

**THE CHOICE FOR AND AGAINST
GOD'S MESSIAH
Matthew 19:3 - 23:39**

Introductory Comment

Matthew's first teaching section focused on Jesus' sayings concerning discipleship. This was followed by the first narrative section (chapters 8-9) in which we watched Jesus as he drew people into communion with God through his healing and liberating power. The second teaching section concerned mission, and in the narrative section which followed it (chapter 11-12) we saw Jesus being rejected and yet responding with love. The third teaching section consisted of parables of the kingdom, and the narrative section which followed (chapters 14-17) focused on Jesus as he educated his disciples, drawing them to a deeper understanding and faith, and forming them into a covenant community.

We have just completed the fourth teaching section in which Matthew focused on how the community of Jesus' disciples is to work for and maintain unity. Now, as Jesus journeys to Jerusalem, the contrast between those who are for him and those who are against him becomes more and more stark. The reader is invited to choose in favour of God's Messiah.

PART A. Journeying with Jesus to Jerusalem (19:3 - 20:34)**Fidelity to the marriage covenant**

Jesus has just said: ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them’ (18:20). What does this mean for the primary and most intimate community which is created by the marriage covenant? What effect does the presence of Jesus have for a Christian husband and wife?

Jesus’ teaching comes by way of a response given to a question on divorce asked him by the Pharisees ‘to test him’. Jesus is in Herod’s territory, and perhaps they are trying to force Jesus into a position where Herod will act towards him as he did towards John the Baptist, who was imprisoned and then killed because of his opposition to Herod marrying his brother’s wife (14:3).

They ask their question in terms of a debate that was current at the time regarding the proper interpretation of the Law expressed in the following text attributed here to Moses (19:7):

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession.

– Deuteronomy 24:1-4

Rabbi Hillel and his disciples interpreted the words ‘something objectionable’ in the above text as allowing a husband to divorce his wife if he found her unsatisfactory for any reason at all. Rabbi Shammai allowed divorce only for adultery. The Pharisees are asking Jesus where he stands on this issue.

It must first be noted that the text from Deuteronomy says nothing about the rightness or wrongness of divorce. It is an attempt to regularise an already existing practice in such a way as to give the divorced woman some security. If her husband divorces her, she can at least live without fearing that he can call her back at whim.

³ Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?’

compare Mark 10:2

⁴ He answered, 'Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning "made them male and female,"

⁵ and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"?

⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

⁷ They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?'

⁸ He said to them, 'It was because you were so hard-hearted that *Moses* allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

⁹ And I say to you whoever divorces his wife, *except for unchastity*, and marries another commits adultery.'

compare Mark 10:3-12

verse 9 compare
Matthew 5:32; Luke 16:18

Jesus himself goes back to the words from Scripture that express God's will 'from the beginning'. He quotes from the book of Genesis (Genesis 1:27 and 2:24). These texts demonstrate, in a way that the Pharisees would have to respect, that in God's original design marriage is not about male rights, but about male-female communion. Human beings have no right to use human legislation to bypass God's will.

It is important to note that nowhere in this passage does Jesus enter into the question of which marriage relationships God has in fact 'joined together'. He is saying that, on the assumption that a particular union of man and woman is a true marriage, men cannot claim rights for themselves that ignore the rights of women, or that cut across the very purpose of marriage which is that man and woman be bound into an ever deeper communion of love. It is especially in our ability to love than men and women are made in God's image and likeness.

Jesus goes on to speak of adultery. This was defined in Jewish law as a sexual union which is contrary to a husband's rights over his wife. As far as Jewish law was concerned, if a man had sexual intercourse with a married woman, he committed adultery against her husband. If, on the other hand, a married man had sexual intercourse with an unmarried woman no adultery was committed, because no male rights were contravened.

The legislation from Deuteronomy (see the previous page) was an early attempt to give some protection to a divorced woman. Jesus goes much further. He declares that divorce is contrary to God's will (a point which Matthew himself refines as we shall shortly see). Jesus also declares that a man 'who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery'.

A text from the prophet Malachi points in the same direction. Just as many of the prophets likened God's covenant with the people to that of marriage (see Jeremiah 3:1-12; Ezekiel 16,23; Isaiah 54:6), so Malachi regards breaking the marriage covenant as breaking the covenant with God (see Malachi 2:13-16).

