

**JESUS FORMS A COVENANT COMMUNITY  
OF THOSE COMING TO UNDERSTAND  
AND LEARNING TO BELIEVE**

**Matthew 13:53 - 17:27**

### **Introductory Comment**

The main focus of this section is on Jesus and on how he is gradually revealed to his disciples. He is 'the carpenter's son'(13:55), who nourishes God's people in the desert (14:13-21; 15:32-39; 16:8-10). He is The Lord, walking on the waters (14:27), the 'Son of God' who saves (14:33). He is the 'Son of David'(15:22), the 'Messiah, the Son of the living God'(16:16). He is the 'Son of Man'(16:27), suffering now with those who suffer (16:21; 17:12,22), but he will be vindicated by God (16:21; 17:22) and he will take to himself all who have listened to him and lived as he lived (16:27). He is the beloved Son of God, with whom God is well pleased. The disciples must listen to him (17:5).

The disciples will be introduced to a number of 'the secrets of the kingdom of heaven'(13:12) in this section, but none more important than that the 'God of Israel'(15:31) is in Jesus reconciling the world to Himself, revealing the good news about His everlasting love, and healing us of all that inhibits our communion with Him.

Throughout this section, Jesus is gathering around him a community of those who are learning to trust in God and to believe in what God reveals of Himself in Jesus. He is laying the foundations for his 'church'(16:17).

### Lack of faith in Jesus' hometown

Here, in this first scene following the parables, we come to Jesus' home town, and find that even there, Jesus is met with disbelief. They have known him all his life. They think they know him well, because they know his family. Concerning Jesus' brothers and sisters, confer the commentary on 12:46-50, where Jesus has already declared that his family are those who 'do the will of my Father' (12:50). The people of Nazareth are so confident in their knowledge that they refuse to 'look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn' (13:15).

Love never intrudes. Love never forces entry. God is all-powerful love. God cannot act in an unloving way. So, while God's love is offered to us unconditionally, it is not received by us unconditionally. We must have faith. We must open our hearts and our minds and our lives to the Spirit being offered to us. If we do not, the offering will still be there, but to no effect. God chooses not to force the human heart.

It is instructive to note why the people of Nazareth reject Jesus. He was simply too 'ordinary' for them. Like many of us, they would accept the divine when it is up there on a pedestal, or somehow out there majestically beyond reach. However, when the divine enters into the simple, ordinary affairs of human life, it seems that it is too close for comfort. 'They took offence at him' (see also 11:6).

It is still often the case that people who have no trouble accepting the divinity of Jesus are offended when focus shifts to the 'ordinariness' of the humanity that he shared with us. Our faith tells us that it is God whom we see when we look upon the face of Jesus; it is God whom we hear when we listen to Jesus' words. But it is God, not in his transcendence, but as revealed in the human. If we bypass Jesus' humanity we cannot see the God whom he reveals.

The people of Jesus' hometown did more than simply fail to believe. We can fail to believe in Jesus because we know nothing about him. They refused to believe. They saw who he was and rejected him because of it. They 'took offence at him'. Their rejection made it impossible for Jesus to do many deeds of power there. Jesus' 'deeds of power' are always signs pointing people towards God, symbolising and realising God's redeeming action in people's lives. This redeeming action can happen only where there is faith.

<sup>53</sup> *When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.*

<sup>54</sup> *He came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power?*

<sup>55</sup> *Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? <sup>56</sup> And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?'*

<sup>57</sup> *And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour except in their own country and in their own house.'*

<sup>58</sup> *And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief [disbelief].*

compare Mark 6:1-6  
Luke 4:16-30

**<sup>1</sup> At that time Herod *the ruler* heard reports about Jesus; <sup>2</sup> and he said *to his servants*, ‘This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and for this reason *these powers are at work in him.*’ <sup>3</sup> For Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, <sup>4</sup>because John had been telling him, ‘It is not lawful for you to have her.’ <sup>5</sup> Though Herod wanted to put him to death he feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet. <sup>6</sup> But when Herod’s birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod <sup>7</sup> so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. <sup>8</sup> Prompted by her mother, she said, ‘Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.’ <sup>9</sup> The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given; <sup>10</sup> he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. <sup>11</sup>The head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who brought it to her mother. <sup>12</sup> His disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus.**

compare Mark 6:14-29  
Luke 9:7-9; 3:19-20

### **The prophet John is killed**

In the previous passage Jesus has spoken of himself as a prophet, rejected by his own people (13:57). In this passage we see the fate of the prophet John, and are forced to wonder whether Jesus might suffer a similar fate.

The Herod mentioned here is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great and Malthace. Matthew gives him his correct title here (‘tetrarch’, translated ‘ruler’), though he later refers to him, more loosely, as ‘king’(14:9).

Herod was tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea (Transjordan) from 4BC to 39AD. His guilty conscience makes him an easy prey to popular superstition. He thinks that Jesus may be John the Baptist returned from the dead (see also 16:14).

The story of the murder of John the Baptist is a story of adultery and vainglory. It has interesting parallels in the story of Ahab, Jezebel and Elijah (1Kings 17-18).

Herodias was Herod’s niece, being the daughter of his half-brother Aristobulus (son of Herod the Great and Mariamne I), as well as being the wife of another half-brother, Herod-Philip (son of Herod the Great and Mariamne II).

Herod stands out in stark contrast to the man of whom Jesus has said: ‘Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist’(11:11). John’s murder heightens the tension of the narrative and casts a shadow over Jesus’ own ministry, preparing us for the price Jesus himself will pay for preaching the good news in a violent and unscrupulous world.

Matthew’s final remark creates a link with the next episode in which we are left with the impression that Jesus retires to grieve the loss of his friend. We might borrow a phrase from John’s Gospel where, on seeing Jesus weeping for Lazarus, they said: ‘See how he loved him’(John 11:36).

### Jesus is God's manna for the hungry

We approach this scene with the eyes of one who is contemplating a mosaic, a fresco, a stained-glass window, or an icon. The inspired artist is portraying a scene not to record exactly what happened, but to communicate a central aspect of Jesus' significance for the community for whom the gospel is intended.

The 'great crowd', the 'deserted place' and the miraculous feeding are all elements of the narrative that are meant to remind the reader of the manna from heaven enjoyed by the Hebrews in their journey through the wilderness (Exodus 16 and Numbers 11). God is still looking after his people and satisfying their hunger, now through the ministry of his Messiah and the community of his disciples.

The secondary theme of the fish is, perhaps, related to the Greek word *ichthus*. We have very early evidence that it was used as an acronym for the Greek words for 'Jesus(I) Christ(ch) of God(th) Son(u) Saviour(s)'. This acronym may have developed in the oral tradition prior to Matthew. Alternatively, the fish may allude to Jesus' first call of the disciples, when he said 'I will make you fish for people' (4:19).

Matthew is portraying Jesus as the Messianic prophet. His narrative alludes to the legend in which Elijah miraculously provides food for the widow of Zarepath (1Kings 17:8-16). There are even closer links with a legend concerning Elisha (see 2Kings 4:42-44).

The 'twelve baskets' symbolise the divine fullness, and the universality of God's saving grace. It is clear, too, that 'the twelve' can carry on what Jesus has just done.

<sup>13</sup> *Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.* <sup>14</sup> *When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.* <sup>15</sup> *When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.'*

<sup>16</sup> *Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you [emphatic] give them something to eat.'* <sup>17</sup> *They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.'* <sup>18</sup> *And he said, 'Bring them here to me.'* <sup>19</sup> *Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.* <sup>20</sup> *And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.* <sup>21</sup> *And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

compare Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10-17

## Miracle of the loaves

Matthew wants us to see in the mission of Jesus, carried on through his disciples, the beginning of the Messianic banquet promised by the prophets:

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.  
Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.  
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,  
my steadfast, sure love for David.

