

**ISRAEL REJECTS ITS
SHEPHERD MESSIAH
Matthew 11:2 - 12:50**

PART A. The Messianic kingdom offered and rejected

(11:2-24)

Jesus, the Messiah

² When John heard in prison what *the Messiah* was doing, he sent word by his disciples

³ and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'

⁴ Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see:

⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

John had promised that one more powerful than himself was coming who would baptise people with the Holy Spirit and fire (3:11-12). He has already been surprised by Jesus coming to him to be baptised (3:14). Now, from prison (see 4:12), we find that he is unsure as to whether Jesus is 'the one who is to come'. This is a title which we find in the prophetic literature (see Daniel 7:13; Zechariah 9:9; 14:5; Malachi 3:1, and Psalm 118:26). John, representing a long line of prophets, is seeking to discover whether or not Jesus is the one for whom Israel has been waiting, the one who is to fulfil the promises of God. Matthew does not explore the reasons for John's uncertainty; his attention is entirely on Jesus' reply.

Jesus invites John's disciples to observe 'what you hear and see'. Matthew has already carefully laid the ground for Jesus' reply. We have seen the blind receiving their sight (9:27-31), and the lame walking (9:2-8). We have seen lepers cleansed (8:2-4) and the deaf hearing (9:32-34). We have seen the dead being raised (9:18-26). Matthew's build up of signs reaches its climax in the most wonderful sign of all, and the sign of which all the previous signs are but examples: 'the poor have good news brought to them'.

In claiming these as Messianic signs, Matthew is alluding to prophetic oracles such as the following:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

– Isaiah 35:5-6

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed'.

– Isaiah 61:1

For Jesus, as for Isaiah, the blindness, the inability to move, the lack of purity, the inability to hear and the failure to live, go far deeper than a person's physical state. As we have seen in examining the texts in Matthew 8-9, the physical healings are, in each case, symbolic of a healing that penetrates to the depth of the human psyche and, when welcomed in faith, brings about that communion with God which is the object of Jesus' Messianic mission.

compare Luke 7:18-23

Hence the accent on the good news being brought to the poor. This is the good news that we discussed when commenting on Matthew 4:17: the good news that God is our Father, and that each of us is God's son or daughter. God loves us and delights in us.

As John had promised, Jesus is baptising with the Holy Spirit (the 'fire' will become obvious in the following passages). Those who are open to accept this good news are those poor who know their complete dependence on God, who cry out to God in their distress and who welcome God's reply in Jesus. As Jesus has already said: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'(5:3).

Matthew adds another beatitude here: 'Blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me'; that is to say, anyone who is not scandalised because of the kind of Messiah he or she finds me to be. We noted some of the Messianic expectations in the Palestine of Jesus' day when we commented on Matthew 3:7-10.

The rest of this section is devoted to recording how Jesus' contemporaries, on the whole, refused to accept him as God's Messiah, and so took offence at what they heard and saw. Matthew is directing his gospel to his own community. We must allow it to penetrate our psyche and that of our contemporaries. What kind of liberation do we expect from God? If we want something other than what we see in Jesus, we will miss the kingdom he is offering and be left unredeemed.

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” ¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence [advanced itself forcibly] and the violent take it by force [the forceful seize hold of it].

¹³ For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.

¹⁵ Let anyone with ears listen!

compare Luke 7:24-28

verse 10 compare Mark 1:2

verses 12-13 compare Luke 16:16

Jesus is offering a place in the Messianic kingdom

Matthew wants his readers to be aware of what Jesus is offering them. It is nothing less that the promised Messianic kingdom. The people flocked after John. He is the one in whom the prophecy of Malachi was fulfilled (11:10 is from Malachi 3:1). John is a prophet, yes, but ‘more than a prophet’ in that he is the prophet sent by God to herald the Messiah.

For the Israelites, belief in life after death became explicit only at the time of the Maccabean martyrs in the second century BC. The legends concerning Elijah predate that awareness by many centuries. It was thought that Elijah had been taken alive into heaven in a fiery chariot (2Kings 2:11). From this legend grew the idea that God was keeping him to send him back to herald the Messiah (Malachi 4:5). Referring to this legend, Jesus declares that, if they are willing to accept it, that is to say, if they have ears that are willing to listen, they will recognise that it is John the Baptist who is the fulfilment of their expectation.

Jesus is claiming to be the expected Messiah. The one concerning whom ‘all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came’ is Jesus himself who is now offering to anyone who wants it the fulfilment of the promises, the kingdom of heaven. It matters to belong to this kingdom.

Matthew has shown us the forceful advance of the kingdom, conquering evil in all its forms: physical, psychic, and moral, reaching even beyond the grave to give life. In Jesus’ ministry, God is breaking through all the bounds within which people attempt to define him, including the understanding of revelation taught by the scribes, taught without the authority that is evidenced in the words and the actions of Jesus (7:29).

The kingdom is advancing, and with it the power of God, but it demands a corresponding determination of those who would take hold of the redemption offered them. They will need all the courage they can muster, for they can belong to the kingdom only by repenting, by leaving whatever they must leave to follow Jesus; they will have to take up the cross, even lose their life; and they must ‘endure to the end’.

The people reject Jesus

In the previous passage, Matthew has shown what John the Baptist and Jesus were offering. Here he shows just how the offer was ignored.

