

South Moreton Presbytery
Year of Matthew Seminars

Session 3

MATTHEW AFTER PENTECOST

Some General Notes on *Matthew*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE NOTES AND HOW TO USE THEM

The following notes are the third set in a three-part series based on the *Gospel of Matthew*, particularly focussing on some passages used in the lectionary readings for Year A ("The Year of Matthew"). The previous two sets of notes are available on the South Moreton Presbytery website (www.southmoreton.org.au).

Not all passages in the lectionary are covered, however the aim is to explore some of the trickier texts in *Matthew*. The notes for each passage are followed by a few thoughts and prompting questions about how the text may be used in preaching for that Sunday. Each set of notes is prefaced by discussion of some themes in *Matthew*.

They are not just written for use by preachers, but anyone who is interested in studying Matthew at greater depth. It is not intended that the notes should be read beginning to end, but hopefully they may be useful as a reference resource.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT (CHS 5-7)

The so called "Sermon on the Mount" (chapters 5 to 7) is the first of 5 large chunks of Jesus' teaching appearing in *Matthew* and is prefaced with the words of 4:23-25 (NRSV):

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. ²⁴ So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. ²⁵ And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

This passage speaks of Jesus teaching, proclaiming the Reign of God, healing and gaining followers. We can see in Matthew 2 the clash of the reigns, the reign of Jesus and the violent kingdom of Herod. So now many years later, we hear of Jesus' healing and teaching ministry opening up in Galilee. Jesus offers life.

What does this new rabbi wish to teach the people about the Reign of God? What we now have in *Matthew* are 3 chapters which reveal for us the values of this mighty, dynamic, and most unusual Reign.

Yet this teaching brings many questions. Do these words present a way of living that is impossible to fulfil? It seems as though Matthew is presenting a works mentality which seems to go against what Paul had to say about righteousness based on grace and not by keeping the Law.

How do we interpret this teaching of Jesus?

Keener notes that basically there have been 8 traditional ways of seeing this sermon:¹

- 1) The medieval view giving a higher code of ethics for clergy
- 2) Luther's view that the sermon represents a code of Law demonstrably impossible to fulfil
- 3) A (Anabaptist) view literally applying the teaching for the civil arena
- 4) A traditional liberal social gospel view
- 5) A more general challenge to decision
- 6) An interim ethic which was mistakenly based on the imminent return of Christ and the end times
- 7) An application for the future millennial reign of Christ
- 8) The sermon's ethic is the ideal but won't be fully realised until the consummation of the Reign of God.

We shall attempt to explore some of these questions and proposed answers.

It needs to be noted that Jesus is addressing his disciples as those who may undergo persecution, and so intends these ways of being as applicable for the present time, and not just only for some distant future end-times event.

The main theme of the Sermon focuses around 5:17, that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfil them (5:17). It appears that the whole sermon is then seen through this lens.

The Sermon places Jesus' teachings mainly before Jewish people. The goal is to show how Jesus fulfils the Law and the Prophets, not to prove the superiority of his teaching to the Jewish Scriptures or tradition as though they were to be simply replaced.

The Sermon begins with Beatitudes (the "Blessed are" sayings 5:3-12) and ends with the warning about the house that fell because it was not on the good foundation (7:24-27). Responsibility is called for in obedience to God, this is the firm foundation for living.

And so Jesus appears to require full obedience, however not in the legalistic or ascetic ways that he is speaking against, '**but as signs of God's Kingdom**', expressions of submission to God's reign over the lives of those who would follow him.² We see that living in this Reign relates to a state of "being".

This preaching has been described more as a guide to care for those who are endeavouring to live in God's new reign rather than a summary of straight doctrine.³

Here Jesus goes up a mountain and his disciples "come" to him (5:1). Words of "coming" are important in Matthew, and indicate attitudes of faith toward Jesus, or the opposite meaning the rejection of Jesus.

¹ Keener, *Matthew*, 160, citing Blomberg 1992, 94-95.

² Keener, *Matthew*, 161.

³ Lischer, "The Sermon on the Mount," 159.

Throughout this “sermon” we see Jesus as the fulfilment of the hope of the Scriptures (5:17-18), who calls the followers to righteousness. Here we see Jesus ‘radicalizing’ (5:21-22, 27-28, 33-37) and even ‘rescinding’ the letter of the law (5:31-32, 38-39, 43-44)⁴ as Jesus is demonstrated as the authority of the law.

This would have been quite radical for the Jews in Matthew’s audience for whom the Law had been a central component of their faith and a sign of God’s covenant with the people.

The “sermon” demonstrates ethics of the Reign of God as it outlines God’s hope for the people, as well as indicating the blessing for those who live in such ways. It is in keeping with Isaiah 61. The believer is now invited to be part of this Reign in a relationship with God and others through the Messiah Jesus.

Isaiah 61 is God’s announcement through the prophet of God’s good news proclaimed to the people returning from exile. A new time of joy has come. The passage in Isaiah closes with Isaiah 61:11 (NRSV):

¹¹ *For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.*

Matthew has much to say about righteousness. We can see this in the opening chapter.

Throughout *Matthew* **mountains** feature at significant places. Here we are reminded of Moses delivering the Law from the mountain in *Exodus*. Again, we were reminded of Moses at Jesus’ Transfiguration in ch. 17 (also on a mountain!). Finally in *Matthew*, again on a mountain, Jesus sends out his followers in the mission of God’s Reign. And so in chapters 5-7 Jesus follows on from Moses’ proclamation of the Law of God for the new people that God has called from their exile.

Is the Sermon simply to demonstrate how far short believers fall of the expectations of the Reign of God? No, it is definitely a call for righteous living but also a vision of what God anticipates for fullness of life in this Reign.

Throughout *Matthew* there is the acknowledgment of failure and sin and the need for forgiveness from both God and neighbour.⁵ Yet this is the Reign for which the disciples are to pray will come in the “Lord’s Prayer” (6:9-10).

While only the disciples are mentioned at the beginning (5:1), although the number are not mentioned, the crowd is obviously present (4:25-5:1; 7:28-29).

⁴ Robert A. Guelich, “Interpreting the Sermon on the Mount,” *Interpretation* XLI (1987): 117-30, here 128-129.

⁵ Jack Dean Kingsbury, “The Place, Structure, and Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount Within Matthews,” *Interpretation* XLI (1987): 131-143, here 143.

If the disciples represent the 'typical' Christian and the crowd the potential disciple, then the audience of the Sermon has merely shifted from the initiated to those who have overheard the teaching and must now decide if they are ready to commit themselves to the One who makes such a blessed and difficult life possible.⁶

The "Sermon" is not a set of rules. It is a way of life for individuals in relationship to others. "It is precisely as individuals cut off from the community that we are bound to fail. For the Sermon portrays a dynamic constellation of relationships".⁷ And so Matthew is warning against an overly individualistic view of the Sermon, rather, it is about followers in relation to each other as part of God's vision.

Matthew 5:1-12 – The Beatitudes

We are now going to zoom in to the opening section of this sermon, the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes form the opening segment of the Sermon on the Mount and it is significant that they begin with a proclamation of blessing.

Are the Beatitudes entrance requirements to the Reign of God or rather promises of blessings in the end times?⁸ There is the sense that the blessings may begin to appear in the present and not just at some future time. They show many parallels with Isa 61:1-11, again demonstrating Matthew's foundation of the themes in the Jewish scriptures. The references to *Isaiah* give the Beatitudes somewhat of an end times sort of flavour, fulfilling God's promise to redeem Israel.

The Beatitudes have sometimes been labelled the "Be-Attitudes" with their emphasis on the mode of be-ing. They gain emphasis in *Matthew* by being placed near the beginning of the Gospel and the beginning of Matthew's gathering of Jesus' teachings.

While some translations have the Beatitudes beginning with "happy", the Greek word *makarios* here means more than "happy". Stanton translates it as: "God's gift of salvation is given to those who ...".⁹ It has also been translated "fortunate". The word could be translated "esteemed" or "honoured".

In the honour/shame society of Palestine and the ancient world in general, such an understanding conveys a raising of their status. Honour was not available to lot of people because of their lowly standing in society. It largely belonged to those associated with rulers and the wealthy. Bill Loader offers: "You are in the right place to encounter God when ..."

God's ways were therefore upside down to the society in which these teachings were delivered. The ways of the Kingdom are not those of the world.

⁶ Lischer, "The Sermon on the Mount," 159.

⁷ Lischer, "The Sermon on the Mount," 161.

⁸ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Ethical Decision Making in Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 47.

⁹ Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 298-99.

We need to note here that there are similar beatitudes (plus woes) in Luke's Gospel. While Luke has fewer blessings; there, those in need are promised that their situation will be reversed, while in *Matthew* those followers of the Reign of God are assured that those who exhibit admirable qualities (i.e. their meekness, mercy, purity etc.) will be rewarded by God. In other words, those who are seeking after righteousness in its various forms, will find fulfilment in the end.

It has been pointed out that "Jesus' words of favour are pronounced on those least likely to be considered *worthy in the ancient as well as modern world. Like so much of the wisdom* in the gospels, the truth of God is counter to a worldview consumed with success (not purity of heart), fame (not famine), power (not peacemaking), and money (not poverty of spirit)."¹⁰ Therefore we need to consider carefully the radical nature of Jesus' words and observe where this is contrasted with what is happening around us.

And so these verses are an insight into Matthew's message about the Reign of God and for challenging ourselves in our society today. The Beatitudes specifically address those who are ready for God's Reign.

John Bodycomb, a Uniting Church Minister, draws out something more also:

"Merely asking, "How can we improve the what we're doing?" without ever asking "but *why* are we doing it at all?" puts us dangerously close to the idolatry of what is. The first theme in the beatitudes is what we get enthusiastic about – what 'turns us on'." Is it what turns God on? This will then result in our more appropriate response in "what" we are doing.

The Beatitudes incorporate God's vision for the Reign of God. It is also an encouraging and hopeful opening to the Sermon on the Mount.

The Beatitudes are framed by the promise of the kingdom (Matt 5:3, and 5:10b)

³ *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹⁰ *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Certainly the Beatitudes (as does the whole Sermon) relate to Kingdom life.

One of the great successes of J.K. Rowling as a writer of the Harry Potter series, is that she has been able to encourage us to conceive of a different world, a magical world in this example: A world where what we are used to, isn't all there is to reality, and that there is more to the reality of the magical world than we might think. In a playful way she has allowed us to think beyond the borders of our usual world.

¹⁰ Mike Graves and David M. May, *Preaching Matthew: Interpretation and Proclamation* (St Louis: Chalice, 2007), 41.

While I'm not comparing the Reign of God with the world of Harry Potter's and Dumbledore's, nevertheless Jesus in *Matthew* invites us to consider a world beyond the borders and understandings of the world in which we usually live. We are being invited see into what God desires for our world, using understandings which are often foreign to what we are used to. Can we truly envision the meek inheriting everything?

For this mountain top experience for some followers of Jesus, we can imagine some of the puzzlement, and possibly even excitement as Jesus in his first recording teachings in *Matthew* introduces these strange upside-down ideas to them.

The Beatitudes reflect a mixture of future and present tense with a mixture of present and future fulfilment of God's Reign. The ongoing tension of already/not yet.

The change from "blessed are those" to "blessed are you" in the last blessing brings the thought of persecution close to home. And particularly the last Beatitude, but all of them, envisage a situation where Christians are not the ones wielding power over others oppressively, in fact quite the opposite. "They lived in active anticipation of what God was doing and would do in their lives as they lived out a community ethic of love in the face of persecution."¹¹

We have seen from the beginning of *Matthew* that Jesus himself was born into a world that wasn't 100% right, and he was born into a world where the powers that be seek to exercise persecution against those who would be a threat to them.

The Sermon on the Mount has been compared to a national constitution and the Beatitudes to its preamble.¹² We shall now discuss them a little more detail.

Poor in Spirit

Harrington notes in conjunction with material from the Dead Sea Scrolls, that "poor" means "humble". Therefore, unlike Luke's similar beatitude, it is not necessarily addressed to those who lack the necessities of life but for those who are "characterized by their meekness, their patience, their humility."¹³

Talbert quotes other refs to "poor":

the exiles - Isa 61:1;

the meek - Isa 11:4; 29:19;

contrite in spirit - Isa 66:2;

the righteous, needy, and afflicted - Amos 2:6-7;

those who do the Lord's commandments - Zeph 2:3;

the devout - Pss of Solomon 10:6;

in contrast with those of hardened or haughty heart as in the Dead Sea Scrolls

and therefore he concludes:

¹¹ Graves and May, *Preaching Matthew*, 49.

¹² Graves and May, *Preaching Matthew*, 51.

¹³ Wilfred Harrington, *Reading Matthew for the First Time* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2014), 49.

“The parallels show that ‘poor in spirit’ is a religious designation. They are those who ‘embrace the poverty of their condition by trusting in God’. They are humble before God. Matthew is not talking about people who live in material destitution but about those who live with the right disposition.”¹⁴ This right disposition no doubt certainly includes those who are not swayed by the deception of wealth to obtain true power, rather people’s focus is directed towards God.

“for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”:

The kingdom of heaven is used in *Matthew* in two senses:¹⁵

1) a passive connotation and future tense –

A future hope/the New Age beyond the resurrection (8:11; 26:29)
whose coming is near at hand (3:2; 4:17; 10:7)
for which Jesus’ disciples are to pray (6:10)
into which only some will enter (5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23-24; 21:31)
within which there are degrees of status (5:19; 11:11; 18:1, 4)

2) an active connotation and present tense –

The present kingly activity of God in Jesus (12:28)

Those Who Mourn

According to Talbert this beatitude is for those who “need God’s help, who lament that the kingdom has not come and God’s will is not yet done.”¹⁶ “To be comforted, then, is to experience God’s salvation and sustenance”¹⁷ and hope.

Isa 61:1-2, part of a prophecy already referred to, has (NRSV):

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me*

² *to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;*

It is part of the role of the Messiah to bring comfort to the people.

Ps 51:17 says that God is near those who are broken-hearted.

The Meek

Psalm 37:11 says: *But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.*

¹⁴ Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 50.

¹⁵ Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 50.

¹⁶ Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 51.

¹⁷ Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 51.

Poor (see above) and meek are often used synonymously in the Bible (cf. Isa 11:4; 29:19).

1 Enoch 5:7 includes the promise of the whole world to the just: 'To the elect there shall be light, joy, and peace, and they shall inherit the earth.'¹⁸

Two significant people in the Bible are described as meek: Moses (Num 12:3) and Jesus (Matt 11:29). Loader describes the meek as those whose inside strength manifests itself in external gentleness. Those who know who they are and to whom they belong.

Inheriting the earth alludes to the ancient Israelites inheriting the land of Canaan, however by the time of Jesus "the land" had taken on an end-times meaning (see 2 Enoch 50:2; see also Romans 4).

The understanding of the Beatitudes is that the Reign of God does not come by those who seek to force it upon others. This is important to note against the social and historical background of Palestine of the day of Jesus and the centuries prior. The Reign belongs to those who are just, who seek to be like Christ.

Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

Ps 107:5-6 (NRSV) has:

*Hungry and thirsty,
Their soul fainted within them.
Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble;
And he delivered them from their distress;*

See also Isa 49:10.

"The hunger and thirst is for the future kingdom and God's vindication of the right."¹⁹

Some material from the Dead Sea Scrolls suggest that those who hunger for righteousness more than food and drink are those who will be blessed by God. This also includes a yearning for God's justice.²⁰ These shall be satisfied by the future fulfilment of the Reign of God. "Those who long for God's saving activity will find their hunger and thirst satisfied by that very saving activity."²¹

The Merciful

Here showing mercy would include a healthy attitude to those who are in need, not just those in physical poverty. Merciful also means not getting pleasure from

¹⁸ Harrington, *Matthew*, 79

¹⁹ Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 52.

²⁰ Keener, *Matthew*, 170.

²¹ Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 52.

grudges. It relates to “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” (Matt 6:12)

Pure in Heart

Psalm 24:3–4 (NRSV) has:

*Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
Those who have clean hands and **pure hearts**,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.*

Notice the theme of righteousness is constantly appearing behind the scenes. Talbert writes: “Clean hands and a pure heart are the outer and inner ethical stance of the person. The concern, then, is with horizontal relationships.”²²

The “in heart”, like “in Spirit” mean the interior person. Harrington has “purity of intention” so that action and intention are connected.²³ It includes those who are totally focussed on God.

