earth" given to him to save the doubters he died for (v. 18).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *God with Us,*

Amazingly

Notice further how Jesus exercises this authority with his maddening disciples, the Matts and Marys, the Eds and Emmas, the eleven on the Galilean hilltop who exhibit and establish the two-hearted pattern that the rest of us will follow. (It will dog the eleven too. See Peter at Galatia, Gal. 2:12). Responding to this, Jesus in essence sets Moses aside, replacing the first of his commandments with one of his own. Says Moses, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart..." (22:37-38). In truth the only way for any disciple to handle that is by lapsing into fantasy, imagining either that one can really do it or that God didn't really mean it. Neither supposition holds water. So for us and for our salvation Jesus gives the new command, one that drives not to a duty but to a promise. In Greek *idou*. Not "remember" as the NRSV renders (v. 20), but "lo," "look," "see," "notice." But "notice" what? That "I AM with you always," though if we reproduce the Greek construction it reads "I with you AM always," as in worshiping doubters and doubting worshipers embraced forever in the everlasting reality of God, gracious beyond all understanding in the person of his Son. "Notice that!" Now there's a word to learn and teach and find one's joy in, a Christ-specific command that isn't in the least extraneous, one that every clued-in disciple will ache to keep.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Getting with the Program*

As disciples keep this new command some other things will start to happen, as indeed they have ever since that post-Easter hilltop meeting. Bit by bit the joy of God-with-us, Jesus-style, will erode the thirst to be "with it" where lesser lights are concerned. Now the wise ones to emulate will be that handful of odd-duck outsiders who, prompted by a star, came to worship Jesus without reservations of any kind at all (2:11; here, by the way, a plague on NRSV's "paid him homage"; the Greek word is

the same as the one rendered "worship" at 28:17). For disciples this ever so wise worshiping of Jesus will also erode their doubts about him. Recall, worship is trust, the conviction that the "worth-shipped" one, whether "with it" or no, is even so supremely worth it. Persons so convicted will find themselves more and more inclined to "go" as Jesus tells them to (v. 19). They start to grasp that they bear a promise far too good to keep to themselves. Soon it will strike them as churlish in the extreme to allow anyone, whether a neighbor or the unknown denizens of some overseas locale, to settle for lesser and poorer accounts of the God Who Is, God in and through Christ, God the sweetly and perfectly Triune, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (v. 19). Will Matt and Mary Mainline start supporting Christian mission? Will Ed and Emma Evangelical start attending first and foremost to the promising word of God's most holy Gospel? Preach Christ. Watch what happens.