Using a simple illustration Jesus compares John and himself to children inviting people to join in their games only to be ignored. John the Baptist wailed and the people did not mourn: he invited the people to fast (compare 9:14). Jesus played the flute and they refused to dance: as the bridegroom (see 9:15) he is inviting them all, sinners and outsiders included (see 9:11), to the wedding banquet. They will experience healing and forgiveness if they join his company (see 11:2-5).

Jesus refers to himself as the 'Son of Man' (see the commentary on 8:20).

On the whole Jesus' contemporaries chose to stay where they were and to ignore both John and Jesus. However, as the final remark makes clear, God's wisdom is demonstrated in the actions of John, and more especially in the actions of Jesus the Messiah (11:2-5). If they continue to reject the salvation being offered, they must know that they are rejecting God's providential design, thus choosing to stay outside God's chosen people.

Jesus is the incarnation of God's wisdom. His final remark calls to mind the following from the Book of Proverbs:

And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the Lord; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death. Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table. She has sent out her servant girls, she calls from the highest places in the town, 'You that are simple, turn in here!' To those without sense she says, 'Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.

– Proverbs 8:32 – 9:6

¹⁶ **'But to what will I compare this generation?**

It is like [It is the case with it, as with] children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

¹⁷ **"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn."**

¹⁸ **For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon";**

¹⁹ **the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"**

Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.'

compare Luke 7:31-35

²⁰ *Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent.*

²¹ **'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!**

For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

²² **But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you.**

²³ **And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades.**

For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.

²⁴ **But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.'**

God's judgment on their rejection of their Messiah

This is not a final and all-inclusive condemnation of the inhabitants of these three towns of Galilee. As the following passage makes clear, Jesus' offer is still open for acceptance. It is, however, a warning and a rebuke, and the mood indicates an expectation that, on the whole, most will continue to reject him.

Tyre and Sidon are castigated by the prophets because of the injustice upon which their power was based (see Isaiah 23:1-18; Ezekiel 26:1 - 28:24; Joel 3:4-8; Amos 1:9-10). It will be worse for Chorazin and Bethsaida.

The worst rebuke is kept for Capernaum. This is where Jesus 'made his home' (4:13). Matthew can write that Jesus 'came to his own town' (9:1), knowing that his readers will understand Capernaum. Capernaum has seen more of Jesus, and so more of God's merciful design, than any other town. The people of Capernaum have been invited to be 'exalted to heaven'. Their failure to believe means that they will, on the contrary, be 'brought down to Hades' (compare the oracle against Babylon, Isaiah 14:13-15).

Sodom, long buried beneath the Dead Sea, was a symbol of the most wicked of Gentile cities (Genesis 13:13; 18:20; Isaiah 3:9; Jeremiah 23:14; Revelation 11:8). According to tradition, it was destroyed because it rejected the word of God. It would be still standing if it had witnessed what Capernaum has seen and heard. Note that Jesus returns to Capernaum (13:54; 17:24).

What will be the destruction that comes to those who reject the word that is the fulfilment of all God's words, the definitive call to salvation! Matthew observes that the key problem was that they failed to repent. They failed to open their minds to the revelation of God which Jesus was offering them.

compare Luke 10:12-15

Ezekiel 28:12-19

Raise a lamentation over the king of Tyre, and say to him, Thus says the Lord God: You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering ... With an anointed cherub as guardian I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; you walked among the stones of fire. You were blameless in your ways from the day that you were created, until iniquity was found in you. In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and the guardian cherub drove you out from among the stones of fire. Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendour. I cast you to the ground; I exposed you before kings, to feast their eyes on you. By the multitude of your iniquities, in the unrighteousness of your trade, you profaned your sanctuaries. So I brought out fire from within you; it consumed you, and I turned you to ashes on the earth in the sight of all who saw you. All who know you among the peoples are appalled at you; you have come to a dreadful end and shall be no more forever.

Isaiah 14:13-15

You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon; I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High'. But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit.

PART B. God's beloved Son continues to offer the merciful salvation of God (11:25 - 12:21)

God is revealed in Jesus the Son

25 At that time Jesus said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants;

26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

28 Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

The shift from the previous passage to this one is abrupt. Matthew could hardly have made the contrast more stark. Jesus' contemporaries may continue to reject him but he will not stop revealing God's merciful offer of salvation.

In presenting Jesus' prayer, Matthew invites us to contemplate the heart of the rejected Messiah. Jesus addresses God in traditional fashion as 'Lord of heaven and earth'. But first he calls God 'Father', expressing the special intimacy he experienced as God's Son.

Those who think of themselves as 'wise and intelligent' have rejected him; not so those who know that they are as infants before the revelation of God. The idea is traditional:

The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to infants.

– Psalm 119:130.

These are the 'poor in spirit' addressed in the beatitudes (5:3). God's 'gracious will', God's 'wisdom', God's saving design as revealed by Jesus, has been welcomed by them. They have cried to God in their distress and rejoiced in the response which they have found in Jesus' words and actions.

Having thanked his Father, Jesus goes on to speak of the intimacy of the communion which he has with him. Matthew is portraying Jesus as the one who brings to perfection the revelatory mission of Moses:

Moses said to the Lord, 'See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight.' Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.' He said, 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'

– Exodus 33:12-14

Concerning his special intimacy with Moses God declares:

With him I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord.

– Numbers 12:8; see also Deuteronomy 34:10

Jesus' communion with God goes beyond even that of Moses, for in this especially does Jesus fulfil the law and the prophets (5:17). In promising his disciples rest for their souls, Jesus is promising them a share in his communion with God (see 1Corinthians 13:12; see also Hebrews 4:3). Israel is rejecting its Messianic shepherd, but Jesus continues to invite whoever wills to come to him. We are reminded of the plea of God expressed by Isaiah:

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people.