According to Talbert those who “shall see God” is an “eschatological vision of God”,²⁴ but is that all?

Peacemakers

The Messiah is called “Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6). See also Zech 9:9-10.

Talbert says “God’s children are those who act like God. Who calls them ‘children’? It is God.”²⁵ This word has also been used of those who seek to reconcile those at enmity.

Persecuted for Righteousness Sake

Persecution was seen as coming in the end times.

See Ps 35:7 and Isa 66:5.

Conclusion to the Beatitudes

Harrington says:

²² Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 53.

²³ Harrington, *Reading Matthew*, 49.

²⁴ Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 53.

²⁵ Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 53.

... the Beatitudes function not as 'entrance requirements' but rather as a delineation of the characteristics and actions that will receive their full and appropriate eschatological reward.²⁶

Harrington concludes that the beatitudes in *Matthew* are the promise of blessedness to Christians who truly live the gospel ideal. "We will not be admitted to the Kingdom unless, after the example of the Master, we have shown ourselves to be meek and humble; unless we have given proof of loyalty and righteousness; unless we have carried out what God has asked of us; and in particular, unless we have served our brothers and sisters in their need."²⁷

However, as well as looking towards the end-times, the Beatitudes also paint a picture for us of the recipients of these blessings. The first four Beatitudes deal especially with the vertical relationship between us and God and the last four plus the extra one, focus on horizontal relationships, how we are called to relate to each other.²⁸

Each Beatitude is not easily separated from the rest; for to seek peace, for example, is also to seek after righteousness. The promises of the Beatitudes for comfort, inheriting the earth, satisfaction, obtaining mercy, seeing God, being called 'sons of God') refer to the final judgment, the vindication of the just, and the establishment of God's perfect kingdom.

The Beatitudes assume "that Jesus' disciples are 'attached to him' (5:11 – remember 4:18-22) and that they 'resemble the portrait' given in 5:3-12 (this is implied in 5:13-16 – 'You are salt' and 'You are light')."²⁹

Besides looking to eternal end-time rewards, Matthew throughout portrays Jesus as the embodiment of what is asked here of his followers: Meek, hungry for righteousness, humble, enduring persecution etc. This of course is what his followers are called to be.

From this section of the Sermon on the Mount "the Sermon also makes clear that divine enablement is involved. This has been recognized in the performative function of the promises. It is also present in the pronouncement of the blessings.

As Genesis 27 indicates, the world of blessing, once pronounced, cannot be taken back. "The word itself is believed in accomplishing its content. ... So when the Matthean Jesus pronounces his disciples 'blessed,' he is granting them divine enablement. In the Old Testament for God to bless someone is a synonym for God's 'being with' someone. For Yahweh to be with some is for God to enable that one to succeed. The blessings, therefore, like the promises, are performative language. They involve the speaker in the sustenance and success of the disciples."³⁰

This "being with" someone by God we have already seen in Matthew 1, is the "Emmanuel" of God. We shall also see it at the close of Matthew.

²⁶ Harrington, *Matthew*, 82

²⁷ Harrington, *Reading Matthew*, 52.

²⁸ Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 54.

²⁹ Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 54.

³⁰ Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 58.

MATTHEW'S ETHICS – HOW DO WE LIVE?

A great deal is said in *Matthew* about ethics, the way a disciple is to live. Much is mentioned in the Beatitudes as we have seen in the notes in the previous section, plus also in the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7).

In *Matthew* we are encouraged to follow Jesus' example of compassion, his teaching on love, reconciliation and forgiveness, and to see his life-giving death, as we consider the way we can mould our lives on Jesus.³¹

All of Jesus' teachings relate to righteous living and the disciple is encouraged to listen and obey. The large bulk of the ethical teaching in this Gospel come to us in the Sermon on the Mount. In the previous section we have discussed the first part of this teaching, the Beatitudes which relate to Kingdom life.

The following lists some particular features from the Sermon on the Mount. Caution needs to be exercised in reading this section, that the reader consider carefully the nature (or genre) of this writing. It is in the form of wisdom sayings, a style used often in the Old Testament (e.g. some Psalms, Proverbs). Such writing makes use of hyperbole (exaggeration) to make the point. Strong language is also the style of the Hebrew and Aramaic languages. A simple "literal" reading can lead to confusing results. For example the disciple taking Jesus sayings of cutting off their hand, tearing out their eye (5:29-30) at a literal level, would have no eyes or hands left! Similarly, the literal reader of 5:22 which prohibits calling a brother or sister a "fool", would be confused to hear Jesus calling others fools (using exactly the same Greek word) in 23:17.

We shall observe details below from the Sermon, but what follows then a general summary.

"You shall not kill" (5:21) - "The commandment not to murder is taken from Exod 20:13/Deut 5:18. The sanction ("liable to judgment") does not accompany the commandment; it may derive from Exod 21:12; Lev 24:17; Num 35:16. The commandment refers to murder understood as the unjust taking of another's life."³²

"brother" (5:22) – "The expression is best taken generically as 'fellow Israelite' or 'fellow human being.' there is no need to narrow it down to other members of the Matthean community. The three examples in 5:22 all make the same point about restraining anger. There is probably no progression intended in the three examples with regard either to the offense or to the punishment."³³

"judgment" (5:22) - "in 5:21 the word *krisis* refers to the legal process or to a court. In 5:22 the tribunals ('judgment ... Sanhedrin ... Gehenna of fire') probably allude to the last judgment. Gehenna, originally the Valley of Hinnom to the west and south of

³¹ Donald Senior, "Invitation to Matthew" in *Invitation to the Gospels* (Mulgrave, Vic: John Garratt, 2002), 117.

³² Harrington, *Matthew*, 86.

³³ Harrington, *Matthew*, 86.

Jerusalem, in the NT designates the place of final punishment for the wicked. The word 'judgment' can be taken in an eschatological sense."³⁴

"so as to lust after her" (5:28) – "This 'antithesis' deepens the content of the sixth commandment (5:27) by alluding to the ninth (in its Greek form). ... Just as anger is the root of murder, lust is the root of adultery. The lustful look is the beginning of the process of possessing the wife of another man (see Exod 20:17)."³⁵

"whoever divorces his wife" (5:31) – "The alleged text is in fact a summary of Deut 24:1, which outlines the divorce process: 'he writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house.' The document stated that the husband had divorced the woman, and so she was free to marry someone else without incurring the charge of adultery. The divorce proceeding was initiated by the husband."³⁶

"you shall not swear falsely" (5:33) may connect with the 8th commandment (Exod 20:16; Deut 5:20) however the connection is probably stronger to Lev 19:12 about swearing by God's name falsely.

"Jesus' prohibition of swearing has the effect of the preceding antithesis: It guards against swearing falsely by forbidding any kind of swearing at all. This move has the consequence of rendering the Torah passages about oaths useless. Yet this need not be taken as abrogation or criticism of the 'old Law.' Rather it is a sharpening that Matthew understood as fulfillment."³⁷

Verse 43 to love neighbour is based in Lev 19:18 however there is no commandment in the OT to hate one's enemy.

The whole section 5:21-48 are antitheses. That is, they come in paired sayings with a "but" in the middle:

E.g. Matthew 5:21–22 (NRSV):

²¹ *"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'* ²² *But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.*

... in interpreting them from a Matthean perspective we should focus on their function as fulfilling the Torah rather than abrogating it. Matthew did not take them as rendering the OT commandments obsolete or useless. Rather he wanted to show that Jesus interpreted the Torah in such a way as to lead it to its goal and its fullness.³⁸

³⁴ Harrington, *Matthew*, 86.

³⁵ Harrington, *Matthew*, 87.

³⁶ Harrington, *Matthew*, 87

³⁷ Harrington, *Matthew*, 88.

³⁸ Harrington, *Matthew*, 90.

The dynamic of the antitheses is one of sharpening the Torah, getting to the root of what it teaches, moving into the realm of internal dispositions from which evil actions proceed.

The first antithesis (Matt 5:21-22) attacks anger as the root of murder. The two loosely connected illustrations (5:23-24, 25-26) stress the value of reconciliation with an enemy.

The second antithesis (5:27-28) attacks lust as the root of adultery. The loosely connected sayings about the right eye and the right hand as causes of scandal (5:29-30) are further instances of going to the sources of sin.

The third antithesis (5:31-32) presents Jesus' prohibition of divorce as a way of avoiding the divorce procedure outlined in Deut 24:1. The exceptive clause ('apart from sexual irregularity') suggests that Matthew was part of the Jewish debate about the grounds for divorce involving the interpretation of the phrase 'some indecency' in Deut 24:1.

Whereas Hillel gave it a wide interpretation, Shammai narrowed it down to mean unchastity (*m. Gittin* 9:10). If *porneia* refers to sexual misconduct on the woman's part, then Matthew makes Jesus agree with Shammai. If it refers to marriages within the degrees of kinship forbidden by Lev 18:6-18, then Matthew brings Jesus' authority to bear on what may have been a problem especially for Gentile converts and presents him again as upholding the Torah.³⁹

Acts of Piety (6:1-18)

In Matt 6:1-18 we have a set of what has been referred to as "acts of piety."

For "giving alms" (6:2) see Prov 14:21, 31; and Isa 58:6-8 for refs to kindness to the poor. See also Deut 14:28-29; 24:19-22 for procedures for feeding the poor. The mention of trumpet is hyperbole to "caricature the ostentatious behavior captured by the image of blowing a horn to advertise one's almsgiving."⁴⁰

The statement about standing in prayer in the synagogues (6:5) is not a criticism of public prayer but the public display of private activity.

The three acts of piety - almsgiving, prayer, fasting – were important aspects of Jewish religious life in Jesus' time. The Matthean Jesus is not criticizing the acts of piety as such, nor is he speaking against public manifestations of piety. In each case it is a matter of a private act of piety – not the Jewish daily prayers, nor the fast of the Day of Atonement. His target is the aberrant style of those who make acts of personal piety such as almsgiving, prayer, and fasting into public displays. It is ostentatiousness in personal piety that is criticized here: drawing public attention to almsgiving, praying in public places so as to be seen and calling attention to one's fasting.⁴¹

³⁹ Harrington, *Matthew*, 91-92.

⁴⁰ Harrington, *Matthew*, 94.

⁴¹ Harrington, *Matthew*, 96

Wisdom Sayings (6:19-7:27)

What follows has been referred to as “wisdom sayings”

The division of humankind into two kinds of people is a commonplace in Wisdom literature. The joining of this motif to the idea of the last judgment is also common in Jewish writings of Jesus’ time. A major premise of the Wisdom books is the law of retribution: The good are rewarded, and the wicked are punished. But life is not so neat. Around Jesus’ time there was a strong tendency to put off the ultimate rewards and punishments until the end of human history as we know it. And so it was inevitable that the division of humankind and the last judgment would be combined.⁴²

As in the Qumran *Manual of Discipline*, the division is not between Jews and Gentiles. Nor is it between Christians and Jews as if they already represented different and separate religions. Rather, here the division is between Jews who accept Jesus’ interpretation of the Torah and those who do not.⁴³

Summary of the Sermon on the Mount

The whole Sermon is focused around the Our Father (6:9-13), which reminds the reader about living centred on calling on God as we are called to be God’s children. Thus we call God holy in the context of living on earth as God has it in Heaven.⁴⁴

It is in the context of the prayer for God’s kingdom to come. The disciples are still to constantly pray for God’s kingdom to come and so we have this already/not yet of the presence of the Reign of God. This is something reflected throughout the Beatitudes.

Harrington notes “it can also be taken as the center of the entire text (6:1-18) and thus as the ‘spiritual heart’ of the piety that ought to animate Jesus’ followers.”⁴⁵

The theme of love pervades the Sermon: Love expressed without anger (5:22), encouraging reconciliation (5:21-6), and love even of enemy (5:43-47). Love is also expressed in sexual relations and marriage and being truthful and not retaliating (5:27-42). Ultimately love is expressed in the form of the “Golden Rule” (7:12a).

Loader argues that the themes of righteousness/goodness and the Kingdom of Heaven frame 5:3-12. Matthew talks about righteousness elsewhere in 1:19; 3:15; 6:1; 6:33. There is a call here for letting God be the only God, and sharing in God’s righteousness which is love.⁴⁶

⁴² Harrington, *Matthew*, 110.

⁴³ Harrington, *Matthew*, 120.

⁴⁴ Barton, “Gospel according to Matthew,” 129.

⁴⁵ Harrington, *Matthew*, 97.

⁴⁶ Loader, *Matthew*, 4.

Jesus' interpretation of the Law is righteous way which he calls his disciples to follow. This is to be done not with the least amount of effort which the Law requires, but a whole-hearted and loving response to God whom we call our parent.

There is the genuine call to hunger and thirst after righteousness (5:6). Such righteousness can only come through serving God and God alone (6:24). This will be exhibited in the many relationships which the disciples are in.

Although the future tense predominates the Sermon on the Mount when it comes to rewards for the faithful, so that the believer may hope for bliss in heaven to come, nevertheless God promises to meet the needs of the believer in the here and now. An example is 6:11, meaning that the disciple doesn't need to worry about the present (6:25-34). God understands their present needs (6:32). God loves the believer now and cares considerably for them (6:26).

The English term 'Law' can distort the Jewish understanding of Torah. The word 'Torah' derives from the Hebrew verb 'instruct' (*yrh*) and refers to the teaching or instruction presented in the Scriptures, especially the Pentateuch. For Jews the Torah was (and is) the revelation of God's will, a kind of divine blueprint for action. It is a gift and a privilege given to Israel, not a burden. Acting upon the Torah is the privileged way of responding to the Creator God who has entered into covenant relationship with Israel. It presupposes the prior manifestation of God's love. The Greek translation of Torah (*nomos*) is not incorrect since the Torah is concrete and demands action. But the theological context of covenant can never be forgotten if distortion is to be avoided.⁴⁷

The thesis of the Sermon on the Mount is that Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfil the Law and the Prophets. Matthew's compendium of his teaching seeks to show what fulfilment entails. It clearly does not mean doing away with the Torah. In some cases it involves going to the root of the Torah's teachings or going beyond the letter. The sermon emphasizes internal dispositions and attitudes that will structure the appropriate enactment of the Torah.⁴⁸

Some have seen the Sermon as allowing us to be aware of our own sinfulness, and how far we are off the mark of perfection to which Jesus calls us. It seems, however, that Jesus in the Sermon seems to think that it is possible to fulfil the admonitions which he issues.

Is there no help with these admonitions? Allison argues that particularly 6:25-34 and 7:7-11 speak of grace, that God is with us and for us, "a giver of gifts and supplies their every need."⁴⁹

Allison also points out that the crowds who have followed Jesus to hear these words are those who have already been healed by Jesus and received his compassion (4:23-25). Also, the Beatitudes (5:3-12) promise inheritance of the earth (5:5), seeing

⁴⁷ Harrington, *Matthew*, 91.

⁴⁸ Harrington, *Matthew*, 111.

⁴⁹ Dale C. Allison Jr, *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 197.

God (5:8), receiving reward (5:12). Wilder writes that Matt 5-7 offers “not so much ethics of obedience as ethics of grace.”⁵⁰

Loader argues that:

“Matthew helps us avoid dangers:

- Conversion once is all that matters
- Experienced highs, miracles are all that matters
- Acclaiming Jesus ‘Lord’ is all that matters 7:21-23

Matthew in Ministry points to:

- Life of faith as engaging fully with the God of compassion in an ongoing relationship
- Life-long learning in a community of learning
- Mission as expressing God’s goodness in the world and building learning communities of faith and worship
- Worship as honouring a generously creative and loving God, not a self-preoccupied deity needing adulation”⁵¹

MATTHEW 28:16–20 - THE FAMOUS CONCLUSION TO MATTHEW

Introduction to the Text

Beginnings and endings for books of Bible are usually critical and warrant close examination. The ending of *Matthew* is certainly no different. It is one of the most famous endings of any Biblical writing.

The first question we have to address is: Does this commission only apply to the 11 disciples or is it pertinent for the Church today? Matthew certainly includes this passage for the sake of his own community back then. *Matthew*, of all the Gospels, is the most focussed on the Church and what discipleship means for it.