– Isaiah 55:2-3

As the anonymous prophet of the exile saw, the promise made to David was to be experienced by the whole people. The disciples of Jesus took this even further and came to see that God's promise of salvation extends to the whole world, for God wishes to satisfy everyone's hunger.

It is impossible, furthermore, to miss the close literary parallel between Matthew 14:19 and the following words taken from his account of the last supper: 'While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it and gave it to his disciples' (26:26).

Notice also that the setting 'When it was evening' is repeated by Matthew to introduce the last supper (26:20). On the 'first day of the week' (1Corinthians 16:2; Acts 20:7), in memory of the resurrection of Jesus (Matthew 28:1), the Christian community would gather in a home for the 'breaking of bread' (Luke 24:35; Acts 2:42; 20:7,11). They celebrated in this way the memory of how Jesus allowed himself to be broken for them so that he could nourish them with his 'body' and his 'blood'. To nourish them with his body is to share with them his life, his heart, his prayer. To nourish them with his blood is to share his life given for them, his heart pierced for them, his spirit poured out for them. They knew, moreover, that in celebrating this memory they were opening themselves to receive what they celebrated from the risen Christ really present among them.

In chapter ten, Matthew presented Jesus' instructions to his missionary disciples. Now, for the first time, we see them being invited by him to share in his mission. This is a key factor in interpreting the passage. Their first lesson in being missionaries is to recognise their own poverty, and to see in Jesus God's answer to the cry of people's hungry and thirsting hearts: 'they all ate and were filled' (compare 5:6). The disciples are sensitive to the people's hunger, feeling something of Jesus' compassion (see 9:36), but they seem to have forgotten the lesson of the Book of Deuteronomy:

Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

– Deuteronomy 8:2-3

Their first reaction is to ‘send the crowds away’, so that they can get something to eat for themselves. Jesus, however, instructs them: ‘They need not go away; you give them something to eat’. They do not understand. It is obvious that they do not have the resources to feed the people — and this is surely a basic realisation that every disciple needs to have. But this realisation is not enough.

Jesus teaches them the lesson that Matthew wants his readers not to miss. He asks them to give their resources to him. He then turns to God in prayer, his heart moved in praise and thanks, for he knows that he can ‘do nothing on his own’ (John 5:19). He broke the loaves and ‘gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds’.

How can five loaves feed such a great crowd? How can the little love we have be enough for our children, enough to meet the needs of those who call on us for help, enough to create a just and peaceful world? Matthew’s answer is in this scene.

We have witnessed the divine authority manifested in Jesus’ words (5-7) and deeds (8-9). The parables have been telling us that the seed which we sow is so powerful that it can produce a hundredfold (13:8). Our calling is to be disciples of Jesus in doing the will of God, no matter what (7:21; 12:50), and to do it in total trust. The harvest will come; but it will come because of the power of the one in whom we place our trust.

There must be hundreds of memories lying behind this powerful scene: memories of the many times that Jesus nourished people by his smile, his compassion, his words and his deeds. All his close followers had stories to tell of the miraculous way in which he touched people’s hearts and fed their deepest hunger and quenched their deepest thirst. And there was no limit to his generosity in providing for them, as there was no limit to the love which he showed to them. He drew upon the Spirit of God in his ministry and he gave this Spirit without reserve.

By the time the gospel was written, Jesus’ disciples could also call on their own memories of how Jesus’ Spirit, living in them, had worked similar miracles in their lives, when they had found that they too, miraculously, had been God’s instruments in nurturing people as they journeyed towards God through the desert of this world. We might think of Luke’s statement in the Acts of the Apostles:

Many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.

– Acts 4:4

Nothing is impossible to God. Our talents, our hands, our hearts, our love, our acts of service can bring sustenance to a hungry world. It is radically important that we know that we do not, of ourselves, have the resources to do this. But it is equally important to know that we are not ‘of ourselves’. Jesus, who was with his disciples, is with us. United to him and caught up in his prayer, we too can praise and thank God; we too can mediate Jesus’ love to each other.

**22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.**

**23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,**

**24 but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.**

**25 And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.**

**26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear.**

**27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'**

compare Mark 6:45-50

### **The disciples grow in faith**

In the Exodus tradition there is a close connection between the giving of the manna and the crossing of the sea, though there it is the crossing that comes first. The slaves escape from Egypt across the Red Sea (Exodus 14:15-31) and then are fed by God in the wilderness (Exodus 16). Here (and interestingly also in John as well as in Mark) the scenes are reversed. It is the nourishment from heaven that makes possible the journey to freedom.

Jesus 'made the disciples get into the boat', but is not with them (contrast 8:23-27). He is on the mountain praying. Matthew seems to be using the boat as a symbol of the church, struggling in this world, with Jesus no longer visibly present but exalted with God in heaven. Even though Jesus is no longer with us in the way he was before his death, he is still caring for the community. We will be safe if we do not lose faith in him.

Notice that Peter calls Jesus 'Lord', and that 'those in the boat worshipped him' (only here and in 28:17), confessing him to be the 'Son of God'. This is a post-Resurrection faith.

That Jesus is God's Son has already been declared in Matthew's gospel (2:15; 3:17; 4:3,6; 8:29). It refers to Jesus precisely in his relationship to God as Father (see also 6:8; 7:21; 10:32-33; 11:25-27; 12:50). This, however, is the first time that Jesus' disciples have explicitly acknowledged him as God's Son.

The Jesus portrayed in this scene is the divine Jesus. This is clear from the words he uses: 'It is I; do not be afraid'. The Greek translated 'It is I' is *ego eimi*, which is linked in the Greek version of the Old Testament to the Hebrew divine name, YHWH (See Exodus 3:11-15 and Isaiah 43:8-13).

In Jesus we see God walking upon the waters of chaos (Psalm 77:19; Job 9:8; 38:16; Sirach 24:5-6). By the power of God, Jesus is able to master the chaos. The disciples, gripped by fear and doubt (only here and in 28:17), experience how poor is their faith (see 6:30; 8:26). They have to learn that they, too, can cross to freedom, provided they put their faith in him.

How often they would have experienced this while Jesus was living with them and after his death. He remained in prayer, and so, trusting in God, he was able to rise above the persecution and suffering that he endured; he was able to 'walk on the sea'. With him, they can do the same. That a disciple can do what Jesus did because of Jesus' continued presence in the Christian community is brought out in the scene with Peter, the first of the apostles (10:2).

Peter addresses Jesus as 'Lord' (Greek: *kyrie*), which, in the context involves a reference to YHWH (translated as *kyrie* in the Greek Old Testament). God is in Jesus saving the world.

Peter who left his nets to follow Jesus (4:20) must also follow Jesus in daring to journey through chaos. He knows that he can do so, however, only if invited by Jesus. The invitation is simple: 'Come'. Peter is given by Jesus the power to do what Jesus himself can do (compare 10:5-13), and Peter 'started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus'. However, instead of keeping his heart and his eyes on Jesus, he notices the danger and fails to trust. In his distress, he cries to the Lord, who saves him:

He reached down from on high, he took me; he drew me  
out of mighty waters.

– Psalm 18:16

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.  
I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come  
into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary  
with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim  
with waiting for my God.

– Psalm 69:1-3

Stretch out your hand from on high; set me free and rescue  
me from the mighty waters.