– Isaiah 65:1-2

We are reminded also of the advice given by Jeremiah:

Thus says the Lord: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, 'We will not walk in it'.

– Jeremiah 6:16

In spite of the rejection recorded in the previous passages, Jesus' offering always remains open, to be received by any who are willing to be humble, like a child (18:4). Indeed, the people are 'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (9:36). His compassionate heart goes out to them. He wants to 'eat and drink' with them; he wants to be 'a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (11:19).

The yoke of the law, laid on their weary shoulders by their religious leaders, is heavy and does not bring them the rest promised by God. The yoke of Jesus, on the contrary, is 'easy'. The yoke is *chrēstos* ('easy') because it comes from one who is noble, generous and large-hearted, hospitable, kind and gentle. This is the feeling carried by the Greek *chrēstos* (compare Galatians 5:22 and 1Corinthians 13:4).

Jesus invites us to 'learn from' him to be his disciples. He is 'gentle and humble in heart'. We must not miss the dramatic juxtaposition of ideas. The one speaking is the Messiah, the one who is fulfilling the law and the prophets and revealing God. He does so, according to Matthew, precisely because he accepts with joy and from the heart his lowly position of total submission to God, his Father. He is 'poor in spirit' (5:3). He is the meek (5:5) and long-suffering Messiah. We have already seen that the yoke of discipleship may ask of us our life (10:39), and will face us with the kind of rejection and persecution suffered by our master (10:25). But it will be a light yoke because he will be by our side, bearing it with us. It will also bring us to the rest for which we long.

¹ At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath; his disciples *were hungry*, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.

² When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, ‘Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.’

³ He said to them, ‘Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?’

⁴ He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests.

⁵ *Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and yet are guiltless?*

⁶ *I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.*

⁷ *But if you had known what this means, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice,” you would not have condemned the guiltless.*

⁸ For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.’

compare Mark 2:23-28
Luke 6:1-5

The yoke of mercy

Once again the Pharisees are seen opposing Jesus (see 9:11,34). This time, however, the focus is on Jesus and his mercy. In this deceptively simple scene, Matthew illustrates one of the key insights of the early Christian communities into the relationship between Christianity and Judaism.

The prohibition against agricultural labour on the seventh day of the week) goes back to the earliest years of Israel’s presence in Canaan (Exodus 34:21). In later writings it is evident that the prohibition has been extended to all kinds of nonessential activity (see, for example, Jeremiah 17:19-27 and Nehemiah 13:15-22). It was during and after the exile that Jewish self-identity assumed a special importance now that Judah was part – and a small part – of the huge Persian empire. The people were forced to ask themselves what it was that set them apart from the peoples around them. They sought to identify what it was that made them special to God and how they were to express this special identity.

Of particular significance was the covenant which God had made with them, and among the many ways in which they responded to this covenant three stood out as important identifying traits: the practice of circumcision, certain food laws and the institution of the Sabbath. It was particularly this last that took on more and more importance in the self-identity of the Jew. Special Sabbath temple sacrifices were instituted, and, more importantly, this was the day when the people assembled for prayer in the synagogues. The Sabbath was a day consecrated to God, and its observance was symbolic of the commitment of the people to keep their part of the covenant.

You shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. ... Whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. ... Therefore the Israelites shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant.

– Exodus 31:13,16; see also Ezekiel 20:12

This consecration to the Lord was to be a source of delight:

If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord.

– Isaiah 58:13-14

By Jesus' time a host of specific prohibitions had been built up to ensure against causing offence to God on this specially dedicated day. Though the action of Jesus' disciples in the scene before us was allowed on ordinary days (Deuteronomy 23:25), the Pharisees obviously considered it unlawful on the Sabbath. Jesus' reply to the accusation of the Pharisees highlights the difference between the yoke of law as laid down by them and his yoke of mercy (11:29). Matthew mentions that the disciples were hungry, thus linking their situation closely with the story of David. Their need is the basis for Jesus' merciful interpretation of the law.

Jesus reminds them of the time when David bypassed a regulation of the Law to satisfy the hunger of his troops (1 Samuel 21:1-6). The 'bread of the Presence' mentioned in the text refers to the twelve fresh loaves placed on a table in the tabernacle each Sabbath, and afterwards consumed by the priests (Leviticus 24:5-9; Exodus 25:30; 40:23). Jesus also reminds the Pharisees that temple duties exempt the priests from the Sabbath laws (see Numbers 28:9-10). Since he is 'greater than the temple', he has even more authority to exempt his disciples from the law when divine compassion requires it. Matthew used Hosea 6:6 to justify Jesus' eating with sinners, by appealing to a higher obedience owed to God's command of mercy (see 9:13). He makes the same appeal here.

Jesus' final remark, 'The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath' is a Messianic claim with a difference. If David, the Lord's anointed, could dispense from certain injunctions of the law, Jesus claims the right to interpret and reveal the essential meaning of even its central and most sacred demands. This is not the last time that Luke will draw attention to this truth (see 13:10-17; 14:1-6).

In speaking of himself as the 'Son of Man', Jesus is claiming this right also for his disciples. The title, as we saw when commenting on 8:20, focuses on Jesus' identification with the oppressed, and of God's judgment in which they are vindicated. An essential dimension of Jesus' redeeming action is to liberate the oppressed from the oppressive interpretations of the Law with which they have been burdened by their religious leaders. The Sabbath is a sign of consecration to God and is to be lived joyfully in the light of the good news.

