

**South Moreton Presbytery**  
**Preaching Background Notes**

**Gospel Lectionary Readings for November**

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12/10/20

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## ALL SAINTS DAY – NOVEMBER 1 MATTHEW 5:1-12 – THE BEATITUDES

The first Sunday in November happens to be All Saints Day so two sets of readings are available for this Sunday.

For the All Saints Day readings we are going to zoom in to the opening section of the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes.

Are the Beatitudes entrance requirements to the Reign of God or rather promises of blessings in the end times?<sup>1</sup> There is the sense that the blessings may begin to appear in the present and not just at some future time.

The Beatitudes form the opening segment of the Sermon on the Mount and it is significant that they begin with a proclamation of blessing. 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 ...".<sup>2</sup> It has also been translated "fortunate". The word could be translated "esteemed" or "honoured". Bill Loader offers: "You are in the right place to encounter God when ..."

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. 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.

We need to note here that there are similar beatitudes (plus woes) in Luke's Gospel (Luke 6:20-26).

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 298-99.

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).”<sup>3</sup> 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)

<sup>3</sup> “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*”

<sup>10</sup> “*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.

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.

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<sup>3</sup> Mike Graves and David M. May, *Preaching Matthew: Interpretation and Proclamation* (St Louis: Chalice, 2007), 41.

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.”<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup>

Talbert quotes other references 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:

“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.”<sup>7</sup> 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:<sup>8</sup>

1) a passive connotation and future tense –

A future hope/the New Age beyond the resurrection (8:11; 26:29)

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<sup>4</sup> Graves and May, *Preaching Matthew*, 49.

<sup>5</sup> Graves and May, *Preaching Matthew*, 51.

<sup>6</sup> Wilfred Harrington, *Reading Matthew for the First Time* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2014), 49.

<sup>7</sup> Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 50.

<sup>8</sup> Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 50.

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.”<sup>9</sup> “To be comforted, then, is to experience God’s salvation and sustenance”<sup>10</sup> 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 ....*  
<sup>2</sup> *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.*

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

<sup>1</sup> 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.’”<sup>11</sup>

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.

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<sup>9</sup> Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Harrington, *Matthew*, 79

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.”<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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.”<sup>14</sup>

### 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 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?*

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<sup>12</sup> Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 52.

<sup>13</sup> Keener, *Matthew*, 170.

<sup>14</sup> Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 52.

*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.”<sup>15</sup>

The “in heart”, like “in Spirit” mean the interior person. Harrington has “purity of intention” so that action and intention are connected.<sup>16</sup> It includes those who are totally focussed on God.

According to Talbert those who shall see God is an “eschatological vision of God”,<sup>17</sup> 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.”<sup>18</sup>

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:

... 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.<sup>19</sup>

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

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<sup>15</sup> Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 53.

<sup>16</sup> Harrington, *Reading Matthew*, 49.

<sup>17</sup> Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 53.

<sup>18</sup> Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 53.

<sup>19</sup> Harrington, *Matthew*, 82

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.”<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

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’).”<sup>22</sup>

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 word 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.”<sup>23</sup>

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.

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<sup>20</sup> Harrington, *Reading Matthew*, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 54.

<sup>22</sup> Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 54.

<sup>23</sup> Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount*, 58.

**PENTECOST 22 – NOVEMBER 1, 2020**  
**MATT 23:1-12 – JESUS CRITIQUES THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS**

Jesus has just finished the dialogue with the religious leaders, a series of questions asked of Jesus about his authority. No doubt the hostility towards Jesus was increasing. Now in this section, Jesus criticizes their behaviour. Of all the Gospels, Matthew includes the harshest criticism of the leaders. This could very well be a reflection of Matthew's community which may have been ostracized by the Pharisees and Jewish leaders, and the community may have even been expelled from their synagogues. If this is the case, the passage offers advice to the believers about how they can behave appropriately within their own community.

Moses' seat (v. 2) is a metaphor for the teaching and ruling authority of the scribes and Pharisees. Later it would become a physical seat.<sup>24</sup>

Jesus, doesn't criticise what the Pharisees teach, as long as they adhere to the teachings of Moses, rather he comments on their burdening the people and their behaviour. This is in keeping with Matthew honouring the place of the Law in the life of the believer, elsewhere in the Gospel. (E.g. 5:17-20 where Jesus honours the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.)