Jesus qualifies his command against divorce and remarriage with the words 'except for unchastity' (see also 5:32). The word is not 'adultery' (see 15:19), but a more general word (Greek: *porneia*, translating Hebrew *zenut*) used elsewhere in the New Testament to cover a wide range of unlawful sexual behaviour. Scholars are not all in agreement as to the meaning of 'unchastity' (*porneia*) in the present context.

However it probably refers to marriage unions that are illicit according to the norms of Leviticus 18:6-18. These are mainly concerned with incest. These laws applied not only to Jews but to Gentiles living in the community (see Leviticus 18:26), so it is understandable that Jewish Christians would have continued to follow them and would have expected Gentile Christians to do the same.

Confirmation for this interpretation comes from the decisions of the Jerusalem Assembly which are found in Acts 15:20,29. Those at the Assembly were concerned for the social harmony of Christian groups in largely Jewish settings. It was agreed that Gentile Christians did not have to follow Jewish Law. Exceptions were made, however, for certain social customs that had a long history and that had always been applied to Gentiles. James came to the following decision:

I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication (Greek: *porneia*) and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues.

– Acts 15:19-21

We know that this decision was sent on to Antioch (Acts 15:21), and so, in all likelihood, by including the words ‘except for unchastity’, Matthew wishes to remind his community of the decision of the Jerusalem Assembly. Matthew’s understanding is that when Jesus condemned divorce he was speaking of true marriages, not ones entered into in contravention of the law. This is not the place to enter into a lengthy analysis of why fidelity to a marriage commitment is so important. The following statements go to the heart of the matter:

The intimate partnership of life and love which constitutes the married state ... is rooted in the contract of the partners, that is, in their irrevocable personal consent. ... It receives its stability from the human act by which the partners mutually surrender themselves to each other ... Married love is an affection between two persons rooted in the will and it embraces the good of the whole person. It can enrich the sentiments of the spirit and their physical expression with a unique dignity and ennoble them as the special elements and signs of the friendship proper to marriage ... A love like that, bringing together the human and the divine, leads the partners to a free and mutual giving of self, experienced in tenderness and action, and permeates their whole lives.

– Vatican II, GS n.48-49

Married love is an act of the free will. The dynamism of this act ensures not only that it endures through the joys and sorrows of daily life, but also that it grows so that husband and wife become in a way one heart and one soul, and together attain their human fulfillment. It is a love that is total - that very special form of personal friendship in which husband and wife generously share everything, allowing no unreasonable exceptions or thinking just of their own interests. Whoever really loves his partner loves not only for what he receives, but loves that partner for her own sake, content to be able to enrich the other with the gift of himself.

– Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* n.9

Marriage fidelity

In principle, Jesus is telling the male lawyers to stop using divorce to support male whims and to go back to God's original intention which is that men and women should be sacraments to each other of God's faithful love. However, as the Assembly of Jerusalem recognised, not all marriages are in accordance with God's will.

The earliest account of Jesus' teaching on this matter is found in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, written probably in 54AD, that is, probably as much as twenty-five years prior to Matthew's gospel. Paul is concerned not with the requirements of law but with the breakdown of marriage which can result from a failure to share Christian values. He begins by reminding his readers of Jesus' command:

To the married I give this command-- not I but the Lord-- that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

– 1Corinthians 7:10-11

The parallel with Matthew's account is obvious. Paul, however, goes on to write:

To the rest I say – I and not the Lord – that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you. Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.

– 1Corinthians 7:12-16

Paul is writing to a community which included husbands who had joined the Christian community while their wives remained outside, and wives who had joined the community while their husbands remained outside. Sometimes this created conflicts within the marriage that were unresolvable. He admits that he has received no direct teaching of Jesus on the subject, but that does not prevent him from reflecting upon the problem in the light of the gospel.

Paul's first response and final plea are to encourage Christian husbands and wives to remain in their married relationship. However, he acknowledges that there could be situations where this is not possible, and in these circumstances he allows for the possibility, even the need, to separate, and, if appropriate, to enter into another marriage 'the brother or sister is not bound'. Two values are highlighted by Paul. The first is faith, and the second is peace. It is obvious that an unbelieving partner — one, that is, who is not committed to the values espoused by Jesus — may make it impossible for the believing partner to live his or her Christian life. The failure to share such basic values may make living together in peace quite impossible. Family values, though most important, are not absolute. Jesus often indicates that they must give way to values of a higher order (see 8:21-22; 10:35-37; 12:50; 19:29).