An examination of the importance of the Sabbath in first century Judaism indicates that when Jesus, speaking of himself as the Son of Man, says that he is 'lord of the Sabbath' he is claiming a unique relationship to the whole of divine revelation as expressed in the law of Israel. This is one of Matthew's key themes. It is important at this point to attempt to express this relationship carefully.

Jesus and the Law

It is important from the outset to state that the word 'law' does not satisfactorily convey the meaning intended by the Hebrew word *Torah*. The Concise Oxford Dictionary gives as its first definition of law: 'a body of enacted or customary rules recognised by a community as binding'. This is a fairly adequate definition of the Greek word *nomos* which the English 'law' translates. However behind the Greek *nomos* stands the Hebrew *Torah*, which is perhaps better translated as 'instruction', or 'way'. It includes what we intend by 'law', but has a broader as well as a more precise application.

We find *Torah* being used for the way God reveals his will via a specific oracle issued by a priest or a prophet. From this it came to stand for the totality of the way God has revealed himself and his will through the history of his dealings with the people of Israel. In this sense *Torah* ('law') is synonymous with the whole of Israelite tradition, written (the Scriptures), and oral. In this sense 'law' can be the equivalent of 'the religion of Israel'.

When the Scriptures were given a more definite form in the period after the exile, the *Torah* came also to be used in a more restricted sense for the first five books of the Jewish canon: the Book of Genesis and the Books concerned with Moses (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). An example of this usage is found in the Prologue to the Book of Sirach:

Many great teaching have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the other writings that followed them.

On the eight occasions where Matthew refers to the law, he is referring to these five central books of the Hebrew Scriptures. He speaks four times simply of the 'law' (5:18; 12:5; 22:36; 23:23), and four times of 'the law and the prophets' (5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40). For the rest of this discussion we use the word 'law' in its widest application as 'the revelation from God found in the writings and traditions of Israel'. This is the meaning it generally has in the New Testament, and this revelation is found especially in the five books which express the essential constitution of Israel.

Living according to the law as an experience of salvation

It is clear from the whole of the New Testament that the law (*Torah*) was treasured as a genuine revelation of God and that living according to the law was a genuine experience of salvation. This remained the understanding of the Christian community when the Church saw itself as distinct from the Jewish synagogue and was increasingly Gentile. This is clear from the theological writings of Irenaeus. In his famous work *Against Heresies: a refutation and subversion of knowledge falsely so called* (180AD), he writes:

God formed mankind ... but chose the patriarchs for the sake of mankind's salvation, and prepared a people ... and raised up prophets upon earth, accustoming people to bear his Spirit and to hold communion with God.

– AH IV,14,2

The Bible records the religious experience of a people, many of whom in living their religion came to close communion with God. One has only to pray the psalms to realise this truth. Using a remarkably evocative image, which applies not only to Judaism (the 'law') but to all that is genuine in every human religion, Irenaeus continues:

God put the human race together in many ways to effect a symphony of salvation.

– AH IV,14,2

For Irenaeus, and for Christians generally, Christianity is not just one among many religions, including Judaism. We find expressions of the Word of God in every human expression of truth. We find the life-giving activity of the Spirit of God in every genuine religious experience. In Christianity, however, we have the Word of God himself made flesh who with the Spirit is one God with the Father. The Word of God, however, who is incarnate in Jesus, is the same Word whom we find expressed in the sacred Scriptures of Judaism (the 'law'), and, indeed, in every religious culture, however incompletely:

The person who is truly spiritual, knowing always the same God, and always acknowledging the same Word of God (although he has but now been manifested to us), and acknowledging also at all times the same Spirit of God (although he has been poured out upon us after a new fashion in these last times) will know that he (the Son of God) descends even from the creation of the world to its end upon the human race, from whom those who believe God and follow his word receive that salvation which flows from him.

– AH IV,33.15

The Second Vatican Council in its dogmatic constitution on divine revelation ('*Dei Verbum*', 1965) reminds us:

Through Moses, with the race of Israel, God acquired a people for himself, and to them he revealed himself in words and deeds as the one, true, living God, so that Israel might experience the ways of God with people.

– DV n.14

Though the Word of God had not yet become flesh, he was still speaking to Israel (and, of course, to all peoples in different ways - though this is not part of our discussion here) revealing God and drawing the people into divine communion.

Jesus and the Law

Again and again Matthew speaks of Jesus fulfilling what has been written in the sacred Scriptures. From Jesus' opening words, it is clear that Matthew intends to portray Jesus as wanting to 'fulfill all righteousness' (3:15). In the wilderness, he remains obedient to God's will (4:1-10). He has come to fulfill the law and he demands obedience to God's revealed will from his disciples (5:17-19; 7:21; 12:50). Matthew would agree with Paul that the law is a 'gift' from God (Romans 9:4); that it is 'holy' (Romans 7:12) and 'good' (Romans 7:12) and 'beautiful' (Romans 7:16), and that it reveals God's fidelity to his covenant of love (what Paul calls his 'justice', Romans 1:32; 2:26; 7:12). It is God's Spirit who breathes through the law (Romans 7:14). Besides revealing God, it directs us how respond to God, and therefore helps us to recognise our sinfulness (Romans 3:20; 7:7; Galatians 3:19).