While Jesus has elsewhere distanced himself from the teaching of the Pharisees (e.g. 9:10-11, 14; 12:1-2, 10-14 and even warned his disciples of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees in 16:6, 11-12) he is seeking to affirm loyalty to the Law which teaches righteousness.

Jewish law and custom are criticized as being too difficult to live. In contrast, Matthew claims that Jesus' burden is light (11:30). This criticism is then linked to a criticism of the community leaders for not easing the burdens. It is likely that the "burdens" refer to the Pharisaic/rabbinic application of priestly purity laws to everyday life and to their stress on tithing and Sabbath observance. The Pharisaic program for the reform of Jewish life differed from that of Jesus and the Matthean community.<sup>25</sup>

The Pharisees, in trying to respect and protect the Law from violation, had added laws to provide a fence around it. These had contributed to the burden on the people.

What Jesus does not condone is their actions, and he accuses them of hypocrisy. This accusation will intensify in v. 13 onwards. Jesus criticizes the leaders for their desire to promote their own righteousness by outward show. They loved to see themselves as important and honoured by others.

On phylacteries and fringes Harrington writes:<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 1, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 319–324.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 1, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 319–324.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 1, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 319–324.

Several biblical passages speak of a sign, memorial, and frontlets between the eyes and on the arm (Exod 13:1–16; Deut 6:4–9; 11:13–22). Rabbinic practice was to inscribe these passages on parchment, enclose them in leather boxes, and strap them to the forehead and arm during morning prayer. The boxes are called phylacteries. This passage is the earliest use of that term, which can also refer to amulets. Hence Matthew’s use of the term may be polemical. The discovery of leather phylacteries at Qumran makes it probable that “phylacteries” here refers to the same religious article. Rabbinic tradition usually refers to them as *tefillin*. The Qumran phylacteries had slightly different texts.

... In accordance with the biblical command (Num 15:38–39; Deut 22:12) Jews wore tassels on the corners of their outer garments. For Jesus’ practice, see Matt 9:20; 14:36.

According to Jesus, the leaders were overly interested in show and their status in their society.

Matthew now reports Jesus’ words to paint a picture of what their own community of believers should be like. This includes its leaders not to seek their own glory with special status and titles, so that they seek to promote themselves above others. Rather the members are there to serve each other with Christ as their head. “The common Semitic title for an elder, Abba (“Father”), is to be reserved for God, and the title “Master” for the Christ. The members of the community are to be ‘servants’ to one another.”<sup>27</sup>

Jesus is not denying that believing communities will have teachers but is urging against self-glorification of some over others. “All of you are brothers and sisters” (v. 8). Jeremiah also predicted a time to come when no one would need teaching because everyone will know the Lord directly (Jer 31:34).

Hagner summarises:

... for Matthew Jesus alone is the true interpreter of Moses, and he is therefore the one rabbi, teacher, and tutor. He, not the Pharisaic rabbis, gives authoritative interpretation of Torah. And the scribes and Pharisees come under harsh criticism for both their teaching and their deeds in the material that follows. Jesus faults them particularly for their desire to impress others and their love of prestige and position. Such dangers also threaten Christians, and Jesus thus warns his disciples. They are to avoid titles that would set them apart from, and above, others in the community of faith, not because the particular titles are reprehensible but because of the assumption of superiority and elitism that so often goes with them. The demeanor of the disciples is to be characterized above all by the virtues of service and humility. Christians of every era and every circumstance, especially those in leadership roles, must learn again that true greatness consists in service and that self-humbling now is the path to exaltation in the eschaton. Only by such a radical

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<sup>27</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 1, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 319–324.

departure from the values and priorities of the world will Christians in authority be the disciples of the one Teacher and Lord.<sup>28</sup>

### **For the Preacher**

Harrington offers:

Matthew's model of egalitarian communal leadership has been largely ignored by Church communities, except at the inception of various reform movements. Though the title "Rabbi" ceased to be used among Christians, probably because it became a central title within Judaism, the traditional Semitic title "Father" gained wide usage, as did a number of other honorific titles reflecting the power or status of their holders. The struggle between the sociological necessity for institutionalization and the mandate for community fellowship affected the Matthean community as it does many Christian communities today.<sup>29</sup>