Throughout the entire Gospel there is continuity from Israel to John the Baptist to Jesus and then from Jesus to the disciples to the Church.⁵² And so it seems that the message is for all who would be followers of Jesus.

The ending of *Matthew* indicates strongly the reaching out to the world of the values of the Reign of God and urges the Church to be involved in this task of going to the nations.

For Matthew and the community, the final word of their Scriptures would have been 2 Chron 36:23 which contains the royal discourse of Cyrus, the Persian king who

⁵⁰ Amos Wilder, *Eschatology and Ethics in the Teaching of Jesus*. Rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 113.

⁵¹ Loader, *Matthew*, 5.

⁵² Martin Goldsmith, *Matthew and Mission: The Gospel through Jewish Eyes* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2001), 199.

liberated the Israelites from exile in Babylon. It is interesting to have a look at this passage briefly. 2 Chronicles 36:23 (NRSV):

²³ “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD their God be with them! Let him go up.”

That is, Matthew’s ending is like a royal discourse by this ruler and includes the desire that the Lord will be with the people, and the context is the authority of the ruler as now Jesus claims the authority given to him; the task of going is also highlighted.

The Matthew commissioning has also been compared with the commissioning at the ending of Moses’ life (Deut 31-34).⁵³ There Moses commissioned Joshua with instructions about teaching his words to the people (Deut 32:46). Moses assured Joshua of the continuing presence of the LORD (Deut 31:6).

So the readers of *Matthew* accustomed to these ancient scriptures, would have been looking in this passage for the concepts of the commands of God in the context of the dominion of God. Here again we have the desire of the LORD’s presence with the people. Isn’t this what we really seek? Isn’t this what we really need?

Context

We shouldn’t draw Matt 28:16-20 too quickly away from Matthew’s context. We will look at this passage against the background of this First Gospel.

The disciples have been at their lowest point in Matthew’s story: There was Judas’s betrayal, then the disciples falling asleep in the Garden, their deserting of Jesus at his arrest, finally then, Peter’s denial. They have been scattered, and now they are gathered (all of them minus Judas) with Christ. At this low point of discipleship the resurrected Jesus greets them graciously with a mission. It is a new start.

In contrast to the disciples not being with Jesus at his darkest hour, Christ promises to be present with them always. It is a reminder of God’s gracious offer to us to be constantly invited with forgiving love to new starts. This gives hope for the church with its failures. We are still called in the power of the resurrected Lord.

As we shall see, this commissioning draws together many of the themes of the book. It is a commissioning scene with a mountain setting, which we have seen is significant in *Matthew*. By talking about “the” mountain here but not naming it, it seems that Matthew wishes to draw our attention back to the other mountain scenes.

Great revelations come from mountains in *Matthew*, such as Jesus’ authoritative teaching of the Sermon on the Mount and the glory of the Transfiguration. Both these

⁵³ Mike Graves and David M. May, *Preaching Matthew: Interpretation and Proclamation* (St Louis: Chalice, 2007), 131.

themes are developed in this final mountain-top experience. It was on a mountain where Jesus was offered all the kingdoms of the world (4:9) but his refusal to accept this led him to the cross and now on this mountain he announces that all authority in heaven and on earth is given to him. From the mountain top we can see a new perspective on things.

As the Church gathers where Christ calls it, we see new perspectives.

Worship and Hesitation

When the disciples see the resurrected Lord, they worship and the New Revised Standard Version says that some doubt. The Greek is ambiguous, they all could be doubting. The same word for doubt is used by Jesus to describe Peter's uncertain faith in 14:31 while he was trying to walk on the water. Perhaps a better word than 'doubt' is "hesitate".

Matthew doesn't tell us the reason for the hesitation, whether it was that they were uncertain about Jesus' identity, whether they were uncertain whether it was appropriate to worship Jesus, whether Jesus would forgive them, whether they doubted their own ability to obey and follow Jesus. The more important point here is that again Jesus draws ones of little faith to stronger faith and Matthew is happy to make this known. So, notice here that mission begins in weakness, it is "faith in progress"⁵⁴.

Powell writes that the "church for Matthew is a community of worshipping doubters, a gathering of people of little faith pooling their mustard seeds together, ready to use those seeds, which seem so insignificant, to move mountains"⁵⁵

The worship of Jesus at the end of *Matthew* forms an inclusio with the beginning of *Matthew* where the Gentile magi pay homage to the infant Jesus. Similarly, the theme of kingship is a theme of the first 2 chapters as Jesus is Son of King David, and also the King of the Jews. The scene now at the end of *Matthew* is located in Galilee which is significant as the reader is taken back to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The disciples are to continue as they began with Jesus. And so we have beginnings and endings, but new beginnings at each ending. So that this commissioning is far less an ending but a beginning.

Notice that, whereas in the rest of *Matthew*, people approach Jesus, now Jesus approaches the disciples. Jesus is now on the front foot. Are we willing to be met? The call on our lives comes from God, it is not our idea. The call to ministry comes from God, it is not our idea.

⁵⁴ Russell Pregeant, *Matthew* (St Louis: Chalice, 2004), 186.

⁵⁵ Mark Allan Powell, *Loving Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 125.

All

Notice the prevalence of the word “all” in this passage – **all** authority (18), **all** nations (19), **all** that I have commanded (20), I will be with you **all** the days (20).

Comprehensive authority for the mission,
comprehensive mission,
comprehensive teaching of Jesus,
for comprehensive time.

The statement of all authority has been described as “one of the most important Christological statements in the First Gospel”.⁵⁶ In contrast to what Satan offered Jesus in the temptation scene, now all authority in heaven and on earth (i.e. superior to what Satan could offer) has been given to Christ.

There is also an allusion here to Dan 7:14 where Daniel sees the vision of one like a Son of Man:

To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

So, part of Matthew’s gospel message is that a new end time era is upon us. Jesus accepts the Reign so that all people should serve him. Here at the end of the gospel, then, we find the culmination of the theme of royalty which was introduced at the beginning.

Throughout we have the developing language of Messiahship and royalty, but now the true nature of that reign is revealed. This Reign of the resurrected Lord stands far above local politics and extends far beyond the people of Israel. It is the universal Reign of Jesus which is the distinctive feature of Matthew’s Good News (13:41; 16:28; 19:28; 20:21; 25:31–34).⁵⁷

Apocalyptic time is now time in *Matthew*. So, what is the decree of this apocalyptic Ruler?

Go

We have the one who comes to us with all authority, for us to go and leave the comfort zone. This word “go” sounds like the command. In the Greek it is a participle, “as you go”. The understanding of the mission is a process, a pilgrimage, a movement.

It is the beautiful paradox that it is in the going that Jesus is the “I am with you” at the same time. It is in going that we find the presence of Christ.

⁵⁶ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 333.

⁵⁷ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 1113.

Make Disciples of All Nations

Here is the command. Matthew's favourite term "disciple" is now made into a verbal command. So, in *Matthew* what does being a disciple mean? It means an imitation of Christ. The whole of Matthew's gospel spells this out.

Montague puts it this way:

To be a disciple is to follow Jesus, to share his lifestyle and his table, to listen to his word, accept it and live by it, to share his mission, to accompany him through the storm, to learn how to live in the community with other disciples, to forgive and be reconciled, to bear public witness to Jesus, and finally to make other disciples.⁵⁸

As Jesus found, making disciples takes time, instruction and formation. "It is a lifetime of spiritual formation."⁵⁹

The translation "make disciples" sounds coercive. Sadly, it has been used coercively, particularly during times of colonial expansion. Perhaps a better translation is "discipling". Discipling people gives us a better idea.

By discipling the same way as Jesus did, we understand that it wasn't a violent exercise. Jesus loved people, he blessed them, helped them, healed them. Many didn't choose to follow. Jesus always allowed room for people to say no to the call. Discipling is the invitation to be exposed to and to be part of the Reign of God.

Matt 4:15 labels Galilee as "Galilee of the Gentiles", and so now Jesus commissions the disciples to all nations. Initially Jesus' mission for the disciples was not to the Gentiles but to the lost people of Israel (10:5-6). The disciples are now to do what Jesus has done and taught them to do, however this mission is clearly now to all nations. Now the predominantly Jewish group is invited to expand their horizons and fulfil the promises made by the prophets of long ago. The sky is the limit for Christ's mission.

Baptising

Baptism is in the name of the Trinity. Notice that "name" here is singular, thus God is unity with 3 ascriptions and one name. "In the name" of means into the possession of. Those who are baptised are baptised into the possession of the Triune God so that there is a **transfer of ownership**.

While there has been some debate about the origin of the Trinitarian formula in *Matthew*, we should not be side-tracked away from recognizing the importance of the theological step which has been taken here.

⁵⁸ George T. Montague, *Companion God: A Cross-Cultural Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* revd ed. (NY: Paulist, 2010), 361.

⁵⁹ Montague, *Companion God*, 361.

It is one thing for Jesus to speak about his relationship with God (notably 11:27; 24:36; 26:63–64) and to draw attention to the intimate links between himself and the Holy Spirit (12:28, 31–32), but for “the Son” to take his place as the middle person, between the Father and the Holy Spirit, as a three-fold description of the object of the disciple’s allegiance and worship, is totally amazing.

This human leader of the disciple group has become the rightful object of their worship. As well as this, we have the three divine persons having a single “name” – a most significant pointer toward the Trinitarian doctrine of three persons in one God.⁶⁰

Matthew 18:20 shows that the invocation of Jesus’ name evokes his presence among the disciples. By extension, whenever the disciples pray the ‘Our Father’ (6:9-13), the invocation of the name of the Father would evoke God’s presence in and provision for the disciples’ lives (including leading not into temptation and delivering from the Evil One). To invoke the name of God unleashes the power that makes intelligible the words ‘with God nothing is impossible’ (19:26).

There is the probability that the First Evangelist understood Christian baptism in terms of Matthew 3:11 “he will baptise in the Holy Spirit ...” If so, then the Spirit’s presence is presumed by Matthew to be a part of the disciples’ lives to enable them.

To be baptized into the Triune Name, is to enter into this bonded relationship that will provide one with the divine resources to enable following the guidance of what comes next (all that I have commanded you).”

Teaching

While the main focus here is to disciple, Jesus also includes teaching for these disciples so that they grow. Now for the first time in *Matthew* the role of disciples to teach is outlined. Thus, teaching now becomes part of the mission.

All That I have Commanded You

What are we teaching? Matthew has the phrase: “all that I have commanded you”. We are doers and not just hearers (see 7:26-27).

Matthew of all the Gospels is strong on the theme of righteousness. Jesus calls his disciples to righteousness. What does righteousness look like in Matthew’s ethical kingdom picture? Righteousness in *Matthew* springs from the worship of the righteous God.⁶¹

Bill Loader argues, rightly I think, that the themes of righteousness/goodness and the Reign of Heaven frame the commandments of Jesus.

⁶⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 1118.

⁶¹ Goldsmith, *Matthew and Mission*, 67.

There is a call here for letting God be the only God, and a call for sharing in God's righteousness, which is love.⁶²

Teaching and discipling should be embedded in a loving, caring, framework - otherwise it is not doing all that Jesus commands.

I am with you - Immanuel

"And remember" Jesus says. Here instead of "remember" some translations have "Lo" or "Behold" – indicating a sense of seriousness about these words. As we take on for ourselves this important commission of Christ there is an important pause here, before we proceed to the next statement: "I am with you"

The presence of Jesus has also been emphasised earlier in Matthew. In 1:23 he is introduced as Immanuel ("God with us"). Another link with the beginning of *Matthew*. As Immanuel, Jesus again is identified with God. He uses the same "I AM" phrase (*egō eimi*) as with Jesus' revelation to the disciples when he comes to them on the water (14:23). It is a phrase again reminiscent of the divine presence.

In 18:20 Jesus promised to be with two or three gathered in his name.

Matthew's risen Jesus carries out the functions given elsewhere in the New Testament to that of the Holy Spirit. Jesus in *Matthew* has a Spirit enabled ministry (12:17-21 cf. Isa 42:1-4; Matt 3:16-17). Even during times of discipline Jesus' presence is there as a guide and to confirm the community's decisions in ch. 18 (18:18-20). The Spirit will tell the disciples what to say when they are stressed from the outside in ch. 10 (10:16-20)

Nigel Watson notes that about 100 times in the OT God is stated **to be with** people. It is not a static presence but an active power involving protection, help and deliverance.⁶³

According to Talbert, there was an understanding of the day that being in the presence of the master philosopher allowed for a transformation to occur beyond their imitation of the master. **Presence itself was transformative for the followers of the master.** Thus Jesus' being with the disciples in *Matthew* is particularly transformative and we see this at other places in *Matthew* (see e.g. 17:1; 26:51; 26:69; 26:71 and see also 28:19, 20).⁶⁴ Thus, Matthew portrays the gracious presence of the divine with the disciples in a different way to other NT writers. Jesus' very presence is transformative.

And before we think too quickly of the warm cuddly presence of Christ, we have been reminded just a few chapters earlier about the presence of Christ in the hungry,

⁶² Loader, *Matthew*, 4.

⁶³ Nigel Watson, "The Story of the Resurrection in Matthew," in *The Year of Matthew*, ed. Hugh McGinley (Melbourne: Desbooks, 1983), 25.

⁶⁴ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Ethical Decision making in Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 38-42.

poor and needy. There is also the ethical challenge here to see and recognise the presence of Christ in the needy. “You always have the poor with you” (26:11).

The significant part of the proclamation is that it is the resurrected Lord who is now present with the followers. The exemplary teacher of *Matthew* now commissions the disciples to carry on this mission. The concept of Immanuel is now fully developed.⁶⁵

Until the End of the Age

‘until the end of the age’ is the apocalyptic scenario in this commissioning scene. It makes it clear that Jesus is not just talking to the disciples then but to all disciples of all time.

Along with the Daniel apocalyptic vision we saw, we now have a great sign of apocalyptic hope.

Message for the Church

We can note that we end the Gospel on the note of Christology and discipleship, the two major thrusts of the whole Gospel.⁶⁶

Luz notes Matthew finishes his Gospel in a manner quite unusual for Protestant sensibilities, by intermingling grace and commandments. It is a statement of reality as well as a commandment.

Jesus’ commandments are the gospel message that the disciples can offer to the world. But for Matthew, this is not onerous news, but the good news of Jesus’ dominion and guidance and constant presence. The ‘God with us’ will remain with the community always, to the end of time, helping it, teaching it, and standing by its side as it faces new challenges.⁶⁷

Jesus is the Immanuel, the ‘God with us’; and his assistance, his power, his commandments and his teachings are a constant foundation of life.⁶⁸ Times have changed radically and will continue to change, but we always go in the power of the Spirit of Jesus.

Conclusion

And so to conclude: *Matthew* begins and ends with divine intervention in human affairs.⁶⁹ That needs to be our beginning also. So we have here not an ending but a

⁶⁵ David L. Turner, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 692.

⁶⁶ Ben Witherington III, *Matthew* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 535.

⁶⁷ Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 140-141.

⁶⁸ Luz, *Theology*, 140.

⁶⁹ Charles L. Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Ethical Decision Making in Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 35.

new beginning. Graves and May say that this ending of Matthew “propels the reader Into a purposeful future beyond the pages of the gospel.”⁷⁰

So just like Joshua from Moses, just like the Israelites being sent to rebuild their kingdom from King Cyrus, just like the 11 hesitant disciples of Jesus, we are commissioned and we are propelled to this place of powerful and hopeful beginnings.⁷¹

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.

⁷⁰ Mike Graves and David M. May, *Preaching Matthew: Interpretation and Proclamation* (St Louis: Chalice, 2007), 130

⁷¹ Leslie J. Francis and Peter Atkins, *Exploring Matthew's Gospel: A Guide to the Gospel Readings in the Revised Common Lectionary* (London: Morehouse, 2001), 221.

PENTECOST SUNDAY – John 20:19-23

This passage in John's Gospel is puzzling if we try to connect it with the Acts 2 account of the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. In *John*, we read that various disciples encounter the risen Jesus on Easter Sunday and yet Jesus seems to bestow the Spirit on those disciples then. We shall explore this apparent discrepancy further.

Notice that in the previous verses Mary hears, and sees, and holds, the risen Jesus, even though at first she doesn't recognise him. As Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, the disciples behind closed doors, and later also to Thomas, he is still able to show them the signs of the flesh. They hear him, see him, hold him and are offered to feel him.