Jesus and the Law

Matthew presents Jesus as the goal of God's revelation found in the law. It is he who brings it to perfection. He demands the same perfection from his disciples who are to obey God's will from the heart with a 'righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees' (5:20; see 5:21 - 6:18). They can learn to do this only from the Son:

All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

– Matthew 11:27-30

Jesus as the fulfilment of the law (and the prophets) is expressed dramatically in what is commonly called the Transfiguration:

There appeared to the disciples Moses [symbolic of the law] and Elijah [symbolic of the prophets] talking with Jesus ... Then from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' ... When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

– Matthew 17:3,5,8

To obey God's will expressed in the law we must listen to Jesus and share in Jesus' faith, hope and love (Galatians 2:15-21; Romans 3:31; 10:4). It is because Christ lives in his followers that they are able to carry out the just requirements of the law (Galatians 3:2,5; Romans 8:4). It is the love of Christ experienced in the Christian community which is the fulfilment of the law (Galatians 5:14; 6:2; Romans 13:10). Jesus' relationship to the law is summed up in the opening words of the Letter to the Hebrews:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.

– Hebrews 1:1-2

This same point is made by Irenaeus:

The patriarchs and prophets sowed the word concerning Christ, but the Church reaped, that is, received the fruit ... both the sower and the reaper may rejoice together in the kingdom of Christ, who is present with all those who were from the beginning approved by God who granted them his Word to be present with them.

– *Against the Heretics*, IV,25,3

Likewise by the Second Vatican Council

The most intimate truth which revelation gives us about God and human salvation shines forth in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of revelation.

– DV, n.2

God taught them to look for the promised saviour. And so, throughout the ages, he prepared the way for the Gospel.

– DV, n.3

Jesus Christ completed and perfected revelation.

– DV, n.4

Removing the limitations of the law

In the scene on which we are commenting it is clear that Jesus' interpretation of the law is in conflict with that of at least a significant number of the religious leaders of his day. Jesus had his own way of getting to what we might call the heart of the law. This gave him a perspective that his followers found liberating and life-giving.

However, there is more to it than this. What we have in the Jewish Scriptures (the 'law') is not the divine Word himself, not the divine Word-who-speaks, but the divine Word-as-heard. God inspires real human beings to express their experiences of his presence and his will, and so we must expect them to respond to God within their human limitations, historical and cultural, as well as personal. The fact that the words of these real human beings continue to be taken up by the community and treasured as inspired assures us that in heeding the inspired words we are, indeed, listening to God - but not in some ethereal or abstract way. We are listening to God as God was heard by limited human beings who, in turn, could give expression to their communion with God in ways that are necessarily limited and that must be subject, therefore, to careful interpretation.

This point is stressed in a document issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993). A few passages should suffice:

Scripture reveals the meaning of the events which bring it to fulfilment and that events reveal the meaning of Scripture, that is, they require that *certain aspects of the received interpretation be set aside and a new interpretation adopted.*

– pages 91-92

In other words all understandings found in the law concerning God, God's ways with the human race, and our response to God must be looked at anew in the light of the events that fulfil the law – that is to say, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The exegete need not put absolute value in something which simply reflects limited human understanding.

– page 94

The Word of God finds expression in the work of human authors. The thought and the words belong at one and the same time both to God and to human beings, in such a way that the whole Bible comes at once from God and from the inspired human author. This does not mean, however, that God has given the historical conditioning of the message a value which is absolute.

– page 113

Addressing men and women, from the beginnings of the Old Testament onward, God made use of all the possibilities of human language, while at the same time accepting that his word be subject to the constraints caused by the limitations of this language.

– pages 132-133

If the reader wishes to find a few easy and obvious examples of the limited understandings found in the Old Testament but corrected in the New, he or she could consult Psalm 54, noting that verse five ('He will repay my enemies for their evil. In your faithfulness, put an end to them') is omitted when the psalm occurs in the Christian liturgy (see 25th Sunday, Year B). The reasons should be obvious.

Likewise compare the advice given in Sirach 12:1-7 ('Don't help sinners ... for the Most High hates sinners') with the parable of the Good Samaritan, or read the injunction of Deuteronomy 23:1 excluding eunuchs from the assembly (already 'corrected' in Isaiah 56:4-5) in the light of Matthew 19:2. Examples could be multiplied. Statements about the inherent limitation of human language and insight need to be made about any inspired literature, including, of course, the New Testament. Jesus himself, as human, also lived within the limitations of the human. The big difference – a difference that is at the heart of the faith of Christians – is that, within the limitations of the human, Jesus is the perfect human revelation of God. He is not simply a limited human being responding as best he can to the overwhelming experience of the Word of God and giving expression to his religious experience in words. He is the very Word of God himself living within the limitations of the human, but, within those limitations, giving expression in word, deed, attitude, feeling, decisions and relationships, to the perfect human communion with God which he experienced, having God's Spirit without reserve.

The law, however good, was imperfect, incomplete. It had to give way before the revelation of the Word-made-flesh. Matthew, like Paul, held that the limitations and imperfections of the law had to be let go when they failed to express the revelation of God and of God's will given by him who is 'the lord of the sabbath' (12:8).

You have died to the law through the Body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God ...

We are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

– Romans 7:4,6

This does not mean that the law has lost its value. It does mean that it now has to be treasured as seen through the eyes of Jesus and as understood with his mind. The law indicates the way to communion with God, but now it has come to its goal, now we have experienced its flower, now we can read it in its proper perspective and discern more accurately what is of God and where limited human perception was unable to receive God's Word without distortion.