The point Paul is making is that when one of the marriage partners is not a believer this is not, in itself, a reason to divorce. However, when ties, even those as important as marriage, are an obstacle to living as a disciple of Jesus ‘the brother or sister (that is to say the Christian man or woman) is not bound’.

Each community and each married person has to enter into a careful and honest spiritual discernment in this matter. Paul’s words and Matthew’s are a warning to us not to quote Jesus’ words against divorce as absolute. To do so would be an appalling abuse — the kind of abuse for which Jesus himself spoke out so strongly against the Pharisees: the abuse of using the words of Scripture and their own human tradition to ‘break the commandment of God’ (15:3).

That Jesus was demanding a fidelity to marriage and a commitment to pledged love that went beyond the expectations of his contemporaries of whatever school of thought is obvious from the reaction of his disciples: ‘If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry’.

Jesus does not compromise. Being a disciple is something that is possible only in response to grace. It means dying to oneself (16:24), but if disciples lose their lives because of following Jesus, he promises them that their lives will be saved (16:25).

The present passage examines a key situation in which this dying to self is to be realised. Being a disciple of Jesus does not protect a person against the ordinary situations of hurt or misunderstanding or being the victim of another person’s infidelity that are part of the human condition. The fact that two disciples of Jesus pledge their love to each other in faith does not guarantee them against marriage breakdown. Love does not control and one partner cannot prevent the sin or the infidelity or the breaking of the covenant by the other.

On the assumption that two people have a real marriage, Jesus is telling his disciples that they must remain faithful to their marriage vows. For some whose marriage has broken down, this will mean a life of complete continence. It will mean that they will be choosing in effect to live like eunuchs ‘for the sake of the kingdom of heaven’. They will be graced to do it, and Jesus ends with the plea that if their hearts are large enough to take in this teaching, they should take it in.

¹⁰ His disciples said to him, ‘If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.’

¹¹ But he said to them, ‘Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given.’

¹² For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.’

Being celibate like Jesus

With the instruction comes the promise that, in the mystery of God's providence, they will not lack love in their lives and the goal of their marriage will, by grace, be achieved in a way that transcends their expectations. Jesus is offering life to his disciples. In the area of marriage, it will be a life of self-sacrifice, of service, of forgiveness, and a sacrament of God's fidelity. It will involve the cross, but it is life that he is offering, and the grace to sustain a trust, committed for life and held through the journey of the cross to the glory of the resurrection. According to the law of Deuteronomy (23:1) eunuchs were excluded from the Lord's assembly. The disciples of Isaiah did not judge this ruling to be an expression of God's will:

Thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

– Isaiah 56:4-5

Being faithful to one's marriage may mean for some a life of continence, but it will not mean a life without love, for a disciple will know the intimate love of God, shared with Jesus. This seems to be Matthew's reason for including the saying on eunuchs in this context. However, it is likely that he has chosen from the tradition a saying of Jesus originally given in response to those who laughed at his remaining unmarried, accusing him of being a 'eunuch'. In its original context, then, it was probably a declaration by Jesus that he is celibate by choice, because of the special intimacy of his love-communion with God his Father, and because of the special demands of his mission to announce and realise the kingdom of his Father in this world.

From the beginning there have been those in the Christian community who have wanted to be like Jesus even in his celibate way of loving. Paul is a prime example (see 1 Corinthians 7:7,32-35). The celibate disciple was seen in a special way by the Christian community as a symbol of the love of Christ whose heart was open to all to 'draw all to myself' (John 12:32). It was also seen as a special consecration in love to Jesus himself, and so was a sign of love and an encouragement towards love for the community. It was seen as a special symbol of the reality of the transcendent.

It is appropriate that Matthew 19:12 has been used throughout the church's history to support the choice by some disciples to live a celibate life after the example of Jesus. In this context, Jesus' final words are particularly apt. The NRSV translates: 'Let anyone accept this who can'. The Greek verb used here is *chorein* from which comes our English word 'choreography'. The image is one of space. A better translation might be: 'If you have space in your heart for this, do it!'

The miracle of celibate love is indeed a fruit of grace. It is possible only where a heart has been expanded by the Spirit to share in the love that filled the heart of Jesus.

Little children as examples for disciples

Jesus has already said: 'Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (18:3). However, to open oneself to God as one's 'Father' and to be open to love as was Jesus makes us, like him, vulnerable to abuse and rejection.

It is for this reason that Jesus also said: 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me' (18:5). The disciples, however, have failed to grasp the lesson. They understand greatness still in terms of position and power.

