

“Guardians of the Gospel”

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had 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 behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Today once more we were privileged to witness something out of this world. A miracle where heavenly and earthly realities merge into one. The mighty and gracious act of the Triune God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Baptism. So, let's refresh how to think about this wonderful gift using today's Gospel reading from the Gospel according to Matthew

The resurrected Jesus, to whom all authority has been given in heaven and on earth, entrusted to His disciples what we often call the Great Commission. What is this Great Commission? There is this rather widespread misunderstanding that the Great Commission is about “go and baptize”. It is not.

Let's hear it once more, so that we are clear. “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 guard all that I have commanded you.”

That's it. That is the commission. Make disciples! Make Christians! Not Christians by name only. Not false Christians who claim to be Christians, but don't want to have anything to do with Jesus or with His body, the Church.

But what does it mean to be Jesus' disciple, to be a Christian? What does the Word of God teach us? Here it comes, I will mention a few things that define disciples of Jesus.

They are people chosen by God the Father before the foundation of the world in Jesus Christ. They are people who are called by the Holy Spirit. They are people, who abide in the words of Jesus, who gladly listen and learn.

Who believe that Jesus' words are Spirit and life, and that it is this following Jesus that leads us into eternal life. They believe that Jesus is the truth and the way, and they entrust the words of Jesus to shape every aspect of their lives – their worship, their marriage, their family life, their work, their rest, and so on.

They are people who choose to serve, not pursuing status and treasures of this world, but denying themselves and considering others as more important, being ready to pay the price for being loyal to Jesus above everyone else.

They are members of this imperfect community, the Church, where they try to love one another as Jesus loves them, caring not only for one another, but praying even for their enemies. And, of course, there is more...

As we can see from this brief list of the marks of Jesus' disciples, the Church is not some boring and maybe a bit strange social club, where you can be a member, but it really doesn't have any impact on your life.

Being a Christian, a true disciple of Jesus is life-changing, self-sacrificial, adventurous and exciting a journey, filled with challenges and joys, with battles and celebrations, with mystery and awe, deep meaning, peace and satisfaction.

That is the best thing that can happen to anyone... That is the Great Commission, – to invite and teach people to lead such fulfilled and exciting lives. That sounds a lot, I know, therefore the question – how do we do that?

How do we make such disciples? Jesus Christ provides the answer. Do this by [a] baptizing them and [b] by teaching them to guard everything that I have commanded you. Okay, first about baptizing. We are told to baptize them into the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

What does this mean? It means that when we baptize someone as Jesus has commanded us, the Triune God embraces them in the divine fellowship with Himself and with all His people.

You are made members of the divine family. The Holy Spirit unites you with the Father, and He unites you with the Son, and He unites you with the Church, with all God's people throughout the ages and across the world.

As it happens, we also receive a new identity. Eternal identity. A child of God. A brother or a sister of Jesus Christ. These are priceless gifts of our God. They bestow on us so much more than we could ever dare to dream on our own.

We can't choose which family to belong, and there is no way we could force the holy God to embrace us in His family. "Do this, for I accept you!" Sure... That is His love and grace, that takes us, unworthy and transforms us into precious and significant eternal beings.

This is a very important step, to be made a member of the body of Christ. Remember all the marks of true disciples? That is not easy to become one. It is impossible to achieve it on our own. And we don't have to.

Our Father gives us all these people, as many as needed to teach us, to be good examples to us, to encourage us, to support us, to pray for us. Look around, all these people, and countless others our Father has given to you to help you to become as good and faithful a disciple as possible.

As we reflected on it a few month ago, our baptism is not only some event in past. Done and dusted and ... forgotten. It is something where we live every day of our lives in this age.

It is about our new identity of God's children and Jesus' disciples. Every day empowered by the Holy Spirit and shaped by the words of Jesus we try to make our baby steps growing in our Christian maturity.

Failing every day, falling every day, getting up, joyfully repenting from what we have done wrong, and gladly returning to our God so that by His grace we can continue this rich and exciting adventure of Christian life.

Our Baptism is what keeps us firmly anchored in God's Kingdom. We may betray Him, we may run after idols, we may be overcome by our passions or temptations of the world, we may wander far away from our Father's house.

But the moment we remember that we are baptised into the body of Christ and turn back, our Father and the whole Trinity runs to embrace and welcome us. Our God never revokes His promises. This is most certainly true.