As disciples of Jesus all are free from the necessity to observe all the detailed prescriptions of the law. Many of the laws will express lasting human values, values embraced by Jesus himself. A Jew, becoming a Christian, will find much in his religious tradition that is of lasting value. A Gentile, becoming a Christian, will be enriched by coming to know and follow the divine guidance found in the law. However, the early Christian community recognised that it was not necessary to become a Jew in order to become a Christian, for the basis of a person's communion with God was not conformity to the law but communion with Jesus. For Paul, as no doubt for many Jews who became disciples of Jesus, this was experienced as a deliberate and painful shift, likened to a death:

By works of the law shall no one be justified ... For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live *in the faith of* the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose.

– Galatians 2:16,19-21

If you are led by the Spirit you are not under the Law.

– Galatians 5:18; see also Philippians 3:7-11

Their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains, unlifted, because only through Christ is it *being annulled*. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their *hearts*; but when a *person* turns to the Lord the veil is removed.

– 2Corinthians 3:14-16

In Matthew's Gospel we have already seen Jesus setting aside injunctions accepted as law by his contemporaries. Jesus touches lepers (8:3), eats with sinners (9:11). In the scene upon which we are commenting, he does not follow the Sabbath regulations expected by the religious authorities of his day. Jesus' followers did not follow the cultic food laws (Acts 10-11), nor did they accept the necessity of circumcision as a requirement of belonging to God's people (Acts 15). Following Jesus' teaching they did not accept the barrier between Jews (judged to be 'holy') and Gentiles (judged to be 'unclean').

It is still obvious today that people find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to let go practices which have been part of their religious identity. Many of Jesus' contemporaries, especially those responsible for preserving the tradition, were no exception. Jesus was crucified because he was seen as a threat to the temple and to all that the temple stood for (26:61; see Deuteronomy 13:1-5). Jesus' followers were to meet a similar fate (Acts 6:13; see Acts 7; re Paul, see Acts 21:28).

The other side to this is that many recognised in Jesus the fulfilment of their religious aspirations, and the flowering of the law. They found in his love the power to be liberated from sin – something they were unable to do within the confines of the law.

9 He left that place and entered *their* synagogue;

10 a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, ‘Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?’ so that they might accuse him.

11 He said to them, ‘Suppose one of you has *only one sheep* and it falls into a *pit* on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out?

12 *How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.*

13 Then he said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other.

14 But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

compare Mark 3:1-6

Luke 6:6-11

verse 11 compare Luke 14:5

The yoke of mercy (12:9-14)

Still on the Sabbath, Jesus enters ‘*their* synagogue’ (12:9). This expression occurs frequently in Matthew (4:23; 9:35; 10:19; 13:54; 23:34) and is possibly another indication of the tension that existed between the Jews and Matthew’s community who were no longer welcome in the Jewish synagogue.

Jesus speaks of a poor man who has only one sheep which falls into a pit on the Sabbath. He knows his audience. Of course they would save the sheep. Of course, argues Jesus, you can heal on the Sabbath, for a human being is more valuable to God than a sheep (compare 6:26). In this section, Matthew is accenting God’s compassion (see 9:36) and focusing on Jesus as Israel’s true shepherd.

The difference between the yoke offered by Jesus and that offered by the Pharisees, is that the latter have ‘neglected mercy’ (23:23). It is in Jesus uncompromising stand on mercy that he fulfils the law and the prophets (5:17), for, in witnessing to God’s mercy and to God’s ‘gracious will’ (11:26), Jesus brings the law to its goal which is to unite people with their God.

The scene, like an earlier one (9:34) closes on a tragic note. It is the Pharisees who go ‘out’, not Jesus or his disciples, and they ‘conspired against him, how to destroy him’.

Jesus the servant of the Lord sent to the whole world

Jesus chooses not to confront those who are seeking to destroy him, but rather to continue his ministry of mercy. He is also portrayed by Matthew as not wanting to draw attention to himself (see commentary on 8:4; also 9:30).

We are watching a Messiah who is ‘humble of heart’ (11:29). To reinforce this truth and to demonstrate that in being so Jesus is the fulfilment of the Messianic expectations of the sacred Scriptures, Matthew quotes the first song of the servant of the Lord (Isaiah 42:1-4).

As is customary in the New Testament the text is not quoted strictly word for word. Matthew’s interest is in Jesus. He is convinced that the deepest meaning of the text — that intended by God — can be found only by contemplating Jesus. He therefore adapts the text slightly, the better to bring out its inner meaning.

The opening words remind us of the words spoken by God at Jesus’ baptism (3:17; see also 17:5). In his mission of mercy, Jesus is proclaiming God’s just verdict concerning mankind not just to the Jews, who for the most part are rejecting him, but to all the nations. And what is God’s just verdict? It is the central message of the gospel: that God wants each person to be His son-daughter, chosen, and beloved, in whom He is well pleased.

For this reason, Jesus will not be put off by opposition or hostility. He has already said ‘Do not resist an evildoer’ (5:39), and ‘love your enemies’ (5:44). Here we see him doing this. Developing the thought of Isaiah, Matthew portrays Jesus as one who does not take action against those who do him wrong. He does not cry out in self-defence or complain against the injustice. His focus is on treating people with the gentleness of God’s compassionate love, trusting that God will ultimately achieve victory for the truth through him.