Whereas Soards et al suggest:

For decades and centuries Protestants have enjoyed taking a flatly literal sense of these verses and bashing Roman Catholics with them. But there is more here than meets the simple eye. Jesus' message is that we lay aside our efforts and claims to authority and honor because the real authority and the actual honor belong to God. And greatness in God's is in service. ... As we recognize God's glory, expressed to us through Jesus Christ as selfless love, we are liberated from a preoccupation with ourselves and for faithful and gratifying service to God and God's people.<sup>30</sup>

Only one is to be so honored; all others are brothers and sisters, that is, equals bound together by mutual affection and respect. This ideal of the church as an unstratified society is firmly espoused by Paul. Social historians have contrasted Paul's churches with other clubs in Greco-Roman society in which members bolstered self-esteem by the use of a wide variety of grandiose titles. The apostle refers repeatedly to leadership *functions* without stressing the *persons* who fulfilled these functions. Instead, he implores his converts to abandon selfish ambition and humbly treat others as superior (Phil. 2:3; Rom. 12:3, 16).<sup>31</sup>

Hare continues:

This passage is perennially relevant. It is not a mortal sin for clergy to be addressed as "Reverend," "Father," "Doctor," or "Pastor." The eagerness of laypeople to exalt ordained persons by the use of honorific titles, however, intensifies the minister's

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<sup>28</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, vol. 33B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1995), 657–662.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 1, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 319–324.

<sup>30</sup> Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A After Pentecost 2* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 119.

<sup>31</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew Interpretation Series* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 266-7.

responsibility to work diligently at breaking down the barrier between clergy and laity.<sup>32</sup>

Matthew paints a picture for us of what community life could look for us, in keeping with God's vision for God's Reign. Dominion will be exercised by Christ as head of the community. Those with particular gifts and abilities will use them faithfully and humbly in the service of each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Such humble service speaks against those who would seek glory for themselves.

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<sup>32</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew Interpretation Series* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 267.

**PENTECOST 23 – NOVEMBER 8, 2020**  
**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. Thus 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.<sup>33</sup>

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.”<sup>34</sup>

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

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<sup>33</sup> 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.

<sup>34</sup> 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:<sup>35</sup>

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:<sup>36</sup>

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.

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<sup>35</sup> George A. Buttrick, “Exposition” in George Arthur Buttrick et al (eds) *The Interpreters Bible Vol 7* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), 556.

<sup>36</sup> Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A After Pentecost* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 140.

**NOVEMBER 15, 2020**  
**MATT 25:14-30 – THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS**

The talent was considered to be a huge amount of money and certainly could be used to start a reasonable business. Burying money in the ground was considered a safer option than keeping it in a purse which could be stolen.

Notice the delay in the master's return ("after long time", v. 19). This compares with the motif of delay in the previous parables (24:48; 25:5). This, plus other indicators, place this parable in the context of end times, judgment and appropriate behaviour for the coming of the Son of Man.

Verse 29 has "more will be given". The use of the passive here is in keeping with usage elsewhere of the "divine passive", i.e. a grammatical feature that indicates that it will God who will do the giving.

The "outer darkness" (v. 30) is contrary to entering into the joy of the master (vv. 21, 23) and the "weeping and gnashing of teeth" is a phrase which is used elsewhere in Matthew (8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51).

The master firstly determines who is capable of taking on responsibility and, as an outcome of that, the master then determines who should share in his joy. This turn of phrase suggests the parable is not just about everyday life but a pointer to the end times with the return of the Son of Man.