The disciples are behind closed doors for "fear of the Jews" (20:19). This term can only mean here the Jewish authorities. This hiding is not the valued characteristic of a good disciple in John's Gospel (contrasting the examples of John the Baptist (1:19, 20), the man born blind (ch. 9), Jesus (18:20) plus others) who had no fear of "the Jews". It seems Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, after Jesus's death, "came out" in their willingness to associate with Jesus (John 19:38, 39). They appeared to have more courage than the other disciples.

When the disciples see the risen Christ, they are filled with joy, and Christ greets them with a blessing of peace (in fulfilment of Jesus' word to them of 16:16–33). This blessing of peace is repeated.

Peace also holds a new meaning in the light of 14:27 where Jesus promises this gift. His words are more than a greeting but also a bestowal on the disciples of the gift. This peace reflects the deeper idea of *shalom* of all that is good for their deeper well-being.

With this offering of peace Jesus now (v. 22) refers to the Holy Spirit as he breathes (the Greek word is simply *enephusēsen* - "he breathed"). In ch.16 Jesus gave the promise of the Holy Spirit, now here there appears to be a (symbolic?) dynamic transmission. There is a probable parallel to Gen 2:7 where God breathes life into the first human (and possibly Ezek 37:9 - breath on the dry bones.) The recalling of these Old Testament events perhaps indicates the beginning of a new creation and awakening of the dead.

We have been prepared for this event of the Holy Spirit already in the Gospel in 1:33; 3:5; 4:24 and 7:39. With regard to 1:33 ("baptism of Holy Spirit"), *John* is the only gospel which connects Jesus' Spirit baptism directly with the descent of the Spirit upon him as a dove. Note also John's mention of the Spirit "abiding" or "remaining" on Jesus (1:32). In 3:5 Jesus refers to water and spirit. In 4:24 God is spirit and worship is to be in spirit.

The bestowal of the Spirit is now in fulfilment of Jesus' words to his disciples in 14:16-17,26; 15:26; 16:7-15.

Here in chapter 20, however, the verb to breathe doesn't carry an object, so it more literally reads "And with that he breathed, and said 'Receive the Holy Spirit'".⁷² This raises the question whether this is the point at which the disciples receive the Spirit or is it a sign of what is to come, if one wishes to harmonise this event with Acts 2 where the Holy Spirit was seen coming upon the disciples at Pentecost.

Most scholars would see this action in John 20 in a symbolic way as an indication of what would happen to the disciples at a later date. It must be acknowledged that the effect of this breathing appears to make little immediate difference. The disciples still meet behind locked doors. The picture portrayed in the next chapter of John indicates life as normal for the disciples and nothing like the scenes depicted in Acts 2.

Carson then proposes that "Jesus' 'exhalation' and command *Receive the Holy Spirit* are best understood as a kind of acted parable pointing forward to the full endowment still to come (though in the past for John's readers)."⁷³

Jesus speaks of "as the Father has sent me". "Has sent" is in the perfect tense in the Greek, suggesting that Jesus' "sentness" is still in operation in the present. Carson concludes from this: "Thus Christ's disciples do not take over Jesus' mission; his mission continues and is effective in their ministry (14:12-14)."⁷⁴

And now we come to a tricky verse 20:23 (NRSV):

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

Matt 16:19 has something similar, where certain authority is given to Peter. This passage in *Matthew* was discussed in earlier notes. In Matt 18:18 this authority is given to the disciples (18:1).

Various interpretations of what authority is given to the disciples here in *John* have been suggested:

1. sacramental/priestly power of absolution or baptism
(e.g. Constantine)
2. authority to adjudicate on membership of the community
3. the gift of discernment – an aspect of being led into all truth
4. present forgiveness announced and honoured on the 'last day'
5. declaration of forgiveness - through penance/gospel proclamation
declaration of judgment - discipline/excommunication

It should be noted that the passive form of the verbs "they stand forgiven" or "they stand not forgiven" is a form commonly implying that it is God who does the acting, i.e. forgiving or not forgiving.

⁷² D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 652.

⁷³ Carson, *John*, 655.

⁷⁴ Carson, *John*, 649.

Smith sees this being primarily for “inner-community discipline, a problem and need that appears acute in 1 John”⁷⁵.

Lindars proposes:⁷⁶

The disciples preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins in preparation for the rule of God. To those who respond forgiveness is assured, and ratified by God himself ... But to those who refuse, there is the divine warrant for asserting that their sins remain unforgiven ... But we can hardly suppose that John does not think *also* of preaching within the life of the Church, so that the notion of an internal ecclesiastical discipline is not altogether excluded (cf. 1 Jn 1.5-2.6).

Carson says:⁷⁷

The Christian witnesses proclaim and declare, and, empowered by the Spirit, live by the message of their own proclamation; it is God who *effectively* forgives or retains the sin. ... through the gift of the Spirit the authority that Jesus exercises in, say, John 9, is repeated in their lives. Jesus there gave both sight and faith to the one who knew he was blind; to those who claimed to see, he declared, ‘Your guilt remains’ (9:41). Thus the retention of their sin was both description and condemnation. And the Paraclete who is given as a gift to Jesus’ followers (v.22) continues the same two-edged work through them...

Moloney proposes: “The Paraclete’s ongoing – yet divisive – revelation will lay bare sin, righteousness, and judgment (cf. 16:7-11).”⁷⁸

Is the authority given to individuals? Is it the duty of the Church to convey forgiveness and warn those who spurn God that they forsake God’s mercy?

Morris also notes that whoever’s sins are forgiven is plural i.e. Jesus is not speaking of individuals but classes. “Of course, what applies to classes has its application to individual cases. That cannot be denied and should not be overlooked. But it is not the subject of this gift of Christ.”⁷⁹

Brown⁸⁰ notes how the disciples are sent as the Son was sent, now they continue the “discriminatory judgment between good and evil.” “The disciples both by deed and word cause men [*sic*] to judge themselves; some come to the light and receive forgiveness; some turn away are hardened in their sins.”

Brown continues:

... we doubt that there is sufficient evidence to confine the power of forgiving and holding of sin, granted in John xx 23, to a specific exercise of power in the Christian community, whether that be admission to Baptism or forgiveness in Penance.

⁷⁵ Smith, *John*, 380.

⁷⁶ B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (London: Oliphants, 1977), 613.

⁷⁷ Carson, *John*, 656.

⁷⁸ F. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 533.

⁷⁹ L Morris, *The Gospel According to John* Revd. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 750.

⁸⁰ Brown, *John II*, 1042.

These are but partial manifestations of a much larger power, namely, the power to isolate, repel, and negate evil and sin, a power given to Jesus in his mission by the Father and given in turn by Jesus through the Spirit to those whom he commissions. It is an effective, not merely a declaratory, power against sins, a power that touches new and old followers of Christ, a power that challenges those who refuse to believe. John does not tell us how or by whom this power was exercised in the community for whom he wrote, but the very fact that he mentions it shows that it was exercised.⁸¹

Hägerland notes echoes of the Balaam/Balak story in Numbers 22-24, particularly in the Greek version of the Old Testament, where Balaam was unable to curse those whom God has blessed. He compares this episode also with the prophecy of Caiaphas. He suggests that the Greek translation of the Balaam episode indicates that Balaam's word was "an unwitting confession that only those who are already blessed or cursed by God can be blessed or cursed by Balaam."⁸²

He concludes:

If the phenomenon of Jesus' disciples forgiving and retaining sins by virtue of the Spirit parallels that of Balaam blessing and cursing in the spirit of God, then the perfects of John 20:23 do not imply a divine blanket ratification of any forgiveness and retaining of sins proclaimed 'at will' by the disciples. Rather, they express the notion that by the prophetic Spirit given to them, the disciples will be able to forgive the sins of those, and only those, whose sins have been forgiven by God or Jesus.... It is reasonable to view 20:21-23 as Jesus' commissioning of the disciples to put into practice the ministry of the prophetic Spirit, a ministry that includes a prophetic ability to identify and proclaim sinfulness and forgiveness.⁸³

Forty times in *John* Jesus is described as sent by the Father. Now Jesus sends the disciples. Again the concept of the model of the Father/Son relationship is expressed with the Son and the disciples. The disciples are enabled for mission.

Byrne⁸⁴ notes that they receive the Holy Spirit and begin to be the proclaiming community. Thus Mary, later Thomas, and the disciples move from unbelieving, seeing and believing to be able to proclaim.

Earlier the Beloved Disciple sees a sign and believes without seeing the risen Lord (John 20:8). So too, argues Byrne, are the later community called to believe not having seen the risen Jesus, but have encountered the "sign" of his rising.

The Beloved Disciple is given as the example, however it is for these later believers who receive the blessing of Christ: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (20:29 NRSV).

⁸¹ Brown, *John II*, 1044.

⁸² Tobias Hägerland, "The Power of Prophecy: A Septuagintal Echo in John 20:19-23," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71 (2009): 99.

⁸³ Tobias Hägerland, "The Power of Prophecy," 100, 102.

⁸⁴ B. Byrne, *The Beloved Disciple*, 42.

For the Preacher

It seems from the above notes on the passage that Jesus' breathing is symbolic of the giving of the Holy Spirit to the disciples. The demonstration of the giving of power will become apparent at Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2. The preacher who would like to stay with John's description for their sermon on Pentecost Sunday can look further back in John's Gospel to see what Jesus promised his disciples (especially in chapters 14-16) regarding the Holy Spirit i.e. power, comfort, encouragement, wisdom, strength, peace etc.

The preacher may explore Carson's quote given above in the notes and is repeated here:

Jesus speaks of "as the Father has sent me". "Has sent" is in the perfect tense in the Greek suggesting that Jesus' "sentness" is still in operation today. Carson concludes from this: "Thus Christ's disciples do not take over Jesus' mission; his mission continues and is effective in their ministry (14:12-14)."⁸⁵

The preacher may then draw these thoughts of the mission of Christ with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Belief without sight is demanded from those who read John's Gospel. And so the Evangelist explains his purpose in writing the Gospel: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name" (20:31) In the light of the Resurrection what can we say in our preaching about believing?

Crowetipton writes:⁸⁶

We may know about the resurrection but struggle to believe it when we see it. Our tendency is to place it in the past, as one of those hard to fathom yet somehow essential parts of the faith. At the same time, when we see resurrection in our own lives, it is as if we are Mary in the garden staring Jesus in the face but not recognising him. Perhaps the best sermon will challenge the congregation to see both the resurrected Christ, but also the effect of resurrection in our own lives. Through the corrective lens of resurrection faith, we can see why it is true that when Jesus tells us to leave behind the things that hold us captive, to love our neighbor (whoever that is), to pray for our enemies, to turn the other cheek, all so that we can follow him, our own lives are resurrected. Resurrection corrects our vision of ourselves, our community, and our connection to God.

Other possible themes to explore are:

- The connection of the Resurrection and receiving the Spirit.
- Multiple witnesses to the Resurrection and the impact on the followers.

⁸⁵ Carson, *John*, 649.

⁸⁶ Vaughan Crowetipton, "Homiletical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Gospels, John*, Volume 2 eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 313.

PENTECOST 2 – MATT 9:35-10:8 (9-23) – SENDING OF THE DISCIPLES

While this is quite a lengthy passage it has a great deal to say about what Matthew wants to encourage us about discipleship.

The passage begins in 9:35 (NRSV):

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.

And so we start with a description of Jesus' ministry, which will be passed on to the disciples to assist in this mission.

In chapters 5-7 Jesus outlines in teaching how one should live. This is followed in chapters 8 and 9 by his own example of righteous living. The parallels with Moses still continue. As Moses gave the Law and then proceeded to lead the people with signs and wonders, so Jesus has given his sermon from the mountain and now follows up with his signs and wonders. Jesus' authority in teaching is now demonstrated in his actions. And so chapters 8 and 9 represent Jesus' deeds of mercy. They include both Markan and non-Markan material.

The calling of the disciples and accompanying statements about the homelessness of Jesus and the cost of discipleship are intermingled with the healing stories. Now dissension with the Pharisees is escalating (9:11-13, 34).

In our passage (9:36) Jesus has compassion on the crowds because they were like sheep without a shepherd. In Ezekiel 34 we see God disheartened about the lack of care shown for the people of Israel from their leaders. They too were like sheep without shepherds. The increasing antagonism from Jesus' opponents will continue throughout the remainder of *Matthew*.

There are many different sorts of people dealt with in this section, people who were often on the edges of society: lepers, women, demoniacs, tax collectors, sinners, impure, the dead, Gentiles.⁸⁷ There are also different miracles represented: healings of different types, exorcisms, nature miracles and the raising of the dead.

The good news is moving beyond the establishments but Matthew wants to portray what the establishment is meant to be. Note the matching of the phrases "curing every disease and every sickness" of Jesus ministry (9:35) and what he tells the disciples to do (10:1). The disciples are now called to continue the merciful work of Jesus.

⁸⁷ Witherington, *Matthew*, 176.

In 9:36 Jesus' response to the state of the crowd is deep-seated as France describes:⁸⁸

His response is described by the strongly emotional Greek verb *splanchnizomai*, which speaks of a warm, compassionate response to need. No single English term does justice to it: compassion, pity, sympathy, fellow-feeling all convey part of it, but "his heart went out" perhaps represents more fully the emotional force of the underlying metaphor of a "gut response." A further feature of this verb appears through a comparison with its other uses in Matthew (14:14; 15:32; 18:27; 20:34): in each case there is not only sympathy with a person's need, but also a practical response which meets that need; emotion results in caring and effective action, in this case the action of sending out his disciples among the people. It is a verb which describes the Jesus of the gospel stories in a nutshell.

In verses 37-38 the harvest metaphor is used, here not relating to judgment but the gathering of people for their own well-being, as people are gathered into the Reign of God. Firstly, the disciples are urged to **pray** for workers to work in the field. And so God as Lord of the harvest will raise up other shepherds to continue the work of Jesus proclaiming the Reign of God. Note the use of the term "his harvest" i.e. it is the work of God not of humans.

Now in chapter 10, Jesus will single out the twelve inner group of disciples and indeed Matthew calls them "apostles" in 10:2. The term implies they are "sent" as envoys, representing the one who sends them. These have already been selected in chapters 4 and 9.

Matthew portrays the development of the mission from Jesus to the initial Twelve that he calls although the reader is encouraged to read further ahead to the mission of God being taken up by other disciples. Jesus' twelve disciples are now listed in pairs, with Peter especially as designated as "first" (although the remainder are not numbered). This is in keeping with Matthew's view of Peter taking prime place among the others (See also 14:28–29; 16:16–19; 18:21; 19:27; 26:33–35).

Sad to say, little is known of the bulk of the remaining list of the Twelve. Judas Iscariot of course will be mentioned later. What happened to the Eleven after Jesus ascended to the Father is largely unknown. With the exception of Peter, we have only some snippets in *Acts* and various other stories outside the Bible which cannot be confirmed.

Matthew was a tax-collector as we are reminded. His call is mentioned earlier in the Gospel (9:9). There are two disciples with the name James and so the second's father is mentioned in order to distinguish him.

The second Simon mentioned in the list is given with the nickname, "Zealot."

"Zealot" did not become a technical term for members of the revolutionary party until the time of the Jewish War, so that Simon's nickname may derive more from

⁸⁸ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 372–398.

his reputation for religious zeal (for “zealot” in this sense see Acts 21:20; 22:3; Gal 1:14; cf. Phil 3:6) than from involvement in an insurrectionary group, though by the time Matthew wrote his gospel at least some of his readers would have been likely to take the term in the latter sense. The title raises the interesting question how a man so described would enjoy being part of the same group as a tax-collector, his ideological opposite, but that can only be speculation.⁸⁹

So now the Twelve are sent on in Christ’s mission and they are given authority, without which there is no mission. More will follow later, and Matthew’s community knows that they too will follow on in their steps.

One may wonder about the limitation on the Gentiles and Samaritans (10:5) in this mission. France suggests:

The geographical terms used here (“way of Gentiles,” “town of the Samaritans;” cf. “towns of Israel,” v. 23) indicate a restriction on the area to be visited rather than a total ban on contact with Gentiles and Samaritans as such. ... But the geographical limitation remained essentially in force as long as Jesus himself was there as the focus of the mission. After his death and resurrection the world-wide mission predicted in 24:14 and 26:13 could be launched in the disciples’ commission in 28:19–20.⁹⁰

Jesus is acting on God’s commitment to the promises to Israel from old. However, the mission was always to continue to the Gentiles. As is said: “Jesus is first and foremost Israel’s savior;”⁹¹

As the twelve are sent, their ministry in verses 7 and 8 reflect that of Jesus in chapters 5-9. How people will respond to them reflects how they respond to Jesus (see 10:40-42).