They find it easy to reject the little children, much as in the previous passage husbands took it as their right to reject a wife who no longer pleased them.

Jesus demonstrates how his disciples must welcome the small and the vulnerable. He reminds them that the kingdom of which he is the Messiah belongs to those who, like these children, come seeking his embrace and welcoming it.

¹³ Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray.

The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them;

¹⁴ but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.'

¹⁵ And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

compare Mark 10:13-16
Luke 18:15-17

16 Then someone came to him and said, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?'

17 And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.'

18 He said to him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness;

19 Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

20 The young man said to him, 'I have kept all these; what do I still lack?'

21 Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'

22 When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

We are powerless of ourselves to enter God's kingdom

Pope John-Paul II gives a long reflection on this passage in his encyclical 'Veritatis Splendor, 1993, 6-27.

This young man is not a disciple, though he comes to Jesus to learn from him. He calls Jesus 'Teacher' not 'Lord'. He is seeking eternal life. The word 'eternal' has already occurred in Matthew in reference to the fire of Gehenna (18:8). It means 'belonging to a dimension outside space and time' - the dimension of the divine. The young man is concerned not with the life that we experience here and now in our present existence, but with the life that belongs to that other world (the 'age to come', 12:32) which lies beyond the horizon of death and which he hopes to have at the resurrection.

He assumes that there is some way in which he can earn this life by doing good deeds, and he wants to know what he must do. Jesus immediately directs his attention to the 'only one who is good', for the kind of life the young man desires can come only as a gift from God. However, it is a gift that God certainly offers. It can be received, however, only by one who is willing to do all he can to be open to receive it, and so Jesus begins by answering the man's questions. Having directed the man's attention to those commandments that are concerned with the way we treat other people (see Exodus 20:12-16; Deuteronomy 5:16-20), Jesus adds: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18; see also Matthew 22:39). Note the repetition of the phrase 'if you wish' (19:17, 19:20). Jesus, as always, respects our freedom.

The young man, however, is not satisfied. He wants to be 'perfect'; that is to say, he wants to be open to the fullness of life that alone will satisfy his longing. In Matthew's gospel being perfect means perfectly doing God's will, the way Jesus does it, as a son (see 5:48). Here, however, we come up against the limits of what we can do. Being perfect is possible only by following Jesus, which, in this context, replace the first three commandment.

We have to taste the bitterness of our own powerlessness to achieve eternal life of ourselves. We have to let go of all that has, to this point, brought us to where we are. We have to dispossess ourselves. In this man's case it was a matter of wealth, 'for he had many possessions'. In another person's case it might be intellectual ability, or natural charm, or physical wellbeing, or good reputation, or love and admiration from others. Whatever it is, we have to learn not to be self-reliant, for 'eternal life' is not something we can give ourselves.

This young man 'went away grieving', unable to let go, unwilling to accept to be dependent, unwilling to lose control, unwilling to be 'poor in spirit' (5:3), to be among 'the little ones who believe in me' (18:6); unwilling to 'follow' Jesus. Our mind goes back to the words of Jesus: 'Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life because of me will find it' (16:25). It is material possessions that are holding this man back from answering God's call. He is possessed by his possessions, and lacks the freedom to part with them, even though he is yearning for eternal life and learns what is required of him to find it.

It is possible that the word 'camel' (Greek: kamêlos) might be meant to be 'hawser' (Greek: kamilos). One might be able to work a thin thread through the eye of a needle, but not the thick rope used for attaching a boat to a wharf!

The shock of Jesus' teaching is beginning to come home to the disciples. In many ways material possessions are the least problematic of all. If attachment to them can hold a person back from life, what about the more subtle and penetrating possessions like reputation, learning, positions of power? Do we really have to be ready to let go anything and everything if the call from God asks this of us? If this is the case 'Who can be saved?'

Jesus looks intently at them. At last they are beginning to grasp something of the 'secrets of the kingdom of heaven' (13:11). If we cannot, of ourselves, let go of material possessions, then it is obvious that we cannot, of ourselves, let go any security. We will need God's grace to make it possible.

²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven,

²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'

²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, 'Then who can be saved?'

²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.'

compare Mark 10:23-27
Luke 18:24-27

Detachment

This is why John of the Cross sees the dark night of the senses and of the soul as a ‘sheer grace’. ‘Nobody’, he writes, ‘is able alone to empty himself of all his appetites in order to reach God’(Ascent I.1.5). He also warns us of those more subtle ‘possessions’ (even quite spiritual ones) that hold us back from journeying with Jesus:

They must not so rely on their sharp intellects nor upon gifts received from God as to believe that their attachments or appetites will not blind, darken, and cause them to grow gradually worse.