The master accepts, at least for argument's sake, the reality of the slave's fear and does not suggest that he should have pushed past this fear to engage in business as the others had done. But, the master points out, there was a virtually risk-free alternative. With a minimum of effort the slave could have placed the master's money with the bankers (the plural is perhaps to suggest that spreading the money over several bankers would have made it yet safer). Though this was not at all what the master had originally intended (but the parable reports no specific directives), it would at least have gained money for the master for whom, in this slave's image, gaining more was a consuming passion. The slave has not really acted in line with his declared view of the master. His explanation is revealed as more an excuse than a reason. Initially it may have sounded plausible, but in the end it was only a cover-up for wicked sloth. This third slave now stands exposed for what he is.<sup>37</sup>

"In what sense is the third slave one who 'does not have' before the talent is taken from him? Probably what he does not have is a right attitude to his master."<sup>38</sup>

Within the Matthean framework this story is also very clearly told with reference to the coming of the Son of Man. As in 24:45–51, a period of absence is involved which this time has a much more explicit role as an extended period of being away from home. In some ways this third parable is the first over again on a much grander

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<sup>37</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 1013–1021.

<sup>38</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 1013–1021.

scale, but the differences are also significant. Whereas the wicked slave of 24:45–51 was caught by the timing of his master’s return and in the parable of 25:1–13 the bridegroom’s arrival flushes out the thoughtlessness of the foolish maidens’ earlier preparation, in vv. 14–30 the flimsiness of the rationalisation of the wicked and indolent slave comes to light on the master’s return. In each case, though the final emphasis falls on the negative case, there is also a positive counterpart: in the slave promoted to permanent responsibility over the household; in the maidens who share the festivities of the wedding banquet; in the slaves who have the privilege of managing large fortunes and who ‘enter into the joy of their master’. With his three parables Matthew has been exploring different dimensions of what is involved in being ready to meet the master.<sup>39</sup>

“It would ... be pressing the imagery too far to infer that the blessing of the good disciple is *at the expense of* the forfeiture of the bad.”<sup>40</sup>

### **For the Preacher**

The loyal believer with a positive attitude to the Master is encouraged to wisely and actively use what has been entrusted to them, rather than being paralysed by fear. The amount given by the Master is abundant (even 1 talent was about 12,000 days wages). “Grace employed abounds, but grace buried does nothing.”<sup>41</sup>

Hagner offers:

The usual moralizing approach to Matt 25:14–30 (“use your talents to the best of your ability”) does not take into account the eschatological horizon that is essential to the parable. The return of the master and the accounting are essential aspects of the story, and they should not be omitted in teaching and preaching.

Matthew, still building upon his assertion in 24:36 that the time of the coming of the Son of Man remains unknown, again addresses the importance of the disciples’ conduct in the lengthy time that the Son of Man is “away.” The imagery of the parable centers upon money. It is fitting, however, that the monetary unit referred to is the “talent,” the Greek word that is the root of the common English word “talent,” i.e., in the sense of “special aptitude” or “gift.” Something like this (cf. the “spiritual gifts” of passages such as Rom 12:6–7; 1 Cor 7:7; 12:4–31) is probably in view here rather than literal money. Not everybody has been entrusted with the same “amount” (gift), but one must be faithful with what one has been given. Thus the two-talent person is given precisely the same accolade as the five-talent person (as would be the one-talent person, if only that talent had been used). The disciple who uses that with which he or she has been entrusted will receive the wonderful praise, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” and will enter into the full joy of

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<sup>39</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 1013–1021.

<sup>40</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 956–957.

<sup>41</sup> Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A After Pentecost 2* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 151.

eschatological blessing. The disciple who, on the other hand, fails to make productive use of what has been given faces the terrifying prospect of ultimate loss. The faithful will be further blessed; the unfaithful will lose all. The point cannot be missed: before the Son of Man comes and until that time whenever it may be, disciples are called to faithful and steady service of the kingdom.<sup>42</sup>

Soards et al suggest:<sup>43</sup>

Sermons that only threaten are often ineffective, merely turning off the hearers. But in fact, the majority of elements in this parable are positive – though the master’s lengthy speech overwhelms us with the recognition of possible condemnation. While no sermon on this text should lose sight of the fate of the one-talent slave, major attention should be given to the trust given us, the charge to use the trust, and the promise of reckoning with the good news of the call ‘into the joy of [our] master.’

What then does this say about the nature of God?

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<sup>42</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, vol. 33B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1995), 737.

<sup>43</sup> Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A After Pentecost 2* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 151.