France writes: “The “peace” which will rest on the ‘worthy’ is not just a social formality, but a real mark of God’s blessing or judgment. This is a moment of spiritual decision, however little some of the people of Galilee may yet recognize it as such.”⁹²

The disciples are told to travel light, and it is apparent the mission will only be short, since spare clothes are not required. Luke 22:35-36 describes the necessity for extra gear but describes a different situation following the arrest of Jesus.⁹³ Hagner also suggests that hospitality “in Jewish towns and villages would not be difficult for the disciples to obtain; the closeness and solidarity of the Jewish people in Israel and the

⁸⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 372–398.

⁹⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 372–398.

⁹¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 259–280.

⁹² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 372–398.

⁹³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 372–398.

proximity of such communities would make this mission possible. Travel outside Israel in gentile lands would not be possible in this same way.”⁹⁴

The specific and temporary nature of the instructions are not intended to apply to all missionaries for all time.

The theme of accepting support in the mission is one that is raised later in the New Testament and in early Christian literature.⁹⁵

The instruction to shake the dust from their feet, following rejection (10:14), reflects the Jewish practice of shaking the dust off their sandals when they returned from traveling in (unclean) gentile territory.⁹⁶

The severe consequences of rejecting the gospel is made emphatically clear in v. 15 when the final judgment comes.

Verse 18 makes clear that what is said in verses 16-23 now has further reaching application. Looking beyond the immediate mission of the Twelve as outlined in verses 5-15. Now future disciples will appear before governors, councils of synagogues and even kings. (See Acts 13:6–12; 18:12–17; 23:23–25:12 for governors and Acts 12:1–4; 25:13–26:32 for kings.) Now there will be division within the family (v. 21) and the possibility of martyrdom. Similar to a common theme in *Revelation*, endurance is called for despite these persecutions for their faith.

The disciples are now called to “shrewd” (*phronimos*).

Disciples under threat are not to be helpless and gullible, but must maintain the initiative. Cf. the shrewd self-preservation of the steward in Luke 16:1–8, also described as *phronimos*. But in popular thought snakes are feared rather than admired (cf. 3:7; 7:10), and it is as a threat to God’s people that they appear more often in biblical literature. So Jesus here offsets that more obvious connotation of snakes by a balancing animal image, the harmlessness of doves; the disciples’ cunning is to be directed not to harming their opponents, but to their own survival and the commendation of the gospel. They need the cunning of snakes without the venom.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 259–280.

⁹⁵ “A number of parallel passages are found in the NT and in early Christian literature. Luke 22:35–38 is an important passage that suggests the temporary character of the details of the missionary instruction, indicating that the specific instructions are to be understood not as permanent commands but as an indication of the style of ministry (e.g., urgency, economy, single-mindedness) and the legitimacy of receiving support. On this last, rather sensitive point, Paul depends on the teaching of Jesus for the right of support, while not himself taking advantage of it (1 Cor 9:4–18, esp. v 14; 2 Cor 11:7). The same point is stressed in 1 Tim 5:18 (cf. 2 Thess 3:9), where the logion of v 10b is quoted (but with Luke’s μισθοῦ, “wages” [Luke 10:7], for Matthew’s τροφῆς, “food”). The importance of the whole issue of support for Christian workers (“apostles and prophets”) is again raised in *Did.* 11:3–6, 11–12, and in 13:1–2, where the logion of Matt 10:10b is cited. This right to support explains the emphasis in the NT on the importance of hospitality (cf. Rom 12:13; Heb 13:2; 1 Pet 4:9).” (Hagner).

⁹⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 259–280.

⁹⁷ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 372–398.

In verses 19–20 the future missionaries are urged not to worry. (See also 6:25–34 where they urged, using the same verb, not to worry about provisions or security.) Such encouragement not to worry doesn't imply a failure to take responsibility for preparing for foreseeable requirements.

In verse 20, Matthew uses an interesting phrase “the Spirit of your Father” compared to Mark's use of “the Holy Spirit” once again reflecting Matthew's preference for the word “Father”. Indeed this phrase is unique in the New Testament. Together the phrase suggests an increased emphasis on intimacy.⁹⁸

“the one who endures to the end will be saved” (v. 22) is a bold statement of promise and the bright light amidst the preceding gloom.

France offers the following on the meaning of this word “save”

Sōzō, “save,” is used by Matthew in a wide range of senses: often it refers to physical deliverance from death or disease (8:25; 9:21–22; 14:30; 24:22; 27:40, 42, 49), but it is also used of salvation from sins (1:21) and in 19:25 it stands in parallel with “entering the kingdom of God,” while in 16:25 the disciple's “life” is paradoxically saved by losing it. These latter uses are the most probable pointers to the meaning here. Jesus is talking not about the preservation of physical life, but the ultimate well-being which is compatible with the loss of physical life. In the face of persecution and possible martyrdom disciples must remain true to their loyalty to Jesus; if they do so “to the end” they will be “saved,” even though they may be executed. Cf. the word-play in 27:42 where Jesus' failure to “save” himself (from physical death) is contrasted with his “saving” other people, a fact which the evangelist, unlike the mocking authorities, wishes to affirm.⁹⁹

And so, to those who so endure in the end will be promised the full joys of the Reign of God.

And now we come in verse 23 to one of the most difficult verses in Matthew (NRSV):

When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

When will this be? To whom is it addressed? Has it already happened? What does it mean by the coming of the Son of Man?

Hagner offers the following three possibilities for the coming of the Son of Man:

- 1) the return of Christ in the last days
- 2) the destruction of Jerusalem in 70CE, i.e., the judgment of the Son of Man upon Israel

⁹⁸ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 259–280.

⁹⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 372–398.

3) some striking experience of the power of the new age, such as the death or the resurrection of Jesus, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost or even the success of the gentile mission.¹⁰⁰

The first interpretation would normally be the most likely, however it does not seem to be in keeping with the specifics previously given for the mission of the Twelve. The phrase “Son of Man” which Jesus seemed to use of himself, probably alludes to the famous vision of Daniel 7 where “one like a son of man” receives the eternal kingdom.

Hagner continues:

On the other hand, the other possibilities should not be ruled out too quickly. ...The destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) may possibly have already occurred when the Gospel was written and could easily have been understood as a judgment brought by the Son of Man. This interpretation has the advantage of linking the statement of v 23b closely with the command of v 23a: when the disciples encounter hostility and rejection of the gospel, they are to move on to the next town to complete the mission to Israel before it is too late (cf. 7:6). Perhaps what is in view is the time frame already encountered in 10:5–6; that is, during the time of Jesus the focus of the mission is on the Jews, but after the resurrection of Jesus and the experience of the Spirit at Pentecost, the focus of the mission will quickly move to the Gentiles (cf. Scott). Matthew’s church knows that it exists in the time predicted by Jesus, when the Gentiles would hear and respond to the message of the gospel; it probably has not, however, given up on evangelizing the Jews (see on 28:19). If Jesus truly contemplated a time to come when the gospel would go to the Gentiles, it is unlikely that his reference to the coming of the Son of Man meant the parousia, since this event would then occur before the end of the (rather limited) mission to the Jews (McNeile regards this as “impossible”). Carson rightly notes that “‘the coming of the Son of Man’ bears in Matthew the same rich semantic field as ‘the coming of the kingdom’ ”.¹⁰¹

A final possibility, and the best one, is that the phrase refers to the coming of the Son of Man in judgment in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Three important points argue in favor of this conclusion: (1) the destruction of Jerusalem foreshadows and is typologically related to the final judgment ... and hence can also be seen as the work of the Son of Man (cf. 24:27–31); (2) the destruction of Jerusalem symbolizes the rejection of the gospel by the Jews and thus the shift of salvation-history from the Jews to the Gentiles, the former losing their priority; and (3) the abundant evidence of Jewish persecution of Christians prior to (as well as after) A.D. 70. According to this interpretation, the meaning of v 23b becomes the following: this exclusive mission of the twelve to Israel, which reflects their salvation-historical priority over the Gentiles, will not reach its completion before it is interrupted by the coming of the Son of Man in judgment upon Jerusalem, thereby symbolizing the time frame shift wherein the Gentiles, rather than the Jews, assume priority in the purpose of God. This mission to the Jews, reflecting their place in

¹⁰⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 259–280.

¹⁰¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 259–280.

salvation-history, thus has a time limitation, the end of which (but not the end of Jewish evangelism) will be marked by the coming of the Son of Man in judgment upon Israel.¹⁰²

France offers:

It is widely agreed that the wording of these passages is based on Dan 7:13, “one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven.” The vision of the “one like a son of man” in Dan 7:13–14 was probably the major source of Jesus’ chosen self-designation, “the Son of Man,” and the language of that vision recurs several times in the synoptic tradition, but especially in seven passages in Matthew (10:23; 16:27–28; 19:28; 24:30; 25:31; 26:64; 28:18). Daniel’s vision is of one who is brought before God’s throne in heaven and there given an everlasting kingship over all peoples. It is thus a vision of the granting of the ultimate authority to the people of God, who are symbolized by the “human figure” in contrast to the beasts which represent the preceding empires (Dan 7:3–8, 17), and who are thus vindicated after their oppression by the last of those empires (Dan 7:19–22). In this individual representation of the corporate experience of the “holy people” Jesus found a foreshadowing of his own experience on behalf of his people. In Dan 7:13–14 this “son of man” *comes* before God to be enthroned as king. There is nothing in the imagery of Daniel to suggest a coming *to earth*, as Christian interpretation has traditionally found in these passages; he *comes* in the clouds of heaven *to God*. The verb used both in Daniel and in the NT allusions is the very ordinary verb “come,” which is not related to the more technical NT term for Jesus’ eschatological return, *parousia*. The term *parousia* in fact occurs only four times in the gospels, all in Matthew 24, where we shall see that that future *parousia* is carefully distinguished from the “coming in the clouds of heaven” described in Matt 24:30. This means that, despite centuries of later Christian interpretive tradition, when the gospels speak of “the Son of Man coming” the presumption must be that they are speaking not of an eschatological *parousia* but of a heavenly enthronement, the vindication and empowering of the Son of Man after his earthly rejection and suffering, when God will turn the tables on those who thought they had him in their power. This emphasis will emerge clearly in several of the passages listed above where the vision of Dan 7:13–14 has molded Matthew’s language, perhaps most clearly in 26:64, where Jesus stands before his supposed judges and predicts that instead God will make him “from now on” the judge over them.

“The coming of the Son of Man” is thus not a description of a particular historical event but evocative language to depict his eventual vindication and sovereign authority. As such it can be applied to different stages in the outworking of Jesus’ mission. In 28:18 the echo of Dan 7:14 indicates that already immediately after his resurrection the Son of Man has received his kingly authority. In several passages the fulfillment of Daniel’s vision is linked to a specific time-frame within the living generation: “some standing here will not taste death before they see ...” (16:28); “this generation will not pass until ...” (24:34); “from now on you will see ...” (26:64). The fulfillment is thus apparently linked with the vindication and enthronement of Jesus after his resurrection; it is, to use Lucan terminology, ascension language. In

¹⁰² Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 259–280.

24:30, however, even though the time-scale is limited to the living generation (v. 34), the context links the coming of the Son of Man to the latter part of that period, when the temple will be destroyed. But on the other hand the same Danielic imagery is applied in 19:28 to what appears to be a more ultimate situation, “the regeneration” when the Twelve will join Jesus in exercising authority over Israel, while in 25:31 it introduces what is generally taken to be a vision of the final judgment. It seems then that the sovereign authority envisaged in Dan 7:13–14, first inaugurated when Jesus has risen from the dead, works itself out in successive phases throughout history until it finds its ultimate fulfillment in the last judgment.

In the light of this wider usage of Daniel’s language, at what point in the historical trajectory should we set the uniquely Matthean text 10:23? Is it speaking of a mission to Israel continuing throughout history until the final consummation, or of an earlier terminus within history such as the events of the Jewish War (to which Daniel’s language will be applied in 24:30) after which it will no longer be appropriate for Jesus’ disciples to “go through the towns of Israel,” or of a nearer point in time which would be more immediately relevant to the mission of the Twelve? In view of the use of Daniel’s imagery (though not the same part of his wording) in 28:18, could we interpret this text also as looking forward to the resurrection and ascension of Jesus? It is interesting that the claim of 28:18 is immediately followed by a charge to make disciples of “all nations,” not only of Israel. Are we then to understand the “coming of the Son of Man” here as marking the end of a mission specifically to Israel, when the universal kingship of the Son of Man is established after his resurrection, and his church’s mission is accordingly widened beyond the narrow bounds set in 10:5–6? Until then, they will have more than enough to keep them busy in preaching to “the towns of Israel.”

Perhaps this is to press the evocative imagery of this verse too far, to seek for too specific a point of reference. But some such scenario makes better sense of the Danielic imagery in the context of its wider use in this gospel than to assume as popular (and often scholarly) interpretation has too easily done that this is *parousia* language, and therefore either that Jesus mistakenly expected an immediate *parousia* or that his words here had no bearing on the situation of the Twelve sent out on a mission among the towns of Galilee around AD 30 and no meaning for the first-time reader of Matthew who at this stage in the gospel story has heard nothing about a *parousia* of Jesus.¹⁰³

For the Preacher

We don’t talk much about the heart of Jesus, but in 9:36 we hear of Jesus’ mission being prompted by his heart going out to the people. (See discussion in the notes above.) France’s comment above about Jesus’ “compassion” (9:36) is repeated here:

His response is described by the strongly emotional Greek verb *splanchnizomai*, which speaks of a warm, compassionate response to need. No single English term

¹⁰³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 372–398.

does justice to it: compassion, pity, sympathy, fellow-feeling all convey part of it, but “his heart went out” perhaps represents more fully the emotional force of the underlying metaphor of a “gut response.” A further feature of this verb appears through a comparison with its other uses in Matthew (14:14; 15:32; 18:27; 20:34): in each case there is not only sympathy with a person’s need, but also a practical response which meets that need; emotion results in caring and effective action, in this case the action of sending out his disciples among the people. It is a verb which describes the Jesus of the gospel stories in a nutshell.¹⁰⁴

The preacher, William Willimon, relates the story of his friend stating his own conviction of the divinity of Christ when hearing this reaction of Jesus as he was confronted with the goodness and the downside of the perverseness of humanity, that Jesus still has this response of the “warm compassionate response to need”. It truly behoves the disciple of Jesus to pray for this spirit that we too may be moved by such an attitude. Buttrick even translates *splanchnizomai* as “pain of love”.¹⁰⁵ Care is prompted by such compassion, or our heart “going out” to people as was Jesus’ heart.

In this passage Matthew thus records for us the general move of the mission of God. As we have seen, it begins with Jesus’ heart for the people and perceiving the need for proclamation of the presence of God’s Reign.

Jesus’ sees the dire need of humanity as also something positive, the fields are ripe and ready for gleaning the fruit. Thus we have in 9:37-38 Jesus urging his followers to pray for people who can work in the fields. In such prayer is also the acknowledgement for us that we are praying to the “Lord of the harvest”.

The mission is God’s and so we work as servants of the Lord, and not for ourselves. Mission begins with the heart and continues in prayer.

Jesus then gives authority to twelve to continue the mission of Jesus. Matthew offers their names relatively late in the Gospel so that it comes immediately before the discourse concerning their mission.¹⁰⁶

Hagner writes of the continuing move of mission, first to the people of Israel and then finally to the ends of the earth:

...in the post-resurrection Church the apostles assume great importance as the locus of authority and the guarantors of the tradition. Jesus calls his disciples to himself for the purpose of equipping them for the ministry they are now to perform in his footsteps. He gives them ... “authority,” the very thing he demonstrated about himself in the five preceding chapters (cf. 7:29; 9:6, 8). At the very end of the Gospel, when Jesus commissions the eleven to continue his work, he announces that ... “all authority,” has been given to him and hence to them because he will be with them to the end of the age (28:18–20). The ἐξουσία, “authority,” here is defined

¹⁰⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 372.