– Psalm 144:7

Matthew's vivid portrayal of the struggling community and the divine Jesus coming to its rescue, reminds us of the following passages, taken from the Isaiah scroll:

Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters,  
I will be with you.

– Isaiah 43:1-2

<sup>28</sup> *Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.'*

<sup>29</sup> *He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.*

<sup>30</sup> *But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!'*

<sup>31</sup> *Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'*

<sup>32</sup> *When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.*

<sup>33</sup> *And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'*

<sup>34</sup> *When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret.*

compare Mark 6:51-53

## Jesus walks on the water

‘Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord!  
Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago! ...  
Was it not you who dried up the sea,  
the waters of the great deep;  
who made the depths of the sea  
a way for the redeemed to cross over?  
So the ransomed of the Lord shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads ...  
The oppressed shall speedily be released;  
they shall not die and go down to the Pit,  
nor shall they lack bread.  
For I am the Lord your God,  
who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar--  
the Lord of hosts is his name’(Isaiah 51:9-10,14-15).

As a reflection on this and the previous scene, we might meditate also on the following psalm:

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.  
Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,  
those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in  
from the lands, from the east and from the west,  
from the north and from the south.

Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town;  
hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.  
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,  
and he delivered them from their distress;  
he led them by a straight way,  
until they reached an inhabited town.  
Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,  
for his wonderful works to humankind.  
For he satisfies the thirsty,  
and the hungry he fills with good things . . .

Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters;  
they saw the deeds of the Lord,  
his wondrous works in the deep.  
For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,  
which lifted up the waves of the sea.  
They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;  
their courage melted away in their calamity;  
they reeled and staggered like drunkards,  
and were at their wits’ end.  
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,  
and he brought them out from their distress;  
he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.  
Then they were glad because they had quiet,  
and he brought them to their desired haven’(Psalm 107:1-9, 23-30).

A further reflection is inspired by the fact that the disciples set out in daylight, and Jesus comes to them only in the last hours of darkness, just before dawn. The impression one has is that he brings the light with him, as well as enabling them to reach the shore, but only after they have battled the seas in the dark all night.

There is a divine wisdom in the timing of grace, and it seems that we all must go through a dark night to make us realise that we are totally incapable of reaching our destination on our own, and we are quite incapable on our own of letting go and admitting our own powerlessness. There seems to be no other way to learn this lesson, except to be made to face the darkness alone. If we are willing to dare this journey into the night, God will not release us from it till our entire being cries out for that release and recognises that God alone can effect it.

Yet how strange it is that we, like the disciples, respond in fear at the approach of the one who comes to save us! John of the Cross writes:

How amazing and pitiful it is that the soul is so utterly weak and impure that the hand of God, though light and gentle, should feel so heavy and contrary. For the hand of God does not press down or weigh upon the soul, but only touches it; and this mercifully, for God's aim is to grant it favour and not to chastise it.

– The Dark Night II,7

The impurities of our loving cannot simply be overlooked if our heart is to be formed according to the heart of the one whose disciples we are called to be. Love is a fire. The impurities in our hearts and in our lives must be devoured, till there is only fire, till there is only love.

Jesus does come to them, and when they cry out to him, he joins them in the boat. The night is over and they reach their destination. May it be so for us.

**Jesus continues his saving ministry**

**<sup>35</sup> After the people of that place recognized him, they sent word throughout the region and brought all who were sick to him, <sup>36</sup> and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed [saved].**

compare Mark 6:54-56

Peter has just been saved by Jesus (14:30). Here we see the compassionate Jesus continuing his saving ministry. The contrast with the scene at Nazareth (13:58) may imply that these people, symbolic of the Christian community, are learning to believe, though it must be noted that Matthew says nothing here about faith. In mentioning the fringe [Greek: *kraspedos*] of Jesus' cloak, Matthew is perhaps alluding to the following statement from Zechariah:

In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment [*kraspedos*] and saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you'.

– Zechariah 8:23

## Human tradition must be tested by the word of God

We are reminded of Jesus' earlier statement: 'Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (5:20). Matthew is highlighting the essential difference between the religious attitude which seems to have been prevalent among many of the scribes of Jesus' day and the religious attitude of Jesus. Matthew mentions Jerusalem. This local conflict has far wider implications. Jesus is increasingly coming up against the religious establishment.

Jesus agreed with the scribes on the central importance of doing the will of God. He also recognised the sacred writings (the 'Law') as expressing God's will. The scribes, however, claimed divine authority for their interpretation of the Law - which was in effect a claim to the authority to control people's religious life.

Jesus cites the prophet Isaiah against them. In the verses just prior to the ones quoted, Isaiah has already castigated the religious leaders for their blindness (Isaiah 29:9) and their inability to grasp the meaning of God's word (Isaiah 29:11-12). The words actually quoted by Jesus (Isaiah 29:13) clearly distinguish between human precepts and God's word. They also focus attention on the heart. We are reminded of the words of the psalmist:

They flattered him with their mouths; they lied to him with their tongues. Their heart was not steadfast toward him; they were not true to his covenant.

– Psalm 78:36-37

Human traditions must be assessed according to how well they give expression to 'the commandment of God'. Jesus gives a case in point in which the tradition upheld (at least in Matthew's portrayal) by the scribes is clearly 'making void the word of God' as found in Exodus 20:12 and 21:17.

<sup>1</sup> Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, <sup>2</sup> 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.'

<sup>3</sup> He answered them, 'And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?

<sup>4</sup> For God said, "Honour your father and your mother," and, "Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die."

<sup>5</sup> But you say that whoever tells father or mother, "Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God," then that person need not honour the father.

<sup>6</sup> So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.

<sup>7</sup> You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

<sup>8</sup> "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; <sup>9</sup> in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."

compare Mark 7:1-13

**10 Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, 'Listen and understand: 11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.'** *12 Then the disciples approached and said to him, 'Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?'* **13 He answered, 'Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. 14 Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.'** **15 But Peter said to him, 'Explain this parable to us.'** **16 Then he said, 'Are you also still without understanding? 17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? 18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. 19 For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.'**

compare Mark 7:14-23

verse 14 compare Luke 6:39

## Purity of heart

Everyone (15:10), but especially the disciples, must understand that they will remain 'blind' and end up in the pit unless they realise that what matters is purity of heart (see 5:3; contrast 12:34). The key principle underlying Jesus' teaching in this passage is introduced in a solemn fashion: 'Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.'

This goes against the whole Jewish tradition and implies that Leviticus chapter eleven, for example, which clearly names certain foods that do make the one eating them unclean, cannot be followed absolutely as God's unchanging word.

The fact that there was a prolonged debate on this issue in the early church (see Acts 10:1-33; Galatians 2:11-17; Romans 14:13-21; Colossians 2:20-22) is proof that Jesus could never have expressed himself as absolutely as in this passage. However, by the time Matthew is writing the community had come to see that this was, indeed, the implications of Jesus' words and attitudes.

Peter, whom Matthew has already singled out (14:28-32) seeks an explanation of the parable (on the significance of a parable see the commentary on 13:3). It is interesting to note that both Galatians 2 and Acts 10-11,15 associate Peter closely with the question of what is to be considered clean and unclean. Jesus's focus, as we have come to expect, is on the heart: 'What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions' (15:18-19).

Matthew goes to the decalogue for his examples of evil intentions (Matthew 15:19 comes from Exodus 20:13-16). He expands the list to seven items.