**THE REIGN OF CHRIST – NOVEMBER 22, 2020**  
**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”.<sup>44</sup> Like other apocalyptic writings it serves as (often end-times but not always) consolation for groups who are experiencing oppression or alienation.

There have been reported to be as many as 32 interpretations of this passage.<sup>45</sup> 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?<sup>46</sup>

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.<sup>47</sup>

It is also important to note that this section in *Matthew* forms the close of the 5<sup>th</sup> 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

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<sup>44</sup> Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 213.

<sup>45</sup> Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 208.

<sup>46</sup> Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 209.

<sup>47</sup> Keener, *Matthew*, 602.

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).<sup>48</sup>

Elsewhere (18 times), Matthew refers to fellow members of the Christian family.<sup>49</sup> 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:<sup>50</sup>

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.”<sup>51</sup>

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).”<sup>52</sup>

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.<sup>53</sup>

### Some Closing Thoughts on Judgment in Matthew

Boxall includes these thoughts:<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Keener, *Matthew*, 605.

<sup>49</sup> Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 216.

<sup>50</sup> Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 219

<sup>51</sup> Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 221.

<sup>52</sup> Keener, *Matthew*, 606.

<sup>53</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993),290-1.

<sup>54</sup> Boxall, *Discovering Matthew*, 102.

“... 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

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).<sup>55</sup>

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)”.<sup>56</sup>

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.”<sup>57</sup>

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.<sup>58</sup>

### **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.

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<sup>55</sup> Boxall, *Discovering Matthew*, 102.

<sup>56</sup> Boxall, *Discovering Matthew*, 103.

<sup>57</sup> Boxall, *Discovering Matthew*, 104.

<sup>58</sup> Boxall, *Discovering Matthew*, 104.

The word for eternal “*aiōnion*” means age-long in the sense of spirit and quality rather than of unending duration and *kolasin* 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.)”<sup>59</sup> Buttrick reminds us that we “must not 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:<sup>60</sup> “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.

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<sup>59</sup> George A. Buttrick, “Exposition” in George Arthur Buttrick et al (eds) *The Interpreters Bible Vol 7* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), 564.

<sup>60</sup> George A. Buttrick, “Exposition” in George Arthur Buttrick et al (eds) *The Interpreters Bible Vol 7* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), 566.

**ADVENT 1 - 29<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER, 2020**  
**MARK 13:24-37 – THE SON OF MAN COMING IN THE CLOUDS**

We now move into a new year in the church calendar. It is sometimes referred to as “Year B”, the second in the three year lectionary cycle. The Gospel readings in this year are often from *Mark*. Each new year begins with the season of Advent, leading us up to Christmas. During this time we focus on the coming (or advent) of Christ, past, present and future.

Context and Apocalyptic

The reading for this week relates Jesus’ prediction of the coming of the Son of Man in clouds. The passage is part of a complex chapter in Mark, sometimes referred to as “The Markan Apocalypse” (see below for more discussion of this term). In chapter 13 the disciples refer to the magnificence of the physical temple. Jesus replies with the announcement of its destruction and then coming persecutions. This is then followed by our passage today of the return of the Son of Man “with great power and glory” and the urging for preparedness.

The apocalyptic style of writing was more familiar to the ancient readers than to modern readers, as at the time several apocalyptic works were around, both Jewish and Christian. The most famous example in the New Testament is the Book of Revelation, yet many parts of the Book of Daniel use this style. Visionary material is described and often the themes gather around end-time events. The language is not literal, but symbolic and pictorial. Many modern readers have sought to “decode” this material to attempt to discern the timetable of these end-time events. Also, the mistake is often made to seek to read this material as a literal description of what is to happen. Apocalyptic material, however, is symbolic and colourful, and uses imagery to attempt to describe the indescribable realities.

Apocalyptic material was appreciated by people who were under some form of religious or financial oppression (e.g. the Daniel passages at the time of the oppressing king Antiochus Epiphanes IV, or Revelation under the Roman Empire).

The presence of 19 commands in this chapter in Mark suggests that it is not about giving information about the end times as such, but to promote faith and obedience while the community is in times of distress and upheaval.

Mark cautions his readers that the community is to find its life not in apocalyptic fervour but in obedience to Jesus’ call to cross-bearing and evangelism in the confidence that this is God’s will which must be fulfilled before Jesus comes again.