¹⁰⁵ George A. Buttrick, “Exposition” in George Arthur Buttrick et al (eds) *The Interpreters Bible Vol 7* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), p. 360.

¹⁰⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 259–280.

specifically as ... “over unclean spirits” (cf. 12:43; cf. 8:16). The result clause, ... “so that,” refers accordingly not only to the casting out of the demons but also to the healing of all sicknesses and maladies (cf. v 8). This may mean that the authority over demons is linked with the healing of sickness, presupposing the popular view that most, if not all, sickness was caused by demons¹⁰⁷

“The prayer for workers is thus directed to and answered by the Church of every generation. As the harvest continues, so too does the need for workers.”¹⁰⁸

The Twelve represent an odd collection of people from various different walks of life and political outlook. And yet Jesus still called them. The disciples go as representatives of the one sending them. They don’t try to represent themselves. This requires humility and a strong and understanding relationship to the one who sends them.

The Twelve are sent on a not-for-profit mission.¹⁰⁹ They are warned that there will be a mixed response to their proclamation. There always has been. Sometimes we are tempted to talk in terms of success or failure in terms of numbers who respond. Even Jesus, and certainly not the Twelve, didn’t receive a 100% positive response to their message of life. Success or failure can only be measured by our faithfulness to the one who sends.

Hagner writes about pending persecution in the proclamation of the message:

The strangeness of this new emphasis on the persecution, suffering, and even death of the very ones who proclaim the fulfillment of the promises, the good news of the kingdom, is remarkable. There is a sharp incongruity, which no doubt impressed itself on the disciples. How could a message of such joy and power, if it were true, be compatible with the things the disciples are now told to expect? The disciples, like the Church of every age, had to learn about the present as a kind of interim period, one of fulfillment, yet short of consummation, one in which suffering was being conquered, but still clearly experienced. Yet they are sent by Jesus, and the Spirit of their Father will provide whatever defense they may need. There is, on the one hand, no flashy heroism here, no martyr complexes—they are to be crafty and to flee. Yet, on the other hand, there is a call to endurance. These who endure will finally receive fully and perfectly that eschatological blessing called salvation, that perfect and lasting *shalom* (ultimate well-being). What the disciples experience in their mission work will be the experience of all messengers of the gospel to the end of the age (cf. chap. 24).¹¹⁰

And so this passage points beyond the sending of the Twelve to the time of the mission in which Matthew’s community was involved and from then to the end of the age.

¹⁰⁷ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 259–280.

¹⁰⁸ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 259–280.

¹⁰⁹ Ministers of the Word and Deacons in the Uniting Church, and others, are paid a stipend and not a salary to support them so that they are freed for mission.

¹¹⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 259–280.

The discourse thus has relevance both for the sending out of the twelve and for the Church of Matthew's day and later. The mission of the Church is the mission of Jesus, for the Church too proclaims the dawning of the kingdom of God. But to engage in the mission of Jesus means also to follow him in the experience of rejection and hostility.¹¹¹

PENTECOST 3 - MATT 10:24-39 – NO FEAR, NO PEACE

We continue the theme of discipleship from last week's lectionary passage (see above), and we are now told of a lack of peace amongst those who believe and the rest of the world. The overall idea of this passage is that of warning, and on the other hand, encouragement. The followers are encouraged to continue under pressure and remain faithful in their discipleship.

In this passage we appear to have several snippets of Jesus' teaching (possibly gathered from various sources), and each snippet is not strongly connected to the others. The concept of impending persecution has been introduced in the previous passage (vv. 17-23).

The entire passage may be divided into vv. 24-25; vv. 26-31; vv. 32-33, although it could be argued that the latter 2 units could be combined under the theme of whom to fear.

In verses 24 and 25 we see *Matthew* (and only *Matthew* of the Gospels) uses the term "slave" (*doulos*) to describe his disciples. (This term is often used in the epistles.) *Matthew* of all the Gospels places a stronger emphasis on the teacher/disciple relationship.

Jesus states in verses 24 and 25 that the disciple is not above the teacher. It is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher. Here may be implied that the disciples are to share their teacher's lot, however there is also a positive encouragement for the disciple to **become like** Jesus, certainly a high enough aspiration.

Verses 26-27 speak of the need for good news not to be kept secret but will later be proclaimed before the high and mighty and indeed announced from the rooftops. (Palestinian houses were built in such a way that this could happen.)

In verses 28-31 the possibility of martyrdom is again indicated. The disciples are urged not to fear when opposition arises as their soul cannot be harmed by others. Only their bodies can be touched.

The reference to Hell in verse 28 uses the Greek word *Gehenna*, which is derived from the Hinnom Valley, a place used as a garbage dump outside Jerusalem. The garbage was incinerated in the valley. France suggests "In this passage it is spoken of as a place of destruction, not of continuing punishment ... On the basis of this text

¹¹¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 259–280.

alone it would therefore be better to speak of true life (the “soul”) not as eternal but as “potentially eternal,” since it can be “destroyed” in hell;”¹¹²

The good news which Jesus brought, and which the disciples would share in proclaiming, always has and always will result, unfortunately, in some opposition - such is the radical nature of the good news.

Jesus does not seek to gloss over the potential cost of discipleship. No “hard-sell” strategies including a free set of steak knives! Instead, Jesus lays it all out in the open. There may even be division in the closest of relationships. And so Jesus is asking of his disciples for a commitment even beyond their commitment to their immediate family. “To agree to follow Jesus is to sign away all rights to a quiet life of self-determination.”¹¹³

This is not to be misunderstood as a call not to continue care for one’s family. Jesus elsewhere has spoken of the importance of love for family. Even more so is their love to be for Jesus and his message.

Jesus provides a statement in verse 34 which is meant to shock: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; ...” Peace has been proclaimed as the purpose of the Messiah (e.g. Isa 9:6–7; Zech 9:10) and the characteristic of God’s final reign (e.g. Isa 11:6–9) however,

the way to peace is not the way of avoidance of conflict, and Jesus will be continuously engaged in robust controversy especially in chs. 21–23, while his whole experience will be the opposite of a “peaceful” way of life. His followers can expect no less, and their mission to establish God’s peaceful rule can be accomplished only by sharing his experience of conflict. The “sword” can hardly be understood literally, as the literal use of the sword is explicitly forbidden in 26:51–52; it is a metaphor for conflict and suffering, as in Luke 2:35.¹¹⁴

With regard to the “cross” (v. 38) France writes with somber words:

Christian readers have become so used to the cross as a word and a symbol (and indeed a cause for “boasting,” Gal 6:14) that it is hard now to recapture the shudder that the word must have brought to a hearer in Galilee at the time. Crucifixion was a punishment favored by the Romans but regarded with horror by most Jews, and was by now familiar in Roman Palestine as a form of execution for slaves and political rebels. It was thus not only the most cruel form of execution then in use, but it also carried the stigma of social disgrace when applied to a free person. To have a member of the family crucified was the ultimate shame. Crucifixion was an inescapably public fate, and drew universal scorn and mockery, as we shall see in 27:27–44. And that public disgrace, as well as physical suffering, began not when the condemned man was fixed to the cross, but with the equally public procession

¹¹² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 398–411.

¹¹³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 398–411.

¹¹⁴ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 398–411.

through the streets in which the victim had to carry the heavy cross-piece of his own gibbet, among the jeers and insults of the crowd.

That is the prospect Jesus holds out before any “worthy” disciple: a savage death and public disgrace. Jesus himself will literally go through that experience, and he offers his followers the prospect of the same. The language of discipleship (“follow,” “behind me;” ...) thus takes on here the macabre sense of following Jesus on the march to execution. But when the opportunity eventually comes for one of the disciples to follow Jesus carrying his cross for him, they will not be there to take it up, and a stranger will fill the unwelcome role (27:32).

Popular usage has sanitized the language of having “a cross to bear” so that its challenge has evaporated. It is not of course true that every loyal disciple will be a martyr, but all must recognize and accept the possibility of dying for Jesus, and many who have not faced literal execution have nonetheless known well the social stigma implied in carrying the cross behind Jesus.¹¹⁵

For the Preacher

What can we glean from this passage about our discipleship? Our commitment? Our willingness? The message we proclaim?

Several times in this passage the phrase “Do not be afraid” occurs. How do we handle fear, particularly fear of being singled out or made fun of because of our faith?

Buttrick writes:¹¹⁶ “Two events only could befall his followers – life and death; and both are in the hand of God. Fear not: The Christian life is the ultimate valor.”

What does it mean for us to place our love for Christ first? Buttrick writes: “by paradox, only by that surrender [to Christ] is natural affection saved from its own decay.”¹¹⁷

What does “taking up our cross” mean for us, especially in the light of France’s challenging words in the notes above?

PENTECOST 7 – MATT 13:24-30, 36-43 – THE PARABLE OF THE WEEDS

Chapter 13 contains various parables which have been gathered together from Matthew’s sources. The parables which occur in Chapter 13 occur in the other Synoptics as follows:

¹¹⁵ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 398–411.

¹¹⁶ George A. Buttrick, “Exposition” in George Arthur Buttrick et al (eds) *The Interpreters Bible Vol 7* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), 371.

¹¹⁷ George A. Buttrick, “Exposition” in George Arthur Buttrick et al (eds) *The Interpreters Bible Vol 7* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), 374.

Parable	Matthew 13	Mark	Luke
The Sower	1-9, 18-23	4:1-9, 13-20	8:4-8, 11-15
The Weeds	24-30		
The Mustard Seed	31-32	4:30-32	13:18,19
The Leaven	33		13:20-21
Discussion on Parables	34-35	4:33-34	
Interpretation of the Weeds Parable	36-43		

Embedded in this chapter is a description of Jesus' use of parables (13:34-35) with OT reference. In *Mark* it is not said whether the disciples understand the parables, however in *Matthew* when Jesus asks whether they understand they simply reply "Yes" (13:51)!

Throughout the chapter there is the motif of final judgment, a topic common in *Matthew*. As well as this there is the continuing thread of the newness, the surprising nature, and the power of God's Reign.

It is possible that Jesus originally spoke the parables in pairs.¹¹⁸ Hence in this chapter we have pairings of the parable of the weeds and the wheat, with the parable of the catch of fish. The treasure in the field parable is matched with the parable of the pearl. The parable of the mustard seed pairs with the parable of the leaven.

There are also some similarities between the Parable of the Weeds and the Parable of the Sower. Besides the similarity of agricultural imagery, mention of the devil and the Reign of God, there is also a similarity of theme.

Davies and Allison write: "... while the victory of God's kingdom is sure, *the way from here to there is hampered by unbelief and its effects.*" [authors' italics].¹¹⁹ Thus both parables discuss the place of evil as hampering belief in Jesus as Messiah and his rejection. Good comes with evil, however with the Parable of the Sower the responsibility for acceptance/rejection is that of humanity, while in the Parable of the Weeds it is the devil. The "devil must share the responsibility for the apparent failure of God's word."¹²⁰

From the above table comparing the parables in this chapter with those in the other Synoptics, we see that the parable of the weeds and its interpretation only occurs in *Matthew*.

Verse 13:34 seems to imply that Jesus is addressing the crowds here. The disciples ask for an explanation in 13:36-43.

¹¹⁸ Witherington, *Matthew*, 272.

¹¹⁹ W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (ICC Series; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 408.

¹²⁰ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 408.

The word for “weed” (*zizanian*) is a noxious weed which looks like wheat in its early stages of growth.¹²¹

Malina and Rohrbaugh offer the following cultural background:

Feuding families and feuding groups marked the social landscape of the first-century Mediterranean world. Being born into a given family, a person normally inherited a ready-made set of friends and enemies. This parable on the continued and mutual presence of weeds and wheat until harvest time mentions the man’s enemy without explanation. A family’s enemies would make varied attempts to dishonour the family.¹²²

The “harvest” is a commonly used Old Testament metaphor for the last judgment (Joel 3:13; Hos 6:11; Jer 51:33). Matt 13:36-43 also refers to the harvest as the close of the age.

When Matthew begins: “The kingdom may be compared to someone...” (v. 24) it is not to be understood that the Reign is like the man, but the entire story. “While everybody was asleep ...” appears to indicate a time of waiting until the kingdom is realised (see Mark 4:26-29).

The separation of the weeds and wheat is left for the householder and reapers at harvest time.

In verses 36-43 the parable is interpreted allegorically i.e. where each element of the parable is symbolic of something in real life. Not every parable that Jesus told is an allegory.

Basically the parable speaks about the mixed reception of Jesus’ word of the Reign of God. “The parable ... counsels patience and tolerance in the present. The assumption behind this counsel is the confidence that at the final judgment there will be a separation between the just and the unjust along with appropriate rewards and punishments ... when God will set matters straight.”¹²³

The interpretation is only given to the disciples (36-43). Here, however, he develops the concept of the end-times harvest where the angels separate those who are of the evil one and those of Jesus. The former will meet a fiery outcome. A strong dualistic theme comes through here.

While we may be dismayed at evil in the world and even in the church this will be resolved. There was the expectation in many circles that when the Reign of God came there would be judgment which would sift out the righteous from the wicked. However, in Matthew’s parable, there is still evil in the world even though the Reign of God is present now. Thus today, there is the presence of evil, and people aren’t necessarily called to seek isolation from the rest of the world.

¹²¹ Harrington, *Matthew*, 204.

¹²² Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 103.

¹²³ Harrington, *Matthew*, 208.

For the Preacher

Buttrick writes: "... the story has a salient and perennial truth. It confronts the mystery of wickedness. Why is there evil in our world, in our hearts, and even in the church? The mystery is not explained by this story, but it is not evaded or ignored"¹²⁴ This could prompt the preacher to discuss the nature of sin in our world.

Harrington writes:

The message of patient tolerance and leaving to God the settling of scores is timely today also. For a world in which so many conflicts occur on the basis of religion, race, ethnic identity, and so forth, this is sound advice. As Christians and Jews try to work toward a more positive and trusting relationship, Matthew's message is at least a first, minimal step on the way to recovering the fuller and more adequate approach outlined by Paul in Romans 11. And, of course, readers of all generations need to be reminded of the wondrous promise and surpassing value of the kingdom of God that are sketched so neatly in the little parables in pairs.¹²⁵

Another point to consider: do we immediately assume we are a good crop and not a weed? Are there parts of our own lives which will need purification?

The preacher could also consider the verse "the field is the world" (v. 38). What are the consequences of this statement in the context of the church "reaching out"?

PENTECOST 14 – MATT 18:15-20 – REPROVING ANOTHER WHO SINS

Were there discipline issues in the church of Matthew? It is especially important to note the context of the whole passage which is forgiveness and saving those who are lost. So the previous verse (14) reads (NRSV):

So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

What follows from our text is a passage on forgiveness, where it is Peter who asks how many times he must forgive, followed by a parable about the unforgiving servant and so it is important we read about "discipline" in the context of forgiveness and restoration.

The nature of the process would suggest sins of a reasonably serious nature. Note the corporate effect of sins on the community. It can affect the entire community, thus we have pictured here, not just private matters, but issues which affect the body.

Verse 15 is similar to Lev 19:17 (NRSV):

¹²⁴ George A. Buttrick, "Exposition" in George Arthur Buttrick et al (eds) *The Interpreters Bible Vol 7* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), 414.

¹²⁵ Harrington, *Matthew*, 210.

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.

There is a responsibility of the community towards each other. The process in verse 15 preserves the honour of the offender, as witnesses are not involved. The winning back of the person straying is the important feature.

Verse 16 can be compared to Deut 19:15 (NRSV):

A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained.

and 2 Cor 13:1 (NRSV):

This is the third time I am coming to you. "Any charge must be sustained by the evidence of two or three witnesses."

The presence of one or two others is for the protection of the sinner. "gained" reflects the shepherd motif of v. 13.

In v. 17 the word here means literally "ignore".