– Ascent, I.8.6

Attachment to anything that ‘possesses’ us (what we call ‘possessions’), no matter how small, will tie us down and prevent us answering the call to eternal life, even when we desire it as much as does the man in this scene. As noted earlier, John of the Cross uses the image of a bird whose leg is tied by a strong piece of string, or by the flimsiest thread. So long as the thread remains unbroken, it cannot fly (Ascent I.11.4). No more can we while we remain attached to anything other than God’s will, no matter how insignificant it may appear.

Moreover, of ourselves we need all the security we can find, and so we cannot break from these possessions on our own. We need to hear the call. We need also the grace of God to untie us and set us free. In this, as in so many other aspects of the Christian life, we find an encouraging example in Saint Paul, who was able to write:

I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

– Philippians 4:11-13

Jesus' disciples will inherit eternal life

Peter and the other disciples have done what the rich young man was unwilling to do: they have left everything and followed Jesus. When Jesus first called Peter and his brother, they 'left their nets and followed him' (4:20). Likewise, James and his brother John 'left the boat and their father and followed him' (4:22). When Jesus called Matthew 'he got up and followed him' (9:9). Will they, having left everything for him, find eternal life?

Earlier Jesus had promised that 'those who lose their life because of me will find it' (16:25). Here he spells out some of the experiences that losing one's life might involve, such as leaving house, family and land. When disciples do this 'because of my name', that is, because of Jesus and his mission, they will inherit eternal life (see 19:16). Moreover they will experience here a hundredfold for what they have given up.

When Matthew speaks of the 'disciples' his focus is primarily on the twelve who symbolise us all. At the last judgment, when all forms of evil are finally vanquished and the kingdom of God is finally established, the disciples will be with the Son of Man. Their lives, conformed to that of Jesus, will be the standard by which everyone will be judged.

27 Then Peter said in reply, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?'

28 Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.'

29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake [because of my name], will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.

compare Mark 10:28-30

Luke 18:28-30

verse 28 compare Luke 22:30

³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

¹ *For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard.*

² *After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.*

³ *When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace;*

⁴ *and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went.*

⁵ *When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.*

⁶ *And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?"*

⁷ *They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard."*

verse 30 compare Mark 10:31

Luke 13:30

The parable of the workers in the vineyard

The kingdom of God — the life of communion with God experienced by Jesus and offered by him to those who are willing to be his disciples — is something that can in no way be bought, earned or achieved by human effort.

This does not mean that we will receive it if we just sit and wait. We must do all we can to be ready to hear God's word and to obey it. We must keep working the soil, trusting that God wants to sow the seed. We must prepare the tackle well and launch the boat and keep throwing out the net even when we catch no fish, trusting that God wants to fill the nets. We have to be willing to row hard all night against the heavy seas even though we are making no headway, trusting that God will calm the sea and bring us to our destination. All this is demanding. It is what the gospel means by loving God with all our heart and soul and strength.

Thinking we can enter the kingdom by our own efforts is the greatest barrier to receiving God's offering of life, so there is no substitute for becoming poor in spirit (5:3), for becoming humble like a child (18:3). The possessions of the rich young man could not buy entry and he had to get rid of them if he wanted to follow Jesus and so have eternal life (19:21).

All this goes against our normal expectations. Those who rely on their many possessions are those least able to receive the gift that Jesus is offering. Those with empty hands are the ones most able to receive. 'Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first' (19:30 and 20:16).

The parable makes it clear that God's offer is for all — everyone in the market place of this world. It is also an offering that is repeated again and again — all through the day. The one making the offer is called in the parable the 'landowner'. Literally the expression is 'the lord of the house', a term already used of Jesus (10:25; 13:27). The house is the church, the community of Jesus' disciples.

What each one is offered is what each one needs: what Jesus calls 'our daily bread' (6:11), enough dough to bake bread for the following day. We are to wonder at God's generosity. There is no place for envy.

The message is one that transcends any particular situation. In Matthew's community it would have had a special application to the Jewish Christians (those called early) and the Gentile Christians (those called late). Whether called early or called late, they must be grateful for the gift of faith and be delighted to see others enjoying it with them.