This passage is embedded in a wider section in Mark full of temple imagery. Prior to this passage, Jesus comes to Jerusalem and it simply says he went to the temple looked around and left (11:11). He has just entered Jerusalem in partial fulfilment of Ps 118:25-26 including a mention of the house of the Lord (“from the house of the Lord we bless you”). Jesus then clears the temple - my house shall be a house of prayer for all nations not a den of robbers (11:17). As the fig tree was cursed because it did not bear fruit, so will the Temple be destroyed (11:20, 21). Next day

while in the temple Jesus quotes Ps 110:1 about putting enemies under feet. Now in this chapter Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple (13:2). Accusations made against Jesus at his trial were that he would destroy the temple (14:58). Jesus is mocked at the cross by people who said “So, you who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days come down and save yourself” “He saved others but he can’t save himself. Let this Christ this King of Israel come down now from the cross that we may see and believe” (15:29-32). When Jesus died the curtain was torn (15:38) as a symbol of the temple’s destruction (cf. 1:10 where the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends). So, to some extent, the destruction of the temple is in a sense fulfilled when Christ dies and rises again (10:45; 14:24 where Jesus is the locus for forgiveness of sins).

In this chapter Jesus acts as the “revealer of the future and of the heavenly realm.”<sup>61</sup> The setting for this revelation, we are told at the beginning of the chapter (13:1–4), is the Mount of Olives opposite the temple. This place is connected in Zech 14:4 with “the day of the Lord”.

Jesus answers the question put to him by four of his disciples about when “these things” will take place. Jesus’ answer moves from the indication of the temple’s destruction to other future events and the great cosmic transformation that will accompany the coming of God’s Reign in its fullness.<sup>62</sup>

The reference to the abomination (13:14) is a reference to Daniel 9: 27; 11: 31; 12:11 where the desolation will be set up in the temple and the daily sacrifices are prohibited.

The section vv. 5-23 is a strong caution that none lead you astray, even with persecutions and other signs. The repeated word to the community is not to be misled. Many Messiah claimants did appear in Israel at this time.

### Matt 13:24-37

Our passage today begins with “in those days” (v. 24). This general phrase is often used in this style of literature in a general way. It also marks a turning from the previously described earthly events in verses 1-23 (the destruction of the temple, wars, famines etc) to the cosmic events which Jesus now describes.

The imagery of the darkening of the sun and moon, and the falling of stars is often used in apocalyptic style (see for example other apocalyptic passages in the Old Testament such as Isa 13:10, 34:4; Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15; Amos 8:9; Hag 2:6, 21. See also other Jewish apocalyptic writings: *T.Mos.* 10:5; *4 Ezra* 5:4; *1 Enoch* 80:4-7; *Sib. Or.* 3:796-797, 801-803; 5:512-531). The imagery is indicating we are entering the time of the end when the Son of Man will come in great power.

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<sup>61</sup> John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 2, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 374–383.

<sup>62</sup> John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 2, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 374–383.

Jesus now uses the imagery of Daniel 7, another famous Old Testament apocalyptic passage. Dan 7:13 describes: “I saw one like a human being [literally ‘like a son of man’] coming with the clouds of heaven.” Jesus has repeatedly described himself as the Son of Man (Mark 2:10, 28; 8:31, 38; 9:9; 9:31; 10:33, 45; 14:21, 41). The figure like a son of man in Daniel receives an eternal kingdom. Psalm 68:4 talks of God as the one “who rides upon the clouds”—a title taken over from the Canaanite storm god Baal who was known as the “cloud rider.” Jesus confirms the identity as he is tried when he says “you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power [i.e. God] and coming with the clouds of heaven” (14:62).

The Daniel passage indicates a time when the evil kingdoms are destroyed. It is a saying of comfort for the community.

Now in v. 27 Christ will send his angels to gather the elect. This is a task that *God* is reported to be doing in Isa 11:11, 16; 27:12 and Ezek 39:27. This current passage makes it clear that the elect will not miss out. The signs will be clear.

Jesus addresses the question asked by the disciples of when things will happen. Only the Father knows of that day and hour (v. 32). Secondly, the disciples are urged to watch and to be prepared.