## Discipleship is open to believing Gentiles

Perhaps the most serious problem facing the early Church in areas that were mainly Jewish was how to welcome Gentiles into the community. Many argued that they would have to become Jews first, which meant being circumcised and following the Jewish Law (Acts 15:5). Peter, too, was hesitant at first to go to the house of the centurion, Cornelius (Acts 10:1-10). In principle it was decided that Gentiles could join Jewish Christians at the Eucharist, at the 'master's table' (15:27), without having to become Jews, provided they had faith. This seems to be the background for this text. In the preceding passage we saw that failure to observe Jewish cultic practices concerning the washing of hands does not exclude people from eating at the Lord's table (15:2,20). Here we learn that neither does being a Gentile.

In the narrative, it is Jesus who takes the initiative by going into Gentile territory. Matthew introduces the woman as a Canaanite, evoking all the mistrust and antipathy that existed between the Canaanites and Jews. However, her language is that of a disciple. She calls Jesus 'Lord', and acknowledges him as the Messiah: 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David'. Jesus is silent.

The reaction of his disciples causes Jesus to repeat a principle that he has already stated when instructing them on how to conduct their mission (10:6). They are not to go into Gentile territory. We saw that this was a way of describing what in fact happened in the ministry of Jesus and his disciples prior to Jesus' resurrection. It is also Matthew's way of highlighting the privileged position which Israel rejected.

The woman persists in spite of Jesus' arguments. To our ears Jesus' remark about dogs may sound offensive. He is probably employing a traditional proverb. Her response indicates that, far from being offended, she was encouraged to keep persisting with her request. Jesus accedes, recognising her faith. We recall an earlier scene where he was surprised at the faith shown by the Gentile centurion (8:10). These scenes are included by Matthew as illustrations justifying the practice of his community in which Jews and non-Jews shared table fellowship as members of the Christian community.

<sup>21</sup> Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup> Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' <sup>23</sup> But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' <sup>24</sup> He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'

<sup>25</sup> But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' <sup>26</sup> He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' <sup>27</sup> She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' <sup>28</sup> Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

compare Mark 7:24-30

**<sup>29</sup> After Jesus had left that place, he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down.**

**<sup>30</sup> Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them,**

**<sup>31</sup> so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.**

### **Jesus continues his saving ministry**

Jesus continues his healing ministry as Israel's Messiah (compare 11:2-5 and 14:14). Matthew sets this and the following scene on a mountain, possibly to connect Jesus' action here with the Messianic hopes of Israel centred on Mount Zion.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.

– Isaiah 25:6-10

## Jesus is God's manna for the hungry

This is the Messianic banquet, the Lord's table (compare 15:27), to which all (the symbolism of 'seven') are welcome. The basic themes are the same as those found in the earlier account of the miracle of the loaves (Matthew 14:15-21).

The setting here is a mountain. The link with the Eucharist is made even more explicit with the use of the word 'giving thanks' (15:36, Greek: *eucharistein*; compare 26:27). Since the Eucharist was, for Jesus' disciples, their way of celebrating the fruits of Jesus' death and resurrection, we might see in Matthew's use of the expression 'three days', a further allusion to this Christian mystery in which our human hunger and thirst is satisfied by the real presence among us of the glorified Jesus. Every other time Matthew speaks of 'three days' (12:40; 26:61; 27:40,63) he is alluding to Jesus' death and resurrection.

Here Matthew plays with the symbol seven, rather than twelve. The twelve reminds us of the whole of Israel. The seven refers to the fullness of creation.

While the Eucharist is God's promised 'bread from heaven', it is not something that is to be taken once and for all. It is the sacrament of our 'daily bread', and, in his 'compassion', Jesus continues to offer us the manna from heaven lest we 'faint on the way'.

<sup>32</sup> Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.'

<sup>33</sup> The disciples said to him, 'Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?'

<sup>34</sup> Jesus asked them, 'How many loaves have you?' They said, 'Seven, and a few small fish.'

<sup>35</sup> Then ordering the crowd to sit down on the ground,

<sup>36</sup> he took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

<sup>37</sup> And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. <sup>38</sup>

Those who had eaten were four thousand men, *besides women and children.*

<sup>39</sup> After sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of *Magadan.*

compare Mark 8:1-10

**<sup>1</sup> The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.**

**<sup>2</sup> He answered them, ‘When it is evening, you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.”**

**<sup>3</sup> And in the morning, “It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.”**

**You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.**

**<sup>4</sup> An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.’**

**Then he left them and went away.**

compare Mark 8:11-13

verse 1 compare Matthew 12:38

verses 2-3 compare Luke 12:54-5

verse 4 compare Matthew 12:39

### **Israel continues to reject its Messiah**

The religious leaders have this in common that they reject Jesus. In the context of the previous scene, their demand for a sign can only be interpreted as acute spiritual blindness and obstinacy. They can read the sky but they cannot read the heavens; that is to say, they cannot perceive the action of God in their midst. It is not only the leaders who refuse the good news, it is ‘an evil and adulterous generation’. On this and the significance of the sign of Jonah, see the commentary on 12:38-39.

This time, with telling drama, Matthew says that Jesus ‘left them and went away’. The focus of his ministry from this point on will be his disciples.

### The disciples begin to understand

Yeast causes dough to puff up. We have witnessed many scenes that portray the ‘yeast of the Pharisees’ (3:7; 5:20; 9:11,14,34; 12:2,14,24,38; 15:1,12; 16:1-4). In the first and last of these scenes we find the Pharisees with the Sadducees. The values which many of these people espoused, their attitude to religion and their obstinate pride and abuse of power, were insidious. Jesus is warning his disciples not to be infected by them. The threefold repetition of the warning may indicate the on-going need for such a warning in Matthew’s community.

The disciples demonstrate the weakness of their faith (see also 6:30; 8:26; 14:31). They still think in terms of looking to themselves to provide the resources they need in order to journey with Jesus. To help the disciples understand, Jesus reminds them of the scenes which have demonstrated that the bread that people need to assuage their hunger is the bread which comes from God (14:15-21; 15:32-39).

They should not be saying that they have no bread when Jesus is with them, and they certainly do not need to follow the example of the religious leaders,

At last they are beginning to understand, and so Jesus is able to begin to take them more deeply into the mystery of his person and his mission.

<sup>5</sup> **When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread.**

<sup>6</sup> **Jesus said to them, ‘Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’**

<sup>7</sup> **They said to one another, ‘It is because we have brought no bread.’**

<sup>8</sup> **And becoming aware of it, Jesus said, ‘You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread?’**

<sup>9</sup> **Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered?**

<sup>10</sup> **Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? <sup>11</sup> How could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread? Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!’**

<sup>12</sup> **Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**

compare Mark 8:13-21

verse 6 compare Luke 12:1

**13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that *the Son of Man* is?' <sup>14</sup> And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others *Jeremiah* or one of the prophets.'**

**<sup>15</sup> He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'**

**<sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'**

**<sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.'**

**<sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.**

**<sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'**

**<sup>20</sup> Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.**

compare Mark 8:27-30  
Luke 9:18-21

### **Peter acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah and Jesus speaks of establishing the church**

This is a pivotal scene in Matthew's gospel from at least three points of view. Firstly, it witnesses to a breakthrough in the disciples' understanding of Jesus when 'Simon, also known as Peter', the 'first' of the 'twelve apostles' (10:2) acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah and as the Son of the living God. Secondly, we see Jesus explicitly establishing his disciples as a community, the community of Israel having rejected him. Thirdly, as the following scene demonstrates, Jesus begins now to instruct his disciples on just what kind of a Messiah he is and on what this will require of them if they wish to continue to be his disciples.