⁸ *'When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first."*

⁹ *When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.*

¹⁰ *Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.*

¹¹ *And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,*

¹² *saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat."*

¹³ *But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?"*

¹⁴ *Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.*

¹⁵ *Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"*

¹⁶ *So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'*

17 While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way,

18 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death;

19 then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised.'

The Son of Man is going to die and rise again (III)

For the third time Jesus speaks of his approaching suffering and resurrection (see 16:21; 17:22-23). The threefold repetition highlights the certainty and unavoidability of what Jesus must face. Jerusalem is mentioned twice, and attention is drawn to the journey. We now learn that the betrayal will also be to the 'Gentiles'. The details of his suffering, written by Matthew in the light of Jesus' actual experience, are then added, including mention of 'crucifixion'.

The shadow of suffering was first cast over Jesus in Matthew's prologue when Joseph was warned that Herod was searching for the child to destroy him (2:13). Herod failed in his intention, but the slaughter of the tiny children in Bethlehem, and Rachel's lament (2:18) introduced a mood that, along with the perfume of the myrrh (2:11), prepared the reader for a gospel that would not be without pain.

In his beatitudes, Jesus spoke of persecution (5:10-12), and identified with the 'Son of Man'(8:20), expressing solidarity with the oppressed and suffering. It soon became obvious that the religious leaders were resisting his ministry (9:3,11,34) and in this context Jesus spoke of himself as a bridegroom, but one who would be 'taken away from them' (9:15). In instructing his disciples concerning the mission that he wished to share with them, once again he warns them of persecution (10:16-25). They must expect to be treated as he is treated (10:25). Following Jesus means taking up a cross (10:38).

The resistance of the religious leaders hardens into opposition till we are told that they 'went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him'(12:14). The people of his own town do not trust him (13:54-58), and John the Baptist is murdered (14:10). This is now the third time after Peter's expression of faith at Caesarea Philippi, that Jesus speaks of his coming betrayal, suffering and death.

We might wonder why Matthew presents Jesus' teaching on suffering as Jesus' first lesson to his disciples. We might wonder, moreover, why he presents it in such a persistent and definitive way. Furthermore, when we go back and re-examine Jesus' first statement on the matter we notice that he says: 'the Son of Man must undergo great suffering'(16:21). Why 'must'? Whence comes this necessity? Let us pause here to reflect upon the mystery of suffering as it is presented in the New Testament.

compare
Mark 10:32-34
Luke 18:31-34

Suffering in the life of Jesus

A superficial reading of the New Testament could leave one with the impression that God, from all eternity, had a plan for our redemption, and part of the plan was that Jesus should die on the cross. After all, Jesus did pray in his agony: ‘not what I want but what you [my Father] want’ (26:29). We have already heard him telling his disciples that he ‘must undergo great suffering’ (16:21), and there is a tradition in some later writings of the Old Testament that link the Messiah with suffering.¹

If, however, Jesus’ death could be described simply as God’s will, we would have to say that those who condemned Jesus to death and those who crucified him were carrying out God’s will. This would make what they did an act of obedience, and therefore virtuous. Such a conclusion obviously makes no sense. To imagine that it was God and not sinful human beings who willed the murder of Jesus can only lead to a gross misunderstanding of the place of God in Jesus’ life – a misunderstanding that it is hardly short of blasphemy. It was not God who crucified Jesus; it was the Jewish leadership, the fickle crowd, the Roman prefect and the ‘obedient’ soldiers. God’s part in what happened is seen in the resurrection. This is clearly expressed in the early sermons which we find in Acts:

This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

– Acts 2:23-24. See also Acts 3:13-15; 4:10; 13:28-30

What does it mean to say, on the one hand, that the suffering inflicted upon Jesus was the sinful responsibility of those who refused to obey God’s will, and yet, on the other hand, that it all came within God’s providential design and grace? Whatever we mean by God’s providential design, it cannot be such as to leave no room for human freedom. We are not automatons; we are not puppets of fate. We experience some freedom, however limited and conditioned. If so much human suffering results from our saying No to God’s loving design, it is also true that wonderful good results from our saying Yes. Without freedom there would be no sin. Equally, without freedom, there would be no compassion, no generosity, no heroism, no love. Freedom is at the very heart of what it means to be a person. God made us this way, and respects what he has made.

God is also constantly inspiring everyone to behave in ways that are loving. To the extent that we, knowingly or unknowingly, respond to God’s inspiration, we behave responsibly and creatively and God’s will is done. To the extent that we, knowingly or unknowingly, reject God’s inspiration, we behave irresponsibly, and God’s will is not done. Any particular decision is likely to be a mixture: we partly respond and partly hold back.