Stressing yet again the universal scope of Jesus’ mission, Matthew’s quotation from Isaiah concludes with the words: ‘In his name the nations (not excluding Israel) will hope’.

¹⁵ *When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them,*

¹⁶ *and he ordered them not to make him known.*

¹⁷ *This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah:*

¹⁸ *‘Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice [God’s verdict] to the Gentiles .*

¹⁹ *He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.*

²⁰ *He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick until he brings justice [God’s verdict] to victory. ²¹ And in his name the Gentiles will hope.*

verses 15-16 compare Mark 3:7,10,12.

22 Then they brought to him a demoniac who was *blind and mute*; and he cured him, so that the one who had been mute could speak and see. ²³ All the crowds were amazed and said, 'Can this be the Son of David?'

24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, 'It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons.' ²⁵ He knew what they were thinking and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no *city* or house divided against itself will stand. ²⁶ If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand? ²⁷ If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. ²⁸ But if it is by the *Spirit* of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.

29 Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his property, without first tying up the strong man? Then indeed the house can be plundered.

30 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

compare Mark 3:22-27, Luke 11:14-23
verses 22-24 compare
Matthew 9:32-34

PART C. Condemnation of those who reject the Messiah (12:22-45)

Jesus exposes the evil of the religious leaders

After speaking of the Servant of the Lord, Isaiah goes on to portray God as complaining that the people 'see many things but do not observe them; have ears that are open but do not hear' (Isaiah 42:20); 'they have become a prey with no one to rescue' (Isaiah 42:22). In the scene before us, Jesus is responding to God's plea and as the obedient Servant of the Lord (12:18-21) he is rescuing God's people, bringing sight and hearing to those who cannot see or hear.

However, as in an earlier and similar scene (9:32-33), this act of compassion leads to rejection. Jesus shows up the stupidity of the accusation brought against him by the Pharisees with his illustration concerning a kingdom divided against itself, and challenges them to see in his ministry the action of the 'Spirit of God', an action that demonstrates that 'the kingdom of God has come to you'.

He uses a second illustration, pointing out the need to bind a strong man before being able to plunder his property. In his ministry 'the kingdom of heaven is advancing forcibly' (11:12), and the kingdom of Satan is being plundered. Jesus is God's Messiah gathering whoever responds in faith to the merciful love that invites repentance and promises 'rest for your souls' (11:29). He is fulfilling the promise declared by Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

– Isaiah 56:8

In refusing to accept Jesus, the people of Israel and their leaders are opposing God's action. It is they who are acting in an evil way, not Jesus. They are scattering not gathering the sheep. Jesus reminds them that God is willing to forgive every sin, even words spoken against God and against the Son of Man.

However, sin can be forgiven only when sinners recognise their sin and look to God for the forgiveness they need. To witness God's redeeming action in the world, exemplified in the healing of the blind and mute man (12:22), and to call it the action of Satan is to make forgiveness impossible by rejecting the very means by which alone it is achieved.

If we are dying of thirst and there is a pure spring close by but we refuse to drink, we will surely die. Likewise with those who reject God's Spirit and turn their back on their only source of forgiveness. They will find that there is no escape from their sin 'either in this age or in the age to come'.

Jesus has spoken already about the fact that sin has consequences and that the evil effects of sin must be burnt away with 'fire' (3:10-12; 5:22; 7:19). He has dramatised this truth using the symbol of 'hell' (5:22,29,30; 10:28). Now, for the first and only time, he speaks about the 'age to come', the equivalent of the word 'eternal' which will occur later in the gospel (18:8; 19:16,29; 25:41,46). The evil effects of our actions are not limited to the sphere of life with which we are familiar, but affect our condition beyond death as well.

They have accused him of acting as a son of Satan. Now he faces them with what it is they are doing. They are, as John the Baptist has already said, a 'brood of vipers' (see 3:7 and 23:33), for it is their words, not those of Jesus, that come from the evil one, the 'viper' (see Genesis 3:1; 2Corinthians 11:3; Revelation 12:9, 20:2).

We will have to answer for every 'careless' word we utter. This could mean every word that is 'wasted', in the sense of not producing fruit, or it could mean every word no matter how 'insignificant'. Either way, Jesus' warning is clear: watch your words for they have effects for which you will be called to judgment.

Sin against the Holy Spirit, the sin that seals itself off from the source of forgiveness, is far more common than we might think. Whenever we deliberately call good evil, we sin against the Holy Spirit, and so long as we persist in such wrong judgment, our sin remains.

³¹ Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³²

Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

³³ 'Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit.

³⁴ *You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.* ³⁵ *The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure.*

³⁶ *I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; ³⁷for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*

verses 31-32 compare

Mark 3:28-30

verse 32 compare Luke 12:10

verse 33 compare Matthew 7:17,20
Luke 6:43-44

verses 34-35 compare Luke 6:45

Sin against the Holy Spirit

This makes it all the more important to listen to Jesus when he warns us not to assume the high moral ground and pass judgment on others (7:1). We do not have the wisdom to judge well, and may easily confuse good and evil.

How often God is gracing us through others, as God was gracing the people and their leaders through Jesus, but we are so blinded by our prejudices that we fail to recognise the Holy Spirit coming to us through them and so fail to be open to the forgiveness being offered us. How often, unwittingly, we oppose good by too readily judging it to be evil because it fails to fit in with our preconceived expectations. We need to be discerning, but let us pray for humility, and for the openness of a child before the wonder of God's action in our lives and before the unexpected ways in which God chooses to come to us.