There is a dramatic power in the very setting of this scene. We are at Caesarea Philippi, near the source of the Jordan river at the foot of Mount Hermon. The town was built by Philip, son of Herod the Great and Cleopatra, around the time of Jesus' birth. He built it in honour of Caesar (Augustus), but included his own name to distinguish it from the other Caesarea on the coast which was the centre of Roman administration in Palestine. This latter Caesarea is mentioned often in the Acts, beginning at 8:40. Caesarea Philippi is mentioned only here. It stood on the site of an ancient grotto dedicated to the god Pan.

Jesus has been preaching the good news by word and deed. The time has come to journey to Jerusalem to confront the temple hierarchy there. Is he to journey alone, or are his disciples ready to journey with him? If the disciples are still not ready, should he wait?

Jesus asks them: 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' By using 'Son of Man' here, Matthew wants to focus on Jesus as the one who is in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, and as the one vindicated by God's judgment (see commentary on 8:20).

We have examples, earlier in the gospel, of people wondering about Jesus' identity. When he calmed the sea, the disciples were amazed: 'What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?' (8:27).

John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask: 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another' (11:3)? The people of Jesus' hometown wondered: 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power' (13:54)? The response which the disciples offer in this present scene reminds us of Herod's superstition about John the Baptist returning to haunt him (14:2), and of the legend concerning the return of Elijah (see 11:14). Matthew also mentions Jeremiah. This may give some indication of Jesus' character as perceived by many, especially when we consider the intense feeling that is characteristic of Jeremiah and also how much he had to suffer in carrying out his mission. It is probably also a comment on the similarities of their preaching.

Jesus then asks: 'But who do you say that I am'? Peter, in an act of trusting love replies: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'. This seems, at first sight, to echo the words of the disciples in a previous scene, in which we are told that 'they worshipped him saying, "Truly you are the Son of God"' (14:33). That, however, was a highly dramatised narrative, a theophany, in which Jesus is portrayed as having divine mastery over the elements, and as saving his disciples from the chaos that threatened to envelop them. By contrast, at Caesarea Philippi we have Jesus, the Son of Man, present in the simplicity of his human condition. It is this Jesus whom Peter declares to be the 'Messiah, the Son of the living God'.

For centuries the Jews had looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, who was imagined in many different ways. Some thought of him as an anointed king who would bring about God's reign over the whole earth; others as an anointed priest who would sanctify the world; yet others as an anointed prophet who would fully reveal God's word. In calling Jesus the Messiah (the 'Christ'; see 1:1,16-18; 2:4; 11:1-2), Peter is saying that Jesus is the one for whom he and the Jewish people have been waiting. Jesus is the one who is fulfilling the hopes and aspirations of Israel. He is the anointed one of God, the one in whom God's Spirit dwells. In calling Jesus 'the Son of the living God' (see 14:33), Peter is recognising the special relationship that bound Jesus to the one he called 'my Father'.

Peter knows this because he has watched Jesus pray and reach out to the poor and the lonely and the sick and the disturbed. He has witnessed Jesus doing the deeds of the Messiah (11:2). Peter can no longer think of God without thinking of Jesus, without seeing the face of God in the face of Jesus, and without finding in Jesus the one who fills up his senses with the aroma (the 'chrism') of God. However, as Jesus says, in all of this it was because Peter was open to God's revelation that he was able to penetrate into the deep mysteries of Jesus' relationship to God and of Jesus' mission from God.

Jesus' response to Peter's act of faith reminds us of his earlier prayer: '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; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 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"' (11:25-27).

## Peter's act of faith

Jesus recognises in Peter's statement a special grace and revelation from his Father. He declares blessed a man who has 'little faith'(14:31; 16:8), but who is willing to learn (15:16; 16:12). Jesus calls Peter 'son of Jonah'. Jonah had to pass through 'death' to life (12:38-39; 16:4). So must Simon (see 14:30-31). He calls him 'Peter'(already foreshadowed in 4:18 and 10:2; see also 14:28-29 and 15:15). Jesus had told his disciples to build on rock (7:24). It is on the rock (Greek, *petra*; Aramaic *kepha*) that is Peter (Greek: *petros*; Aramaic *kepha*), that Jesus builds his house: the community of his disciples, called here the 'church'(Greek, *ekklesia*).

The Greek *ekklesia* was used in the Old Testament for the people of God assembled in response to God's call (Deuteronomy 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; 31:30). Because Israel has rejected its shepherd Messiah (Section VI), Jesus has to build a new community, open to all who repent and believe (see Galatians 6:6; 1 Corinthians 10:1-5; Hebrews 12:18-24), a community of his disciples ('my church').

Matthew's community, in spite of its many links with Judaism, experienced considerable tension in its relations with the Jewish synagogue. They looked back to this momentous act of faith by Peter as the beginning of the movement that was to constitute them as the true, renewed Israel (Galatians 6:16). To grasp the significance of what we are asserting here we need to go back to a classical Messianic text from the Old Testament. It lies behind Matthew's portrait here and also other central scenes later in the gospel (21:7-16; 26:61-66). It is part of the oracle of the prophet Nathan addressed to king David:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

– 2Samuel 7:12-14

David's son is spoken of as God's son (see also Psalm 2:7; Psalm 89:26-27). David's dynasty will last forever (see also 2Samuel 22:51; 23:5; 1Chronicles 7:10-13; Isaiah 9:5-6; Psalm 89:20-34). The king's task is to build God's house. This oracle is fulfilled here in Jesus the Davidic Messiah, and Son of the living God. The house that he builds (compare 26:61) is the community of believers built upon the rock that is Peter (see 8:14, 'Peter's house'). The whole of the New Testament witnesses to the special place of Peter in the early church (see already in Matthew's gospel, 4:18-20; 8:14; 10:2; 14:28-32; 15:15; elsewhere especially Mark 16:8; John 6:68; 20:2-6; 21:15-21; Acts 1-12; 15:7; Galatians 1:18; 2:9). This does not deny what Paul asserts:

No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

– 1Corinthians 3:11

It simply acknowledges the historical reality which Paul states elsewhere, while adding a reference to Peter's special role:

You are members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

– Ephesians 2:19-20).

We have seen Jesus contending with evil and defeating it (chapters 8-9, especially 8:23-34; 9:18-26; see also 12:28-29). These are powers that he has shared with those whom he has appointed to carry on his mission (10:7-8). When Jesus says that the gates of Hades will not prevail against the church, two images come to mind. The first is of the community of his disciples on the attack, storming every stronghold of evil and breaking down its gates, bringing liberation, light and life to the world (5:14). Even death itself ('Hades') will be robbed of its prey, for the message preached by the church holds out the promise of resurrection.

The second image is of the gates of the underworld bursting open and the forces of evil unleashing an attack on the Christian community (see Revelation (9:1-11; 11:7; 17:8). In both senses the church will prevail. Jesus gives Peter the keys of the God's kingdom. We are reminded of the following from Isaiah, spoken to the king:

I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open.

– Isaiah 22:22

This key is the word spoken by the Messiah, the word that brings salvation to those who listen, and announces judgment for those who obstinately refuse to obey. Jesus holds these keys:

I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.

– Revelation 1:18; see 3:7

In giving them to Peter, he is giving him the responsibility, as the first apostle, to carry on his mission of proclaiming the gospel and teaching in his name. The scribes and the Pharisees exercised a similar role in the Jewish community. However, as we have seen, the fact that Jesus' 'generation' for the most part rejected him was in large part the responsibility of their teachers who failed to listen to God's Messiah (see Section VI). This will be stated explicitly later: 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them'(23:13).