Clearly the offender is no longer to be considered a brother or sister. But how is one to behave towards one who has become a rank outsider? The kind of shunning to which Mt. 18:17 has frequently led cannot be sustained, given Jesus' image as 'friend of tax collectors and sinners' (11:19...) and given the evangelistic concern for those of other nations which Matthew firmly endorses. [See Mt 10:18; 12:18, 21; 24:14; 28:19 – also the infant Jesus is visited by Gentile magi] The person is to be related to now as an outsider, but not as one who must permanently remain outside. The spirit to be adopted will be like that involved in the love of enemies, discussed in 5:43-48 ... ¹²⁶

And so verse 17 is the end of the process (if the previous processes haven't gone anywhere), where those who don't accept the decision of the church are treated like a Gentile and a tax collector. These are the ones who need to keep hearing the Gospel. They are the ones to whom the Gospel is going out to. It appears that the shunned brother or sister is to be treated as the object of missionary activity and to whom friendship is to be shown.

Firm action is required against a serious offence, however there is a warning that dealing with such issues can also be sinful if not handled carefully. Throughout this process there is the concern for the community expressed but also concern for the individual involved and their welfare.

The last sentence [verse 18] promises the whole community what was promised to Peter in 16:19. In the present context, 'binding' and 'loosing' refer to the sinner, and

¹²⁶ Nolland, *Matthew*, 748.

represent conviction and acquittal". Compare with John 20:23. "... In Matthew's mind, therefore, the community is merely exercising a function that was entrusted to Peter merely as an example for all. For the Matthaean community, Peter still represents the authority that transmits Jesus' new interpretation of the Law and makes the life of the community possible in actual practice; Peter is succeeded, however, by the entire community, which draws upon his authority to determine in each new case what is sinful and what is not..."¹²⁷

The community does not cause it to be binding but interprets it so.

Above all, the power to bind does not mean that an ecclesiastical inquisition can damn people for eternity... What Matthew probably has in mind is that anyone who promises salvation to another also becomes a judgment upon the individual who rejects the offer, so that the disciple of Jesus is necessarily also a preacher of judgment ... This interpretation is supported by the whole context (vss.10-14,21-22), which deals with responsibility toward one's brother, love for him, and forgiveness. There is not the slightest mention of keeping the community pure ...¹²⁸

Hagner says: "What the disciples agree to on earth in disciplinary matters of the church may be taken as also the will of heaven."¹²⁹

It has to do with bringing to bear on the lives of those who would be disciples the significance of all that Jesus was and brought. Having been instructed by Jesus, the church is able to prohibit and command in a manner that is backed by God himself. In the context of the attempt to bring back an erring brother or sister, the specific point will be that the church is able to confirm the standard of behavior to which the erring one is being called to conform once more. ... The one whom the church declares to be out of step with God is indeed out of step with God!¹³⁰

This is the language of the law court. Jewish legal issues were normally decided in Jesus' day by elders in the synagogue community (later by rabbis). Many Jewish people believed that the authority of Heaven stood behind the earthly judges when they decided cases based on a correct understanding of God's law. (This process came to be called 'binding and loosing.') Jesus' contemporaries often envisioned God's justice in terms of a heavenly court; by obeying God's law, the earthly court simply ratified the decrees of the heavenly court. In Matthew 18:15-20, Christians who follow the careful procedures of verses 15-17 may be assured that they will act on the authority of God's court when they decide cases.¹³¹

Schweizer writes of v. 19 – "The authority of the community's words is thus the authority they gain through prayer. It is assumed, of course, just as in 7:7-11, that the community prays according to God's will, as Jesus taught his disciples to pray in the

¹²⁷ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1975), 372.

¹²⁸ Schweizer, *Matthew*, 373.

¹²⁹ Hagner, *Matthew*, 533.

¹³⁰ Nolland, *Matthew*, 748.

¹³¹ Craig S. Keener, "Exegetical Insight" in William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 121.

Lord's Prayer."¹³² Hagner says "In my name' is another way of saying 'under my rule'".¹³³

"It can be paraphrased: 'If two of you can come to an agreement regarding any disputed matter, that agreement will be blessed by my Father in heaven.'"¹³⁴

While in Deut 17:6-7 the two or three witnesses should be the first to cast stones, in Matthew they are the first to pray.¹³⁵

Hagner also argues:

It would be a mistake to think that in similar circumstances this procedure can be applied today, primarily because excommunication or ostracism today has nowhere near the same effect as it did in the first century, that is, in Matthew's day to be cast out left one with no other options for Christian community. Today a person may simply walk down the street to the next church or next denomination. This is not to say that the church must give up on the possibility of church discipline but simply to say that the process will take on its own character appropriate to the present-day situation... The Christian is always to be accountable to a community. And the importance of the community receives indirect confirmation in the divinely granted authority of its leaders, in the promise of answered prayer in the administration of the church, and in the promise of the continuing presence of the risen Christ in the midst of those gathered in his name. The supreme mark of Christ's community is Christ's presence.¹³⁶

For the Preacher

Our emphasis from this passage can lean towards the end of the process when all else fails. However, the passage should be read in the hope that if something needs to be said, that the issue will be resolved as quickly and quietly as possible.

The preacher could explore the wisdom of this passage when it deals with handling disagreements/conflict within the church. Do we always handle it appropriately? The passage brings together, in a positive way, justice and love.

How often do we discuss people's misdeeds behind their backs before lovingly approaching them alone in the first place? Do we consider the issue of discipline in terms of building people up and encouraging people to learn, rather than being keen to punish? The preacher may consider many church conflicts which could have been avoided or lessened if Jesus' advice had been heeded. Such issues must be handled prayerfully with care of the member always at the centre.

¹³² Schweizer, *Matthew*, 374.

¹³³ Hagner, *Matthew*, 533.

¹³⁴ Hare, *Matthew*, 215.

¹³⁵ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 455.

¹³⁶ Hagner, *Matthew*, 534.

As I write this, our Moderator in his Easter address invites us to be willing to take on the (sometimes difficult) task of being peacemakers. Attending to Jesus' words in this passage help us to consider ways to go about this business.

The preacher may choose to explore how our congregations today can be acting towards peace.

If the preacher chooses to focus on vv. 19-20, Soards et al write:¹³⁷

In turn, vv. 19-20 recognize that we are to be responsible in our prayers. This promise from Jesus is not the equivalent of a Christian wishing-well with guaranteed results. Historically many such prayers have gone unanswered, possibly an indication that the agreement among the people was a bad one or that the gathering was Christless, but perhaps this most indicates that Jesus' words were simply misunderstood. In fact, it may be unwise to read these verses out of their context where they are related to winning back a lost member (18:15-17) and to the responsibility to be faithful in forgiving (18:21-22).

The passage also reminds us of the corporate nature of the church, something we find hard to grasp in our individualistic age.

The Christian is always to be accountable to a community. And the importance of the community receives indirect confirmation in the divinely granted authority of its leaders, in the promise of answered prayer in the administration of the church, and in the promise of the continuing presence of the risen Christ in the midst of those gathered in his name. The supreme mark of Christ's community is Christ's presence.¹³⁸

PENTECOST 16 - MATT 20:1-16 – THE LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD

This parable is unique to Matthew. The opening word "for" connects this passage with the previous with its discussion of rewards. It also connects with the concept of the first and the last from the previous chapter. And so the theme of rewards continues.

The vineyard setting will also be used in two later parables in Matthew (21:28–32 and 21:33–41). The vineyard also reflects a famous parable of God and Israel in the Old Testament (Isa 5:1–7; cf. Isa 3:14; 27:2–6; Jer 12:10).

Daily workers did not have the same security as slaves and hired servants in a household, instead they needed to be hired each day. They were paid at the end of the day's work (Lev 19:13; Deut 24:14-15).

The open-ended phrase "whatever is fair" poses a question for the reader which will be unexpectedly answered in the sequel. The adjective *argos* in vv. 3 and 6 can be

¹³⁷ Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A After Pentecost* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 27.

¹³⁸ Hagner, *Matthew*, 534.

translated “with no work to do” and “not working” rather than by the traditional “idle,” since the latter often has a pejorative note (implying “lazy”).¹³⁹

There appears to be some urgency about getting the job done quickly, suggesting it might be harvest time. Harvest was often an image used in relation to final judgment and the urgency of the work of God’s Reign (cf. 9:37; 13:39).

When asked why workers were still in the marketplace towards the end of the day their reply is simply that no-one had hired them.

Hagner suggests:¹⁴⁰

Why is this statement made? The purpose of this insertion, which breaks the pattern of the previous hirings, is apparently to underline the fact that these are the ones rejected by other employers as unworthy. These “last” ones assume particular importance in the second half of the parable (cf. vv 8–9, 12, 14, 16). They are analogous to the tax collectors and the harlots invited into the kingdom by Jesus (see esp. 21:31). To these workers, regarded as undesirable by others, the master gives the invitation “even you [καὶ ὑμεῖς] go into the vineyard”—the same invitation given to the earlier groups.

These last hired workers certainly would expect to be paid, but only for about an hour’s work. There is nothing to indicate in the story how much they would be paid.

Finally comes the time of payment where those employed last are paid first. The workers hired towards the beginning of the day would have been surprised to see that those hired in the last hour were paid a full day’s wage. They must have expected to be paid more when the time came for them to be paid.

France says:

The principle appears to be of payment according to need rather than desert. The complaint of the whole-day workers expresses a more conventional understanding of “reward.” The comparison between their whole day of hard, hot work and the short stint of the others in the cool of the evening proves tempting to interpreters who are looking for a specific group to apply the parable to.¹⁴¹

And so in verses 13-15 we see that no-one misses out by being a follower of Jesus. Several of the all-day workers enquire, however, about the equality of the payment. The master replies to one of them:

He addressed him as “*Friend*,” a form of address used in this Gospel only in friendly remonstrance (22:12; 26:50). On his side there was no malice or hard feeling; the man who had worked for him all day was his friend. Then he pointed out that there

¹³⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 749–752.

¹⁴⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, vol. 33B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1995), 567–573.

¹⁴¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 749–752.

was no injustice: “*I do you no wrong.*” When a man makes a solemn agreement and keeps to his side of the bargain, there should be no thought of injustice. This man had made a legal agreement with his workmen; they would work for a day, and he would pay them a denarius. That was what they did and what he did. Where is the injustice? The fact that he chose to be generous to other people gave these men no new rights. Their discontent was due to envy, not to the overlooking of any of their rights.¹⁴²

The “last ones” in the parable did not deserve what they were given. Their pay, equal to that of others, depended purely on the will of the lord of the vineyard. The shock of the parable is often the learning moment. We expect justice but fortunately we receive grace.

“The God who is generous far beyond what could be expected is also never less than just. But to think in terms of contractual obligations is to miss the point of the kingdom of heaven. God’s “goodness” (cf. 19:17) is far more generous than that.”¹⁴³

Regarding verse 16, Hagner offers that this last saying

... brings the parable to an end (note οὕτως, “thus”) by focusing attention on the reversal wherein the last are made first and the first last. It thus repeats the logion of 19:30 but alters the order so that here the last are appropriately referred to before the first. The point does not concern the time when the disciples, who are certainly to identify themselves with those who have worked the whole day ... will receive their reward, i.e., after those who came later, but rather the fact that those who come last, the “unworthy” (cf. v. 6b–7a), will receive a reward equal to that given the disciples. ... The last are thus not the last in time but the last in rank, i.e., in terms of worthiness. Thus the parable and also its concluding logion have the effect of underlining the impropriety of the disciples’ question in 19:27. The fundamental assertion of the parable is that God’s grace is granted also to those who come last. Those who come to work in the vineyard after the twelve, even those who come in the eleventh hour, the unwanted and the unworthy, will receive before the disciples the same reward to be given the disciples. In this sense the last will be first and the first last. The surprise of this reversal is similar to that referred to in 19:30, where there is more emphasis on the “first.”¹⁴⁴

For the Preacher

Morris notes:

This is a very important parable. It is possible to interpret it in terms of Israel and the Gentiles.... The vineyard is often used as a symbol for Israel (e.g., Isa. 5:1–7); those who take the parable this way argue that Israel is like the men who worked

¹⁴² Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 499–505.

¹⁴³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 749–752.

¹⁴⁴ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, vol. 33B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1995), 567–573.

all day, while the Gentiles are symbolized in those who came later and were admitted by God's grace. Others point out that there is always a tendency for those who have been followers of Christ for a long time to be suspicious of those who come later. This applies to Jews and Gentiles, but it also applies to the Twelve and to later believers, and it is not difficult to see this tendency at work in the church of all ages. The parable warns us that priority in time means little. But it seems better to interpret the parable as putting emphasis on the truth that God acts in grace toward us all. There is a tendency in the human race to think of salvation in legal terms. There is no heresy as widespread as the one we can put simply as "If I live a good life, I will go to heaven when I die." It is natural for us to think that we can earn our salvation. But the consistent teaching of Scripture is that we are sinners; we all fall short of the standard we ought to have attained, and thus we have no claim on salvation. But as in this parable the workers who came late had no claim on a full day's wage though they got it, so sinners have no claim on salvation. Salvation is always a work of grace. That God does not treat us on the basis of justice is a fact for which sinners must be truly grateful. The parable emphasizes the place of grace (eleven twelfths of what the last comers received was unearned!).¹⁴⁵

What do you think? France offers: "The blessing of eternal life is the same for all. There are not some more saved than others."¹⁴⁶

We may choose to reflect on our possible attitudes of stinginess towards the idea of God's grace, and how we may come to be more willing recipients of this same abundant grace for ourselves. Such a grateful attitude can spill over into our attitudes towards others.

PENTECOST 19 – MATT 22:1-14 – THE WEDDING BANQUET

An equivalent parable appears in *Luke* however there are differences. France outlines the comparison:

There is a partial parallel to this parable in *Luke* 14:16–24, but the audience there is more general (fellow-guests at a dinner). There is the same essential story-line of a lavish feast to which those previously invited refuse to come when summoned, to be replaced by a motley collection of people from the streets, and the conclusion in *Luke* 14:24 similarly focuses on the exclusion of those previously invited. But the story is very differently told: *Luke* has no king or wedding, focuses at some length on the reasons for non-attendance to which *Matthew* alludes only briefly in v. 5, and has two waves of replacement guests brought in (perhaps to represent Jews and Gentiles). He has nothing about the ill-treatment of the (single) messenger, and his host takes no punitive action other than excluding the original invitees from the feast. And *Luke*'s parable stops short when the hall is full; there is no second scene with the expulsion of one of the new invitees. *Luke*'s story is thus essentially simpler than *Matthew*'s, but stylistically more expansive. The situation is similar to what we

¹⁴⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 499–505.

¹⁴⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 749–752.

will find with the parable of the talents in 25:14–30: a basically similar story-line but in a different setting in Luke, and so differently constructed that it seems more economical to assume that Jesus told two related but separate parables on different occasions than to explain the one as an extraordinarily radical and complicated editorial revision of the other. ...it is more responsible to read Matthew's story on its own terms, and in its own literary context, than to look for its meaning primarily in terms of how it differs from Luke's.¹⁴⁷

In verse 1 there "have been no previous words that Jesus was *answering*, but Matthew is fond of the verb (which he has 55 times) and he may have it in mind that Jesus was responding to the hostility of the high priests and Pharisees who wanted to arrest him. *Again* adds this to the previous parables and completes the trio."¹⁴⁸

The king's slaves, who normally would not be people who would be shunned by the potential guests, are sent to those already invited to tell them that the time for the banquet had come. Scholars see this privileged group as perhaps the chief priests and Pharisees who would be expected to be at the feast.

It was probably normal custom to send out two invitations, the second being much closer to the time of the banquet. However, in Jesus' shocking parable the invitees refuse to attend.

So, like the prophets of old, the messengers from the king are again refused and even mistreated and killed. The vague excuses given by the invitees highlights the point that they simply did not care.¹⁴⁹

The language is very much like that of Old Testament passages dealing with judgment.

In verse 7 the story now seems to be going far beyond a realistic situation. France writes:

Most interpreters agree that this is a specific allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, when large parts of the city were burned by the conquering Romans (Josephus, *War* 6.353–355, 363–364, 406–408). It is usually assumed that this must be a reflection by Matthew writing after the event. But it would not have been difficult for a politically astute observer in the sixties to see what was likely to happen, so that this is not necessarily an argument for a post-70 date for the gospel ... The phrase "their city" thus depicts the devastating result of the failure of Jerusalem's current leadership; Jerusalem is now no longer God's city, but "theirs," and the community as a whole is implicated in their rebellion and its punishment, as had so often happened in the past when Israel's sins had led to the city's destruction by invading armies.

¹⁴⁷ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 821–828.

¹⁴⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 546–553.