In vv. 28 - 37 Jesus stresses the nearness of the coming. Constantly they are urged to keep awake and watch out. The movement of the whole passage is from warnings against premature claims of the return of the Messiah to warnings to be alert.

What is meant by “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away” (v. 30)? Donohue and Harrington offer the following:

The saying is linked backward to 13:29 by “these things” and forward to 13:31 by “pass away.” It receives the solemn introduction, “Amen I say to you.” The most obvious meaning of *genea* is “generation”—that is, the contemporaries of Jesus (or Mark) who would be expected to have died in the next twenty to thirty years (see 8:38–9:1). This suggests that the expectation was that “all these things” would occur fairly soon, at least by the end of what we call the first century C.E.<sup>63</sup>

The “these things” of v. 29, according to Lane,<sup>64</sup> refer to the events portrayed earlier in vv. 5 - 23 but not 24 - 25 which are associated with the coming of the Son of Man in v. 26. i.e. before the passing of a generation Jerusalem and the temple will lie in ruins.

That God should know the precise time for “these things” is understandable, since they take place according to God’s plan. But that the Son (who is placed on the same level as the angels) should not know this too strikes most Christian readers as surprising. There has been some preparation for this statement in Jesus’ admission to the sons of Zebedee that it is not within his power to decide who will sit at his right or left hand in the kingdom of God (see 10:40). These sayings are not the kind of material that early Christians would have created on their own, and so

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<sup>63</sup> John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 2, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 374–383.

<sup>64</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 479.

they may well represent the authentic voice of Jesus and provide an important perspective on the meaning of the Incarnation (see Phil 2:6–11). However, they have also provided ammunition throughout the centuries for those who question Jesus' divinity and equality with the Father in the Trinity.<sup>65</sup>

*you do not know when that time is:* Since no one knows the exact time (see 13:32), the proper response is to be on guard always, that is, to act as if the last judgment was to occur at any moment and to live so that one will be judged positively. This is a strong motive in NT ethical teaching.<sup>66</sup>

This chapter provides some clues for understanding the resurrection more deeply. The risen Jesus is the same Jesus which the entire book of Mark has been talking about. Yet he is still obscured by the events in which he works.

As with his acts of power, his identity is still mysterious and hidden. Now he is risen, his identity is still obscured by the events of the world which Mark 13 talk about.

Only with Jesus' return will all be perfectly revealed and the final mystery unveiled. Then "they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory" (13:26) and the elect will find the ultimate release. There is still opposition and rejection but in the meantime the disciples are urged to watch.

The warning of 13:36 links the farewell discourse with the passion narrative that follows. Jesus' passion takes place around the four watches of the night mentioned in 13:35, and three of them are explicitly mentioned. The events leading up to Jesus' passion and the final meal with his disciples take place in the evening (14:17). The experience of Gethsemane, the arrest, and the Jewish trial take place in the middle of the night (14:32-65). At cock crow, Peter will deny Jesus three times (14:72), and the trial before Pilate takes place in the morning (15:1). Ironically, in the light of Jesus' warning in 13:36, when at Gethsemane he will ask Peter, James and John (cf. 13:4) to watch, the master will come and find them sleeping .... Throughout the Markan story of Jesus the disciples who initially responded so well ... have failed to accept or even understand his demands. The passion of Jesus will open with further failures ...<sup>67</sup>

### **For the Preacher**

Donahue and Harrington summarise the passage as follows:

Christian teachers and preachers are often terrified by Mark 13 and other NT apocalyptic passages. This is so because the concepts and images seem very foreign and because throughout the centuries these texts have been misused by "false messiahs and false prophets" to manipulate people and even to convince

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<sup>65</sup> John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 2, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 374–383.

<sup>66</sup> John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 2, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 374–383.

<sup>67</sup> Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark*, 271.

them to perform destructive acts. Nevertheless ... Mark 13 plays an important role in Christian theology and life and should be taken seriously.

The first step toward breaking down prejudice against apocalyptic is to appreciate its literary conventions, especially its reuse of OT images and myths in the new context of the future unfolding of God's plan. The next step is to appreciate the historical circumstances in which the Jewish and Christian apocalypses were composed as the "literature of the dispossessed." The third step is to try to grasp the abiding theological significance that an apocalyptic text such as Mark 13 might have.