The church which Jesus is establishing comes from Israel. It is open to all in Israel who are willing to listen and to heed his word. It is open to the whole Gentile world provided people believe (8:5-13; 15:21-28). Authoritative teaching in this community is given to Jesus' disciples who are growing in understanding and in faith (18:18), and, in a special way, to the one whom Jesus appoints as their leader. Peter is given the keys not to close but to open. However, if people refuse to listen to him as they are refusing to listen to Jesus, he must declare to them that the door which they refuse to enter is indeed the door to life, and that in refusing entry they are opting for death (compare 10:14-15). When the two blind men addressed Jesus as 'Son of David', and 'Lord', their faith led to healing, but 'Jesus sternly ordered them, "See that no one knows of this"'(9:30). The present scene concludes with a similar warning. The reason becomes obvious from the scenes immediately following. Jesus wants to ensure that those who acknowledge him as the Messiah know what it is they are acknowledging. They cannot learn this from hearsay, but only through personal discipleship.

<sup>21</sup> *From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*

<sup>22</sup> *And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'*

<sup>23</sup> *But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'*

### **The Son of Man must suffer, die and rise again (1)**

This passage introduces for the first time ('Jesus began to show them') a theme which is central to the rest of the gospel: the theme of suffering that leads to life. In the section on the parables, Matthew distinguishes between 'the disciples' and 'them' (the crowds). It is to the former that God has revealed 'the secrets of the kingdom of heaven' (13:11). The time has come for one of the kingdom's central mysteries to be disclosed to them.

Peter has just acknowledged that Jesus, whom he has come to know and love, is the Messiah (16:16). Jesus himself chose to speak of the 'Son of Man' (16:13) and it is this title which provides the setting for the present text. If Peter is going to accept Jesus as the Messiah, he must be ready to accept a Messiah who suffers with the outcasts, but who will, ultimately, be vindicated by God.

Jesus has already spoken of himself, in parable, as a bridegroom, and of the time when 'the bridegroom is taken away' (9:15). The build-up of antipathy with the religious leaders (noted as early as 9:3 and 9:11, clearly stated in 9:34, and evidenced particularly in 12:24-45 and 15:1-9), and the fate of John the Baptist (14:1-12), as well as a long history of prophets being rejected, has been enough to make Jesus realise what is in store for him.

That he 'must' suffer is probably based on Jesus' identification with the Son of Man of Daniel 7, and also with the suffering servant of Isaiah 52-53. In this, too, he fulfils the prophetic pattern of the Old Testament. The 'elders and chief priests and scribes' (16:22) are the three groups that made up the supreme Jewish council in Jerusalem. Jesus' faith in the ultimate vindication by God (see Psalm 34:19) is expressed here in the words: 'on the third day be raised'. This is a clarification of Jesus' earlier allusion to the sign of Jonah (12:38-40). There seems also to be an allusion to Hosea:

Come, let us return to the Lord; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth.

– Hosea 6:1-3

compare  
Mark 8:31-33  
Luke 9:22

In biblical usage, ‘on the third day’ is, as in the text just quoted from Hosea, an expression to indicate something definitive. We find this in another saying of Jesus recorded by Luke. The Pharisees warn Jesus to leave the territory of Herod who is determined to kill him. Jesus replies:

Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem’.

– Luke 13:32-33

Whatever may happen today (in the present) and tomorrow (in the foreseeable future), ultimately (‘on the third day’), God will act and God’s justice will triumph. The classical text concerns God’s self-manifestation on Mount Sinai:

The Lord said to Moses: “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people”.

– Exodus 19:10-11

It was ‘on the third day’ also that Abraham caught sight of Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:4). It was only after three days’ journey into the wilderness that Moses offered sacrifice to God (Exodus 3:18, 5:3, 8:27). King Hezekiah asked the prophet Isaiah:

What shall be the sign that the Lord will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the Lord on the third day?

– 2Kings 20:8

Jesus is confident that he will be raised to life by God ‘on the third day’. In other words, ultimately, when God’s will is revealed, God will vindicate him and all those who put their trust in God. He will suffer, but he is determined to continue carrying out his mission, trusting that suffering and death will lead to life.

There is no place for suffering in Peter’s understanding of the Christ. Peter the ‘rock’ (16:18), is also a ‘stumbling block’ (16:23). His reaction is part of the continual testing that Jesus had to undergo during his life; hence the reference to ‘Satan’. Peter, in this instance, incarnates evil, and Jesus rebukes him for it. He is not rejecting Peter. He is telling Peter to ‘get behind’ him: to follow him, and not to stand in his way as an ‘stumbling block’. What it means to ‘follow’ Jesus will be made clear in the following passage.

Peter’s thinking is perfectly understandable from the human point of view, but Jesus makes it clear that God’s way of looking at things is different. Our mind goes to the saying from Isaiah:

My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

– Isaiah 55:8-9

**24 Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.**

**25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake [because of me] will find it.**

**26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?**

**27 'For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.**

**28 Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'**

compare Mark 8:34 - 9:1  
Luke 9:23-27

### **The disciples will find life by following Jesus**

At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked 'Who am I?' Here he asks: 'Who are you?': 'What really is the human self?' The word translated 'life' in this passage is the Greek *psyche*. It has a wide range of meanings, depending on one's theory of psychology. Besides 'life', it could be translated 'self', in the sense of one's aware self. It could also be translated 'soul', in the sense of one's deepest, most intimate, and most mysterious self.

However one translates it, it is obvious from the above passage that Jesus has the deepest respect for a person's psyche. He does not want it to be lost or forfeited; he recognises that gaining the whole world is of no value if it means losing it. Indeed nothing can replace it. A person's self is sacred, for it is the unique individual person who is created by God, sustained in life by God, and loved as a son or daughter by God.

Herein is a paradox that lies at the heart of Jesus' moral teaching. There is another 'self' to which we must say No, if we are ever to discover and enjoy our 'soul'. This other 'self' is the one that is focused on itself. It is the 'self' that is afraid to let go. It is the 'self' that will not give itself away in love, or waste itself in giving life to another. Such a self is like a seed that will not submit itself to the earth, that will not break open and 'lose' itself, so that life might burst from it. It is a heart that refuses to dare to love, lest it be hurt. That surface self, that small self, that fearful self, that insecure self, must learn to trust itself to Christ, and to follow him in his way of living. In this context, it is worth noting the following from Paul:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

– 1Corinthians 6:19-20

Jesus has already spoken of what lies ahead of him. Of course his disciples are frightened, for him, but also for themselves. However, he has already said that he trusts that his Father, God, will raise him to himself. Here he promises them the same. If, because of him, they too have to carry a cross (that is to say, die the death of a slave; compare 10:38), he assures them that they, like their master (10:24-5), will find their real life in communion with God.

We are reminded of Paul's prayer that the real self, the hidden self, 'the inner being', might grow strong:

I bend my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who, by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen'.

– Ephesians 3:14-21

Matthew now turns to the final judgment, in which each person will be judged 'for what has been done', the focus being on one's relationship to Jesus as the 'Son of Man', the one who, according to Daniel, represents all the oppressed ones who have remained faithful to God and who have cried out to God in their distress. When God comes to vindicate them, then those who have rejected Jesus will find that they are not among those called to share in God's glory. The imagery here is familiar to those of Jesus' contemporaries who were interested in the literature, popular at the time, that explored the afterlife. Except for one word. Nowhere else do we find God spoken of as the 'Father' of the Son of Man. We are here at the heart of Jesus' religious experience.