¹⁴⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 546–553.

Notice in verse 10 the invitees from the streets are both good and bad. These would relate to those whom the Jewish rulers would consider as evil and unacceptable.

We have to admit we don't know much about wedding customs at the time of Jesus in Palestine. The king comes in to see whom the slaves had invited to the banquet. What are we to make of the man not wearing a wedding garment? This is a little unclear but as the man had been invited off the streets the man, along with the others, must have been given the proper garments to wear by the banquet organiser. (See Isa 61:10; Ezek 16:10). We are not told why he refused the grace of the king.

France argues:

The symbolism is of someone who presumes on the free offer of salvation by assuming that therefore there are no obligations attached, someone whose life belies their profession: faith without works. Entry to the kingdom of heaven may be free, but to continue in it carries conditions. Even though this man belongs to the new group of invitees, he is one who produces no fruit, and so is no less liable to forfeit his new-found privilege than those who were excluded before him. As the parable of the sower has reminded us, there is many a slip between initial response to the word of God and ultimate fruitfulness.¹⁵⁰

France continues:

[Verse 14] sums up the message of this parable, and indeed also of the two which precede it. It picks up the language of the parable: the first group of guests had all been "invited" (vv. 3, 4, 8), but that did not mean that they would enjoy the feast. So in their place others have been "invited" (v. 9), but now even one of them has failed to make the grade. Who then are the "chosen"? The term will recur in 24:22, 24 to designate God's true people, threatened but protected through the time of trial, and in 24:31 for those summoned from all over the world to make up the new people of God after the failure of the old régime. It is a term with strongly ideological overtones deriving from the OT concept of Israel as God's chosen people. But its use here and in 24:31 introduces a radically new element to that ideological concept: the true "chosen people" is not automatically identified with those who belong to the Israelite community, not even those who are its official leaders: these are the invited, but not necessarily the chosen. The "many" and the "few" speak of a weeding process, whereby many of those invited will not make it to the feast. The chosen are the new tenants who will produce the fruit, who, as we have seen in the last parable, may be Jewish or Gentile; their chosenness does not depend on their racial origin but on their response to God's summons and their readiness to give God his due.¹⁵¹

The parable shares similarities with the previous two in *Matthew*. In each case people are given the opportunity to share in the privileges of God's Reign, however they don't take this up, instead perform evil deeds, which then allow a surprising group of people to be invited to undertake the tasks of God's Reign. Such parables raise the question of how much they are allegories. For example, some scholars see

¹⁵⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 821–828.

¹⁵¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 821–828.

a historical progression from, say, the parable of the wicked tenants (21:33-41) to the parable of the wedding banquet.

In the first, so they argue, the son of the owner represents Jesus who is ultimately rejected and killed and so the earlier messengers of the owner would represent the earlier prophets. Following on from this, in the parable of the wedding banquet, the people receiving the original invitation were the Jews, and those finally invited represent the Christians who are invited in by grace. This line of interpretation then would have more meaning for Matthew's later community, than for the Jewish leaders to whom Jesus originally addressed the parable.

France, I believe, is correct in saying:

... certain features of the story may suggest caution in accepting this whole-sale allegorical reading. The king's son, whose wedding is mentioned in v. 2 as the setting for the story, plays no further part in it; the double invitation of vv. 3–4 fits the cultural pattern of the time (see below) and requires no allegorical explanation; the replacement guests of vv. 8–10 are apparently recruited from the king's own city, and are not described as foreigners. It may therefore be more prudent to read this parable more generally as a warning, as in the preceding two parables, that those who refuse God's call face ultimate exclusion and replacement, and to leave the specific application to the setting within which the story is read. Its message to the original hearers is not necessarily the same as that discerned by a later Christian reader.¹⁵²

The shocking warning for all, is that not all who arrive at the feast will be allowed to stay.

For the Preacher

Are there times where we shun the joy of God's Reign for the sake of our busyness? Do we consider too much our everyday affairs and ignore the invitation to take part in the banquet? Despite the fact that we often mouth the Lord's Prayer how much do we want God's Reign to come?

How are we meant to respond to God's invitation? What do the right wedding clothes mean for us? The person invited to the wedding would not have been well-dressed when he was invited, but would have been offered good clothes for the celebration. He seemed to be refusing to accept the grace offered to him. Can we refuse God's grace?

The preacher may choose to explore the difficulties we have of accepting the concept of grace.

¹⁵² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 821–828.

PENTECOST 23 – MATT 25:1-13 – THE TEN BRIDESMAIDS

Before tackling the detail of this story a few general comments should be made. Firstly, it is important to note that very little is known about Jewish weddings in this era. Many have attempted to describe the customs, the role of bridesmaids etc., however much is speculation based on limited knowledge of wedding ceremonies in other cultures. And so it is unclear what exactly is the role of these “bridesmaids”. The Greek word literally means “virgins”. Their place in the story can only be taken from the information we have in the story itself.

Secondly, while the moral of the parable appears to be given in v. 13 “Keep awake therefore ...”, it should be noted that *both* sets of women, those prepared, and those not prepared, had been asleep (25:5) suggesting caution at exactly how this parable should be interpreted.

Thirdly, many parables are not allegories i.e. where *each* element of the story corresponds to some other deeper meaning, character or issue. I believe it would be a mistake to treat this parable as an allegory. It begins with Jesus’ words: *Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this*. The reader is being encouraged to see how the coming Reign of God can be compared to what is happening in the parable. The future nature of this introduction would suggest that Jesus is talking about the time of his return, but even this interpretation is not unanimously accepted.

We are told that they were to meet the bridegroom, however there was a delay. We are not told the reason for the delay (prolonged discussion about the financial arrangements?) so that is not important for the interpretation of the story. What is important is that some were prepared, while others weren’t, for the arrival of the bridegroom.

The portable torches for outdoor use (the word is not the same as that used for a standing domestic lamp in 5:15 and 6:22) would be bundles of cloth mounted on a carrying stick and soaked with oil. The jars held the oil into which the torch was dipped before lighting. A torch without a jar of oil was as useless as a modern flashlight without a battery.¹⁵³

The disinclination of the young women who had brought oil to share with those who had none, may seem uncaring. Yet it is a distraction from the rest of the story. France rightly comments that “the hard-nosed realism of the sensible girls invites the reader to reflect that spiritual preparedness is not something that others can provide for you: each needs their own oil.”¹⁵⁴

The wedding banquet imagery is commonly used to describe the joy and life of end-time events (see also in Matthew 8:11–12 and 22:1–13). What is horrifying about this story is that the door is shut against those who were not prepared. This flies in the face of ancient hospitality and so drives home the force of the story. It is with this

¹⁵³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 946–950.

¹⁵⁴ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 946–950.

notion in mind that verse 13 should be read “Keep awake”. This urging should be interpreted as being ready.

Equally unsettling is the response of the bridegroom to the unprepared maidens asking to be let in “I do not know you”. In the story the bridegroom would have known these women, all the more poignant that he now denies this. Jesus’ teaching in 7:21-23 is similar.

Preparedness is vital so that one doesn’t miss the banquet. The parable does not seek to describe how one should be ready. One needs to read the preceding and following parables, and also elsewhere in *Matthew*, to hear more about that.

For the Preacher

Buttrick writes:¹⁵⁵

Has the story therefore no meaning for us? Jesus comes again and again in the twin adventure of life and death, and there is no day when this parable lacks pertinence. The theme is preparedness, not for the worst – that readiness we hold comparatively well in mind – but for the best. Preparedness is the crux of the story.

Are we prepared? How do we know? What else can we read in the Scriptures to let us know how to be ready for the (both future and present) return of our Lord?

Soards et al offer the following:¹⁵⁶

Our anticipation of the coming of Christ means that our expectation of the full advent of the kingdom of heaven allows the substance of the kingdom itself to grasp our lives and to shape us into citizens practiced in the life-style of the kingdom of our Lord. The lamps of the bridesmaids became the lights by which the dancers at the wedding banquet performed. Our preparation is more than an admission ticket, it is our training for attendance.

THE REIGN OF CHRIST – MATT 25:31-46 **THE STORY OF THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS**

This story has proved to be notoriously difficult to interpret. It is not like the previous parables in Matthew, but it is called instead an “apocalyptic discourse”.¹⁵⁷ Like other apocalyptic writings it serves as (often end-times but not always) consolation for groups who are experiencing oppression or alienation.

¹⁵⁵ George A. Buttrick, “Exposition” in George Arthur Buttrick et al (eds) *The Interpreters Bible* Vol 7 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), 556.

¹⁵⁶ Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A After Pentecost* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 140.

¹⁵⁷ Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 213.

There have been reported to be as many as 32 interpretations of this passage.¹⁵⁸ Basically, differences can be categorised in the way interpreters answer two questions:

Who is referred to in the “all the nations” phrase who are gathered before the throne (vv. 31 and 32)? and

who are “the least of these my brothers and sisters” in vv. 40 and 45 for whom mercy has been shown?¹⁵⁹

Stanton raises further questions:

- 1) Is judgment on the basis of good works rather than faith?
- 2) Is it about the care of the needy and marginalised?
- 3) Is Jesus here associated with the poor?
- 4) Should Matthew’s interpretation of the parable be separated from Jesus’ original intention? (For example, did Jesus originally intend the parable to be addressed to people’s attitude to the poor, while Matthew rewrote it to be addressed to people’s attitude to those Christians who are oppressed by the dominant society?)

Before we discuss some of these questions, we should note in this story that it is Christ who is the judge in the end times, a role formerly accorded to God in the Jewish literature (e.g. Sib. Or. 4.183-84; 1 Enoch 9:4; 60:2; 62:2; 47:3). Also, the phrase “coming with all the angels” (v. 31) compares with Zech 14:5 where God is described. And so, we see an exalted and even divine view of Christ presented here.¹⁶⁰

It is also important to note that this section in *Matthew* forms the close of the 5th and last main section of teaching. It is the last spoken words of Jesus before the account of the Passion where Jesus demonstrates his teaching, as the Ruler himself associates with the persecuted and oppressed in his passage to the Cross.

It seems unlikely that the reference to “all the nations” (25:32) gathered before the throne is only a reference to Christians. They are not normally referred to as such. It probably refers to Gentiles against Christians or Jews. The phrase “the nations” in the Old Testament was usually a reference to the Gentiles.

“one of the brothers or sisters of mine, even the least” (15:40) is a term used in *Matthew* for Jesus’ disciples (see 12:50; ch. 18 incl. 10, 14; 28:10). See also a similar phrase in 10:42 “one of these little ones”. One can unconsciously treat a representative of Jesus as Jesus himself (10:40-42). These should be treated with hospitality, food, and drink (10:8-13, 42).¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 208.

¹⁵⁹ Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 209.

¹⁶⁰ Keener, *Matthew*, 602.

¹⁶¹ Keener, *Matthew*, 605.

Elsewhere (18 times), Matthew refers to fellow members of the Christian family.¹⁶² Thus, again, we see Jesus as Emmanuel with his identification with his followers and so the one who receives his disciples receives Jesus (v. 40).

Who are the needy? Stanton writes:¹⁶³

It is possible to take the six groups referred to in Matt 25 as a general list of the needy in society. But in comparison with other such lists in Biblical, early Jewish, and early Christian writings, there are so many omissions [e.g. widows and orphans] that it is worth considering alternative explanations.

Thus, it seems that Matthew most likely appears to be portraying Jesus as judging the non-Christian nations for their treatment of the followers of Jesus. See also Matt 10:11-15 and 40-2. Stanton proposes that “Whereas it was originally an exhortation to all to show loving concern for all men and women in need, it became an assurance to Matthew’s anxious readers that the nations would ultimately be judged on the basis of their treatment of Christians.”¹⁶⁴

Keener says: “... in the context of the surrounding parables, ‘receiving’ Christ’s messengers probably involves more than *only* initially embracing the message of the kingdom: it means treating one’s fellow servants properly (24:46-49).”¹⁶⁵

Hare further suggests a broader group of people in need:

There is nothing uniquely Christian about the idea of Jesus’ solidarity with his messengers; What is distinctive about Matt 18:5 is the notion that vulnerable children who have no conscious relationship to him are nonetheless his ‘representatives.’ In 25:31-46 this remarkable principle is extended to include all the world’s powerless and needy.¹⁶⁶

Some Closing Thoughts on Judgment in Matthew

Boxall includes these thoughts:¹⁶⁷

“... judgement in Matthew is especially focused on those who presume to place themselves at the centre of things, to the exclusion of those they have themselves judged.”

He continues that

¹⁶² Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 216.

¹⁶³ Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 219

¹⁶⁴ Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 221.

¹⁶⁵ Keener, *Matthew*, 606.

¹⁶⁶ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993),290-1.

¹⁶⁷ Boxall, *Discovering Matthew*, 102.

Judgement belongs to God, who exercises his final judgement through the Son of Man. The essence of this judgement is very different from human judgement, however. In the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, those who are counted among the blessed 'sheep' are as surprised to find themselves in that particular company as are the accursed 'goats' (25:37-39, 44).¹⁶⁸

Boxall adds: "Matthew represents a subversive re-imagining of the apocalyptic tradition: the true revelation of heavenly secrets has been made, not to 'the wise and the intelligent' but to 'infants' (11:25)".¹⁶⁹

He continues: "Matthew's Jesus presents an alternative apocalyptic vision: Jesus the Son of Man is the one in whom God will definitively act to establish his victory over the forces of evil and chaos. Yet this victory is achieved not by military might but through the suffering and death he endures in Jerusalem."¹⁷⁰

In the ancient world [the term *parousia*] often referred to the triumphant arrival of a king or emperor. It heightens the note of expectancy and readiness that has characterized the teaching of Jesus throughout Matthew. The one who teaches is also the one who judges, and who challenges his followers to a constant state of readiness, of performing that 'righteousness' that is conformity to the will of their heavenly Father.¹⁷¹

For the Preacher

In this parable Jesus is not only represented as King but also as Son of God in judgment and glory, an appropriate image as we celebrate the Reign of Christ this Sunday. Here we have the scene of Christ with the heavenly angels in power. Jesus is ruler of the whole world.

People are judged by their treatment of those on the underside of life. For those of us who often dwell on the upperside of life this is a pertinent reminder. We will encounter Christ in his commitment and presence among those who are doing it tough.

Does belief not count for anything? Yes it does, but genuine love comes from genuine belief. Lip-service is not true faith. Faith is in a God who loves and calls us to love. Judgment and love are both understood in God.

The word for eternal "*aiōnion*" means age-long in the sense of spirit and quality rather than of unending duration and *kolasis* may "have the meaning of remedial, although severe, pruning rather than of arbitrary and vindictive torment (the God and Father of Jesus is neither arbitrary nor vindictive.)"¹⁷² Buttrick reminds us that we "must not

¹⁶⁸ Boxall, *Discovering Matthew*, 102.

¹⁶⁹ Boxall, *Discovering Matthew*, 103.

¹⁷⁰ Boxall, *Discovering Matthew*, 104.

¹⁷¹ Boxall, *Discovering Matthew*, 104.

¹⁷² George A. Buttrick, "Exposition" in George Arthur Buttrick et al (eds) *The Interpreters Bible Vol 7* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), 564.

make a theology from details of a parable, but by the same token we must be honest with the darkness of the punishment.

Encouragement may be taken from v. 34, a beautiful verse, as the desire of God for the Reign to be enjoyed is proclaimed as God's desire of love from the foundation of the world.

Buttrick concludes:¹⁷³ "But the word is forever spoken. Christ has come to us in our prison. Therefore we live in love, because of grateful love for him; and we are able to love all ... even the unlovely, because he loves them and us in the intense love of a very indwelling."

It is interesting that the values expressed in this story reflect those of the Reign of God stated at the beginning of Jesus' teaching in Matthew, i.e. with the Sermon on the Mount.

As we seek to serve others in need can we not be seeking to find Christ in these moments and to fully engage with our saviour as we minister? To do so is energising, awakening, humbling, enriching, and even mind-blowing. Where then is Christ to be found today?

There is also comfort expressed for those faithful servants who are enduring some form of persecution that such oppression is not the final word. Those who persecute are also held accountable. Evil will not have the final say. Jesus the ruler and judge will see to that.

¹⁷³ George A. Buttrick, "Exposition" in George Arthur Buttrick et al (eds) *The Interpreters Bible Vol 7* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), 566.