But then, there was the other side of the same coin in the Great Commission. Make disciples by [a] baptizing and [b] by teaching them to guard everything that Jesus has commanded us. We tend to forget about this one.

It is understandable. You come to baptism, everything is nice, friends, and cloths, and celebration and gifts and happy mood. This part is easy. It takes just a few minutes and you get all the attention and praise and best wishes.

But it means little if we don't do the second part. Then our baptism may remain as a precious ticket that would let us into God's Kingdom, but was never used. Sadly, there are too many that make this terrible, terrible mistake.

And we, pastors need to assume largest part of responsibility for not teaching properly, but letting people to continue to live with some magic misperceptions about baptism. All in the name of pleasing people more than pleasing our God.

Teaching – that is what Jesus commissioned us to do. The most accurate translation of Jesus' words is "teaching to guard everything" that Jesus commanded us. To guard. This is also reflected in our Baptismal rite.

Remember the promise that the parents give at the baptism? "You are responsible for bringing your children up in the Church. Remember them in your prayers. Bring them to the services in God's house and teach them the Lord's Prayer, the Creed and the Ten Commandments. Remind them of their baptism, set them a good example, and provide for their instruction in the faith."

This includes everything we just discussed. Bringing up your children in the community of God's saints. Praying for them. Bringing them to the Divine Services and teaching them the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Creed. By the way, it doesn't mean simply teaching them a few short sentences.

To teach the Creed is to teach the entire Biblical story and to help them to make it their own story. To teach the Ten Commandments is to teach them entire wisdom of God, how to understand ourselves and our relationships with God, and to live them out practically in our lives. Same goes for the Lord's Prayer.

This learning is a life-long enterprise. we could say that parents are responsible for the first stint, from childhood up to late teenage years. But then, then it become everyone's own responsibility – to carry it on till the end of our lives.

I know, I know... for some it may sound hard and burdensome. All that abiding in words of Jesus. But just think about it, how can you make disciples if you are not one of them? How are we going to teach others to guard the treasures of the Gospel, if we ourselves don't know them? How?

Some may object that they have been in the Church their entire lives and have heard so many pastors, they don't need to learn anything anymore. Let me read you what Dr Jeffrey Gibbs said. Who is he?

He is a pastor and a seminary professor in St Louis, where I studied, one of the most respected Biblical scholars. This is what He says after daily studying and learning and teaching and trying to live out the Gospel for good 50 years.

He must have learned everything. He must have mastered everything. No, but listen. "I am convinced that there are many ways for the Gospel to become even more precious to me than it already is. There are many more ways for Christ's truth to shape and transform me more fully than it already has."

If that is true for this great and humble teacher of the Church, then how much more it is true for each one of us. The riches of God's wisdom and grace are inexhaustible. The work of the Holy Spirit with us is never completed in this side of eternity. There is always more to come and more to become.

Besides, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, when we speak about being disciples of Jesus, about becoming better disciples, what is this that we are talking about? We are not talking about some burdensome and unpleasant drudgery that we need to endure so that we can get on with our life.

This is our new life in Christ. We are talking about one of the most enjoyable and uplifting, about one of the most rewarding activities that are given to us under the Sun. We have this great and undeserved privilege that we can listen to and learn from Jesus, the Son of God, Himself.

We can listen to the teaching of the One, to whom all authority is given, not only in this visible world, but also in the one which for now is hidden from our eyes. We are gifted to be able to listen to the One, who expressed His love and commitment to us, unworthy and ungrateful, lazy and selfish creatures, in the most unordinary way – by sacrificing His life for us.

Besides, that is how He comes to us and dwells with and in us. When we listen to His teaching, to His Gospel message, or when we simply discuss it among us. The Triune God is with us, always accompanying us with His Spirit. The Spirit of joy, the Spirit of life.

We are called to be guardians of the Gospel, we are Jesus' disciples, let the Holy Spirit make us humble and help us to put aside the laziness of the old selfish self, and with God's help to live up to our name, to our new identity.

And don't worry if you are weak, or don't have all the marks of true disciple, or if you daily fail and sin too often. For we are not alone in this Great Commission. We journey together with the One to whom all authority has been given. No one has ever had such resources supporting them as we – the guardians of the Gospel have.

The Triune God Himself is the One who baptizes, He is the One who teaches, He is the One who speaks the Gospel through us. And He has promised to be with us every day till the very end of this age.

Just don't resist His call, accept His help, let His Word and Spirit shape and guide you, and you will be surprised what glorious beings He can make of you!

Amen.