The 'glory' refers to the hidden beauty of God at last radiantly manifest, in such a way as to evoke praise from all who witness it. The glory of God is revealed in God's judgment, vindicating the oppressed against their oppressors, and giving the kingdom to the poor. Jesus is inviting his disciples to journey with him, so that they might enjoy with him his Father's glory. However, to journey with him they have to be willing to give their life with him. In an early Christian hymn quoted by Paul, Jesus is spoken of as having 'emptied himself' (Philippians 2:7). His disciples are being asked to do the same.

In speaking of Jesus as the Messiah, Peter has implicitly expressed his desire to be Jesus' disciple. Here Jesus is teaching him, and the others, that the decision to follow him is one that is a matter of life and death.

It is not easy to determine the meaning of the final sentence: 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom'. It reminds us of an earlier statement: 'you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes'(10:23).

The Greek word translated here 'before' does not imply that they will taste death afterwards. Jesus may be saying that they will never taste death. In which case it is possible that Jesus is not speaking of physical death at all. They may well die, but he is assuring them that they will not experience death as a loss of life, for, if they follow him as he has invited them, they will experience the saving power of the kingdom of God (compare John 11:26).

On the other hand, he might be saying that the end of history, and so the final judgment, is imminent. We know from the literature of the day that speculation linked the promised resurrection with God's final judgment. It was unavoidable that the experience of Jesus' resurrection would lead the early Christians to expect the imminent end of history and the final unfolding of God's design. Paul witnesses to this in his early writings (1Thesalonians 4:1-13), and it is not impossible that Matthew may have understood Jesus' words in this way. He may have thought of the conflict between Rome and the Jews which flared into open warfare in 66AD as the final struggle that would bring about the ultimate intervention of God to establish the promised kingdom.

It is also possible, however, that Matthew would have understood the words to be referring to Jesus' death and resurrection. If this is the case, then we see here in Matthew the beginnings of an understanding of the death of Jesus that is well developed in John's gospel; namely, that the hour of Jesus' death is the hour of his glorification. We noted, when commenting on Matthew 3:17, that the gospel preached by Jesus was that every person is God's beloved son or daughter.

Everything Jesus said or did witnessed to his conviction of this truth, and this can be said in a special way about his manner of dying. For he chose death rather than stop preaching, healing and liberating people. He gave his life for the gospel which he was commissioned by God to preach, and in which he believed. Seeing this glorious manifestation of God's love, the disciples would, indeed, be seeing 'the Son of Man coming in his kingdom'. The fact that Matthew follows these words with a scene portraying the resurrected Christ makes this final interpretation the most likely one.

It is so easy to be distracted from our heart's desire. We do not want to let go of anything that has seemed to bring us some security. We dare not put our life at risk, physically, but even more so psychologically. So we cling to anything and everything that gives us the impression of making us less dependent. Jesus' words in this passage cut right across such thinking and such behaviour. How we need to be open to his grace to enable us to really listen and to act as he invites us to here! In the opening chapter of this book, we read Augustine's plea that we 'return to the heart'. Let us listen to him again as he speaks of his own conversion experience:

Let me know you who know me, know you even as I am known. You are the power of my soul - enter into it and fit it for yourself. This is my hope, my prayer ... Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved you! For you were within me and I outside; and I sought you outside and in my ugliness I fell upon the lovely things you have made. You were with me but I was not with you. I was kept from you by those things, yet had they not been in you, they would not have been at all. You called and cried to me and broke open my deafness. You sent forth your beams and shone upon me and chased away my blindness. You breathed fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath and now pant for you. I tasted you and now hunger and thirst for you; You touched me and I have burned for your peace ... Once I am united to you with all my being, there will be no more grief or toil and my life will be fully alive, filled with you. You raise up the one you fill. It is because I am not yet filled with you that I am a burden to myself.

– Confessions, 10.1, 27-28

**God's response: the promised glory is revealed**

Jesus has just expressed his own faith in the intimate connection between his suffering and his glorification by God (16:21). He has also assured his disciples that it will be the same for them (16:25). In this magnificent portrait Matthew assures his readers that Jesus' understanding is correct. God himself tells them to 'listen to him'. The three disciples, 'Peter and James and his brother John' will be together again at Jesus' agony (26:37). In this way also Matthew establishes a link between glorification and suffering.

From the beginning of Matthew's gospel we have seen that one of his main aims is to present Jesus as the fulfilment of the promises of God expressed in the Jewish Scriptures (see especially 5:17-48). That he is making the same point here becomes clear from a comparison of the magnificent scenes from the Old Testament which speak of the experience of Moses and Elijah on the mountain with the even more magnificent scene painted here by Matthew.

Moses, too, encounters God on a high mountain (Exodus 24:12, 24:15-18; 34:3). A cloud descends and overshadows the mountain (Exodus 24:15-18; 34:5). God speaks from the cloud (Exodus 24:16). Moses becomes radiant (Exodus 34:29-30,35). Those who see his radiance become afraid (Exodus 34:30). This happens after six days (Exodus 24:16).

Elijah journeyed 'forty days and forty nights' to this same mountain in the hope of seeing God. He heard God, but it was in 'sheer silence' and with his face 'wrapped in a mantle'. He was told:

'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

– 1Kings 19:11-13

<sup>1</sup> Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and *his brother John* and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. <sup>2</sup> And he was transfigured before them, and his face *shone like the sun*, and his clothes became dazzling white. <sup>3</sup> Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

<sup>4</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus, '*Lord*, it is good for us to be here; *if you wish*, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.'

<sup>5</sup> While he was still speaking, suddenly a *bright cloud* overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, '*This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!*'

<sup>6</sup> When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. <sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them, saying, '*Get up and do not be afraid.*' <sup>8</sup> And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

compare Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36

## The transfiguration

On the mountain of transfiguration, Jesus is gazing on God's face and listening to God's voice. His whole being is caught up in God's glory, 'and his face shone like the sun' (see Exodus 34:29). He transcends the Law and the Prophets, for he is God's 'Son, the beloved' with whom God is 'well pleased'. The words 'with whom I am well pleased', present in this context only in Matthew, take us back to Jesus' Baptism (3:17), but also to the suffering servant of Isaiah 42:1 (see Matthew 12:18). It is to him that they are to listen (see Deuteronomy 18:15). So it is that when the three disciples looked up 'they saw no one except Jesus himself alone' ('alone' is emphatic in the Greek). Moses and the Prophets prepared the way for Jesus. Now, however, God's word is revealed fully in him.

Paul treats of the same subject in a number of places. We might recall here his words to the community at Corinth (written c.56AD):

To this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

– 2Corinthians 3:15-18

Matthew's portrait is rich in symbolism. The glory-cloud reminds us of the cloud that was a symbol of God leading his people through the desert (Exodus 13:21; see 40:34-35). It was from within this cloud that God spoke to Moses 'that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after' (Exodus 19:9). Matthew is portraying Jesus as the new Moses, leading his disciples to the promised land. It is to Jesus now that they must listen. The cloud reminds us, too, of God's presence in the temple (1Kings 8:10; Ezekiel 10:3-4). Jesus is God's new temple (John 2:21). The words spoken by God recall the words spoken at Jesus' baptism (3:17): God who brought order to primeval chaos (Genesis 1:2) is beginning a new creation with his Son.

These same themes are reinforced by the mention of 'dwellings', that is to say 'tents' or 'tabernacles'. The Jewish New Year Feast of Tabernacles, which took place 'six days' after the Day of Atonement, commemorated creation, God's giving of the covenant on Sinai, and God's presence in the temple (compare Exodus 24:15-17). Peter thinks that he can substitute a dwelling made by human hands for the real presence of God symbolised by the cloud, but this is not the kind of house that Jesus intends to build upon him (16:18).