The crucifixion of Jesus would have to be defined as an unjust act. God does not will that innocent people be sentenced unjustly to death. Paul includes the murder of Jesus with the persecuting of the Christians as acts that ‘displease God’ (1Thessalonians 2:14-15).

¹See Ezekiel 4:1-6; Zechariah 9-14; Daniel 11:31-35; 12:1-10; Wisdom 2:12-20.

Suffering

The Sanhedrin and Pilate condemned Jesus to death precisely because they refused to listen to God; they refused to face the truth. Their action was sinful, and so, by definition, contrary to God's will. John has Jesus say as much: 'You kill me because there is no place in you for my word'(John 8:37). Stephen links the crucifying of Jesus with the persecution that was inflicted on the prophets. In behaving in this way, they were precisely 'opposing the Holy Spirit' (Acts 7:51). This point was made by Jesus himself:

You are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors . . . Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

– Matthew 23:31-32,37; compare Acts 7:52

God's attitude to sending his Son is expressed beautifully by Jesus himself in a parable which directly refers to his passion. It is about a man who planted a vineyard and kept hoping to enjoy its fruits. Everyone he sent to deal with the tenants was murdered or badly treated:

Finally the landowner sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

– Matthew 21:37-39

Had we respected the Son and listened to him, there would have been no crucifixion. God sent his Son to 'give his life', in the sense of making every moment a love-offering of himself to others. Jesus gave himself to the leper, and to the paralysed man; he gave himself to the sinners and prostitutes and outsiders; he gave himself to carrying out the mission of love given him by the Father. This self-giving brought him up against the resistance of those who refused to listen (Matthew 12:14). When, sinfully and resisting the Holy Spirit, they tracked him down to effect their evil purpose, what was he to do?

His mission looked like a failure. The temple authorities were not listening; nor were the Pharisees. There was division even among his chosen disciples, who did not appear to be strong enough to carry on without him. Death must have seemed to Jesus to make no sense. He needed more time to do what he knew his Father wanted him to do. There had to be another way.

As sometimes happens to us, the sinful decisions of other people left him no room to manoeuvre. Heroically, he determined to continue carrying out his Father's will. He determined to continue giving his life. He determined to continue to preach the good news of God's saving love. He determined to remain prayerful and forgiving and patient, and to continue to take the side of the poor who were crying to God for help.

On the night before he died he gave a meaning to his approaching death. His life was all that he had left, and he made his death, as he had made everything else, an offering of love.

When it is said that his death redeemed us, we mean, rather, that it was the way he died. His death was another atrocious murder, performed in God's name by hypocritical people determined to protect their own interests. His death was brought about by others.

The way he died, however, was determined by Jesus himself, and his manner of dying — in prayer, and faith and love and forgiveness and compassion — gave the final demonstration of the extent of his love (John 15:13). It was this love-giving, this self-giving, this life-giving that God willed. Thanks to Jesus' fidelity to his Father's will, not even the injustice and disobedience of those who crucified Jesus could thwart God's eternal design.

When we turn our attention from Jesus' relationship to his Father, and focus instead on his relationship to us, a second consideration emerges. What Jesus did stands as an example for us. He shows us how to listen to God, no matter how terrible our circumstances may be. His resurrection holds out hope for us all, that God will vindicate us just as he vindicated his Son. Jesus shows us that when people behave badly towards us, we do not have to respond in the same way. 'Love one another', he said, 'just as I have loved you'(John 15:12).

However, his example would have had little power to persuade us, had he not suffered. Suffering is very much part of the human condition, and Jesus' words and example are all the more powerful in that we see him loving even when everything was against him:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.'

– Hebrews 5:7-9

Jesus demonstrated his faith in God's love even when nothing supported such faith. He also showed us how to respond in love even in the worst situations. It is this which makes his message so convincing. It is this which draws us to follow him.

We needed something as shocking as a crucifixion to shake us out of our lethargy, and to save us from the futility of being caught up in a meaningless way of life as we reacted to sin with more sin, till we lost all hope of finding our way to the fullness of life and love for which we all yearn. We needed to see Jesus loving on the cross, not because God demanded a crucifixion, but because nothing less could convince us that in our suffering we, like Jesus, are surrounded by the unconditional and persistent love of God. Suffering, even when unjustly inflicted, does not have to stop our loving.