Mark 13 uses the conventions of apocalyptic to address Christians who have undergone suffering for the name of Jesus and can expect even more. These people constituted a tiny minority in the Roman empire and necessarily placed their hope of vindication in God. In the apocalyptic vision they found a reason for Jesus' suffering and their own ("it is necessary") as well as a promise that their suffering would soon end in glory (as they believed Jesus' suffering did). The language of Jewish apocalyptic—the kingdom of God, Messiah and Son of Man, resurrection, the last judgment—provided many of their most important theological ideas. The conviction that the world would be transformed and that they would reign with the risen Jesus in glory gave them a horizon of hope against which they could interpret their present sufferings, and the insistence on constant vigilance helped them to find significance and ethical direction in their actions in the present.<sup>68</sup>

Apocalyptic literature speaks of the link between heaven and earth. God has, does and will intervene in the course of history. Thus apocalyptic literature provides the reader with hope and comfort while they may endure darkness, persecution or even despair.

The significant point for Jesus is the disciples' watchfulness, more importantly than the calculation of when things will happen.

"The challenge of living in the in-between time as a new temple, an eschatological people taking the gospel to all nations, outlined in Jesus' farewell discourse (13:5-37), lies squarely in the hands of fragile and sinful disciples. But they have been assured: 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away' (v.31)."<sup>69</sup>

However we interpret the words of Mark 13, the season of Advent reminds us of the chapter's major point, that whatever it might feel like now, we are not abandoned. In many ways our world today feels more ordered and controlled than the ancient world, but not always. In our lives, just as the ancients did, we encounter things we cannot control – natural disasters, terrorism, illness, fear – and the message of Mark 13 is as relevant to us as it was to Mark's original readers. Disaster may come but we should not allow our panic to drive us to accept as Messiah someone who cannot save us (v. 21). In the face of things falling apart – even if this involves something as dramatic as stars falling from heaven – we should remember that Jesus' words

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<sup>68</sup> John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 2, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 374–383.

<sup>69</sup> Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark*, 272.

are sure and reliable (v. 31). No matter how bleak things get, we should remember that beyond our sight God has not forgotten us. Mark 13 ends with a reminder that we do not know when the master of the house will come (v. 35). This is certainly true, nor indeed are we very clear precisely what events Mark 13 is talking about. But what is sure is that the God who nurtured this world into existence has not abandoned us, nor ever will.<sup>70</sup>

Woodward, Gooder and Pryce remind us that Mark 13 reminds of waiting and hope. This hope is not about predicting the future, nor an unsubstantiated optimism, rather an attitude which gives meaning in our present life by conveying meaning about our future. They continue:<sup>71</sup>

The answer Mark's Gospel gives us is this. We proclaim that God is the being of all being, the life of all life, the source and fulfilment of all. By God we mean the one who transcends space and time. Our future is real in the one who is not confined within space and time, but is infinite.

Mark 13 makes an important contribution to the gospel's christology, especially with its image of the "Son of Man coming in clouds" (13:26). Throughout the gospel "Son of Man" is a prominent title for Jesus. It sometimes appears as a reference to Jesus himself or in his role as a representative human being (see 2:10, 28; 14:21, 41). It occurs in all three Passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34) and related texts (9:9, 12; 10:45). But "Son of Man" also refers to a pivotal figure in the events associated with the full coming of God's kingdom. In Mark 8:38 we are told that the Son of Man "when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" will be ashamed of those who have been ashamed of him and his teachings. Mark 13:26 places the manifestation of the glorious Son of Man as the climax in the series of events that constitute the unfolding of God's plan for creation, and in the trial scene Mark 14:62 identifies Jesus as the glorious figure of Dan 7:13. Thus Mark 13:26 is a pivotal text in a very important theme of Mark's christology.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Woodward, Gooder, Pryce, *Journeying with Mark*, 19.

<sup>71</sup> Woodward, Gooder, Pryce, *Journeying with Mark*, 24.

<sup>72</sup> John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 2, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 374–383.