The Gentiles condemn the people for their failure to repent

In the face of Jesus' clear warning (12:30-37), the scribes and Pharisees remain obstinate, refusing to see the action of God's Spirit in what Jesus is doing, and demanding that he play their game and produce a sign that they will find convincing. They want God to fit into their expectations. Jesus moves from warning to threat, and addresses his threat not just to the leaders but to the people who follow them.

It is surely with profound sadness that Jesus speaks of his contemporaries as 'an evil and adulterous generation' (see also 16:4). Adultery is to be understood metaphorically, as infidelity to the covenant with God (see Jeremiah 3:8; Ezekiel 16:32; Revelation 2:22). The leaders have rejected Jesus, as have the ordinary people. They are persistent in being unfaithful to their covenant with the Lord (compare Deuteronomy 1:35; 32:5,20; Psalm 78:8).

They will be given a sign: Jesus death and burial. This is what they are determined upon (12:14) and it will be what they achieve. But it will not be a sign of the grace God is offering them — their obstinacy will make it too late for that. Rather, it will be a sign to them of the gravity of their sin in rejecting and then murdering God's Messianic prophet.

The expression 'three days and three nights' is a quotation from Jonah 1:17. Jonah issued forth from the sea monster, and so there is a hint here of Jesus' rising from the grave. Notice also that the people of Niniveh will 'rise up', as will the queen of the South.

At this stage it is no more than a hint. It is enough for the moment that the people of Jesus' 'generation' realise that their refusal to listen to Jesus and their hostility to him is going to lead to the loss of their Messiah. Since judgment is central to this section, the Messiah is called the 'Son of Man' (see the commentary on 8:20).

38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, 'Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.'

39 But he answered them, 'An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.'

40 For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.'

41 The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!

42 The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!

compare Luke 11:16,29-32
verses 38-39 compare
Matthew 16:1,4
Mark 8:11-12

43 When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but it finds none.

44 Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' When it comes, it finds it *empty, swept, and put in order.*

45 Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first. *So will it be also with this evil generation.*

compare Luke 11:24-26

Matthew does not want to leave them with any excuse. In comparing them unfavourably with the Gentile city, Nineveh (Jonah 3:6-9) and with the Gentile queen of the South (1Kings 10:1-13) he emphasises their failure to listen to Jesus' words and repent.

Many of those listening to Jesus had been affected by his ministry. The power of evil that had been controlling them had been cast out so that they could be said to be like a house that is 'empty, swept, and put in order'. But they were not open to fill their hearts with the Spirit of Jesus. Nothing filled the vacuum left by Jesus when he healed them of the evil possessing them. Here Jesus warns them that if they persist in refusing to make room in their hearts and in their lives for him and for the Spirit of God that fills him, they will find that evil will once again corrupt them and they will be even worse off than they were before his healing.

It is not enough to try to avoid evil. What is more, we cannot fight evil on our own. If we are ever going to learn to love, we must learn to understand our hearts, to accept our limitations and humbly look to God, the source of all good, to draw us into his love. Only the Spirit of God can so fill our minds and hearts and lives that there is no room for evil.

Previous attempts to achieve victory over the forces which oppose God have proved inconclusive. Now Jesus is bringing about God's reign. He is challenging Israel's idolatrous nationalism.

PART D. The true community of the Messiah

This is the first time Jesus' mother has been mentioned since the infancy narrative (2:21). She will be mentioned only once more, in the scene at Nazareth (13:55). There is some uncertainty as to the exact relationship between Jesus and those called here his 'brothers'. If Mary had other male children, or if Joseph had male children by a previous marriage, these would be called 'brothers' of Jesus. In the Aramaic extended family, however, the term 'brother' in Aramaic usage referred also to what we would call cousins.

Later in the gospel, Matthew will identify some of the brothers as 'James and Joseph and Simon and Judas' (13:55). Later still, he includes among the women watching the crucifixion 'the mother of James and Joseph' (27:56). In this last text, he cannot be referring to Jesus' mother or he would surely have identified her as such. So we should conclude that the 'brothers' mentioned in 13:55 are not Jesus' blood brothers. It could well be the case here also. This fits with the ancient tradition that Jesus was Mary's only child.

The second major section of Matthew's gospel ends with this sharp contrast. Jesus' contemporaries for the most part followed their religious leaders in rejecting him. Israel rejected the gentle and humble shepherd who was God's Messiah and the instrument of grace. It is Jesus who fulfilled God's promises and offered the rest and the peace promised by the prophets.

But there were those who did choose to belong to Jesus: his disciples, who followed him in doing the will of his 'Father in heaven'. This obedience is the 'righteousness' of which Jesus spoke in his first words in Matthew's gospel (3:15). This is what Jesus does as God's true 'Son' (4:4). It was for this that the disciples were to pray (6:10), and it is a necessary requirement for anyone who would 'enter the kingdom of heaven' (7:21).

Looking back over the tragic history of Jesus' ministry, Matthew and his community had to try to come to terms with the fact that most of their contemporaries did not accept Jesus or his revelation. However — and it is on this note that this section ends — the offer is still there for anyone who is willing to do God's will. The Christian community is Jesus' family and its heart, like the heart of Jesus, is always open to welcome anyone who would want to belong.

46 *While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him.*

47 **Someone told him, 'Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.'**

48 **But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?'**

49 **And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!'**

50 **For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'**

compare
Mark 3:31-35
Luke 8:19-21