Matthew alone tells us that when the disciples heard God's word 'they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear'. This is the proper response to the awesome communication that God deigns to have with us. The word of God is not something to which we should ever become accustomed. Matthew has stressed throughout his gospel the importance of listening with reverence to God and of basing our lives upon what we hear (see 7:24-27).

However, it is not a reverence that paralyses us, as is shown by the words immediately added by Matthew: ‘Jesus came and touched them, saying, “get up and do not be afraid”’. It is Jesus who makes the approach (compare 28:18) and his touch is always healing (8:3;15; 9:20,21,29; 14:36). The word for ‘get up’ is the same word used for the resurrection. They are as though dead, and it is the glorified Jesus who touches them and raises to a new life those whom he has called to be the light of the world (5:14). They experience a foretaste of what was promised them in 16:28.

It is rarely possible to go behind the highly dramatised portraits of the gospel to discover, with any precision, the historical events that lie behind them. The gospels, as we noted in the introductory chapter, were simply not written to answer our modern interest in establishing exact empirically verifiable data. Such data is the basis for everything Matthew writes, but his concern is to bring out the inner meaning of events - a meaning often grasped only in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus (see the following verse, 17:9). The Transfiguration experience is mentioned also in the Second Letter of Peter:

We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

– 2Peter 1:16-18

**<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them,**

**‘Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.’**

**<sup>10</sup> And the disciples asked him, ‘Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’**

**<sup>11</sup> He replied, ‘Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things;**

**<sup>12</sup> but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.’**

**<sup>13</sup> Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.**

compare Mark 9:9-13

**The disciples come to understand that the Baptist is the precursor of Jesus also in his sufferings.**

This passage seems to reflect two areas of discussion in the early Church. The first was about the relationship between Elijah, John the Baptist and Jesus. The second was about the relationship between the Son of Man (see commentary on 8:20) and Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Matthew has already made a connection between John the Baptist and Elijah (3:4; 11:14; see Malachi 3:1 and 4:5-6). Here he reminds the reader of the Baptist’s violent death (see 14:1-12). Jezebel sought the life of Elijah (1Kings 19:2). Herodias brought about the murder of the Baptist (14:8).

In the previous scene we saw both Moses and Elijah in glory. Essential to grasping the significance of Matthew’s portrait is the fact that both of them suffered before being taken into glory:

From the following passage we get a taste of some of the suffering which Moses had to go through in leading the people to freedom:

Moses said to the Lord, ‘Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favour in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, “Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,” to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once-- if I have found favour in your sight-- and do not let me see my misery.

– Numbers 11:11-15

Moses is a model for the songs of the suffering servant of the Lord in the Isaiah scroll (see especially Isaiah 50:6 and 53:1-12). Elijah’s mission, too, involved him in suffering (1 Kings 19:2-10). Jesus is telling his disciples that if they go back and read the Law and the Prophets they will find there the same central message that he is trying to convey to them: ‘So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands’. The experience of the Transfiguration has enabled the disciples to take one more step of understanding (see 13:51; 16:12).

### The necessity of faith

The early 16th century artist, Raphael, has made a powerful comment on this scene in a famous painting, preserved in the Vatican Museum. In the upper part of the painting we see Jesus transfigured and the three disciples sleeping. However the main action is occurring in the lower half, which depicts the scene upon which we are reflecting.

The father is pleading with the other nine apostles, who are making all kinds of excuses for their inability to heal the boy. The only one who is actually looking up to Jesus is the boy himself, his arm raised and pointing to Jesus, thus providing the link between the upper and lower parts of the canvas. He knows who the source of healing is, even if no one else does. In the centre of the lower scene, with her back towards us, is the figure of a woman, introduced into the scene by Raphael. She is 'Faith', and seems to be saying to the apostles: You do not have to wait for him to come. If you had faith you could heal the boy.

In Matthew's portrait, the father is presented as a disciple, falling on his knees before Jesus, calling him 'Lord' and begging mercy for his son. The disciples are powerless to heal the boy, because of the weakness of their faith (compare 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). The others in the scene, typifying most of Jesus' contemporaries are spoken of as 'faithless'. Like their ancestors in the desert they do not believe that God is present among them with power to heal.

Jesus tells the father to bring the boy to him. Coming from the intimacy of his communion with God on the mountain, Jesus heals the boy. The disciples would be able to do the same if only they put their faith in God.

The point is not that physical healing would always happen if we had faith. Physical illness is not of itself a barrier to grace or to being in communion with God. Rather, Matthew is asserting that grace is always operating and that we need faith to be open to grace so that God's healing love can be effective in our lives. What this healing love will do is best left to the wisdom of God to determine.

**<sup>14</sup> When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him, <sup>15</sup> and said, 'Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water.**

**<sup>16</sup> And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.'**

**<sup>17</sup> Jesus answered, 'You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.'**

**<sup>18</sup> And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured *instantly*.**

**<sup>19</sup> Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, 'Why could we not cast it out?' <sup>20</sup> He said to them, 'Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there," and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you .** (Some manuscripts add <sup>21</sup> But this kind does not come out except by prayer and fasting).

compare Mark 9:14-29  
Luke 9:37-43

verse 20 compare Matthew 21:21;  
Mark 11:23; Luke 17:6

<sup>22</sup> **As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands,**

<sup>23</sup> **and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.'** *And they were greatly distressed.*

compare Mark 9:30-32  
Luke 9:44-45

### **The Son of Man is going to die and rise again (II)**

This is the second time that Jesus has spoken of his coming suffering and resurrection (see 16:21; on his suffering, see also 17:12). Here he adds that he will be 'betrayed', and Matthew tells us that the disciples 'were greatly distressed'. Having listened to Jesus they no longer, like Peter earlier (16:22), reject the idea of suffering out of hand. However, their distress means that they are still unable to understand that the life promised by God is a resurrected life, coming only through the experience of death.

## The liberty of God's children

The 'temple tax' (literally the 'didrachma') was a symbol of the personal link between each member of the community of Israel and God, a reminder of God's action in ransoming them from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 30:16). Not all were obliged to pay it, and opinions differed as to how often it should be paid. It was used to support the temple sacrificial system. After 70AD the tax went to support the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome.

The collectors speak of Jesus as 'your teacher' (compare 8:19; 9:11; 23:8). Claiming to be the 'Son' (see 17:6), and claiming sonship for his disciples, Jesus speaks about the custom duties and direct poll-taxes imposed by kings. The king does not demand them from his own family. God acts as a Father in his kingdom, and his children are, therefore, exempt.

There is a new and closer intimacy with God shared by those of the renewed Israel who choose to follow Jesus and form his new covenant community.

However, Jesus has no intention of using his freedom either to scandalise or to provoke, so he tells Simon to pay a stater (the equivalent of four drachmas) out of his own labour as a fisherman. Behind the folklore accretions, Peter is being presented as the first of the apostles. Are we also to think of him as fulfilling the purpose of the law by carrying out his mission as one who 'fishes for people' (4:19)?

**<sup>24</sup> When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and said, 'Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?'**

**<sup>25</sup> He said, 'Yes, he does.' And when he came home, Jesus spoke of it first, asking, 'What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children [sons] or from others?'**

**<sup>26</sup> When Peter said, 'From others,' Jesus said to him, 'Then the children [sons] are free.'**

**<sup>27</sup> However, so that we do not give offence to them, go to the sea and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin [stater]; take that and give it to them for you and me.'**