We needed to see Jesus believing and forgiving, even when faced with ultimate rejection and the apparent meaninglessness of doing so. For now, no matter what happens to us, we are able to 'look on the one whom they have pierced'(John 19:37), and learn from him the secret of a love that alone can free us from becoming lost in a maze of sin.

Suffering

His example, and the Spirit of love that he gives us from the cross, make it possible for us to give meaning to our own sufferings by making an act of faith in God and allowing the Spirit of his love to transform our cross into a resurrection like his.

If, in our human way, we are to imagine God responding to the crucifixion, we should imagine God weeping, as Jesus wept over the city (Luke 19:41). This is God's reaction to all the terrible injustices that we humans inflict on each other by our sinful rejection of his loving inspiration.

In making us free, God takes our freedom seriously, permitting our decision to say No to love, and so permitting the consequences of such a decision. But God does not stand by as a passive observer of our folly. God is actively inspiring everyone to bring love to flower where it is absent. If we follow the example of those who crucified Jesus and refuse to listen, we must not blame God for the effects of this refusal.

Through Jesus, it is revealed to all who are willing to look and listen, that God is love. Some rejected this love. Like the people in the desert who struck at the rock (symbol of God), so those who murdered Jesus struck at his heart with a lance. Just as Moses saw water flowing from the rock to slake the thirst even of those who were rejecting God (Numbers 20:11), so the beloved disciple saw water and blood flowing from the heart of Jesus on the cross (John 19:34) for the healing even of those who were crucifying him.

There in that darkest place, in that most meaningless event, in that symbol of humanity's rejection of God, love shines forth. God did not will the unjust murder, but he did will the love-response; for it is God's love that is revealed in the heart of Jesus. It is in this sense that one can say that the death of Jesus came within God's providential plan, so that 'by the grace of God, Jesus might taste death for everyone' (Hebrews 2:9). As Jesus himself said:

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.

– John 8:28-29

When Jesus said in his agony 'Not what I want, but what you want' (Matthew 26:39), he was expressing his determination to continue, in the face of death, to carry out the mission of love given him by the Father, whatever the cost. He trusted that, in spite of the apparently meaningless death and the apparent failure it represents, his Father would see that the cause entrusted to Jesus would somehow succeed.

When Jesus' early disciples searched the Old Testament in an effort to make some divine sense out of the crucifixion, they discovered there a constant pattern of God's love persisting through rejection. In this sense, his dying fulfilled the Scriptures, bringing to a stunning climax the revelation of divine love in the history of God's people.

Jesus' way of dying, and God's taking him into his embrace in the resurrection, are at the centre of the Christian faith, revealing as they do God's love-response to human disobedience.

Our disobedience matters. It matters that we sin, and that our sin has such terrible effects on ourselves and on other people. God cannot pretend that things are other than they really are. Sin, however, cannot change the truth that God is love. This love, demonstrated in the way Jesus died, is the source of all our hope. If we believe it, we may dare the journey out of sin. If enough people believe it, there is still hope of realising Jesus' dream of God's will being done on earth as in heaven (Matthew 6:10).

Suffering in the life of the disciple

Speaking of the cross, Paul has this to say:

Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block [scandal] to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

– 1Corinthians 1:22-25

It is natural to find suffering hard to accept. If we keep our eyes on Jesus, however, it is possible to glimpse in suffering a meaning that would otherwise evade us.

We have a basic need to value ourselves, and we experience a natural urge motivating us to become a person who is worthwhile. We desire to be of value in our own eyes and, since we are social beings, we experience the need and the urge to be recognised and respected also by others.

However, we have an even more basic need. The need which is at the very core of being human is to be entirely reliant upon God, the giver and sustainer of our being. The problem is that we do not experience a correspondingly natural urge to rely on God.

Even our 'religious experiences' tend to be drawn into and understood in terms of our natural urge to be someone in our own right. So it requires a grace from God that is above and beyond our natural gifts (a 'supernatural' grace) to make us aware of our need for complete dependence on God and to motivate us to do whatever is needed to attain this transcendent good. Seeking this good demands a letting go of our reliance on our natural urges. It is here that suffering plays its irreplaceable role.

It is suffering which forces us to recognise the basic inadequacy of our natural urges and the basic flaw in our perception that we are meant to be self-reliant. It forces us to face our dependence and it invites us to trust, for we cannot reach the goal of our human fulfilment except in dependence upon and communion with God.

Without suffering, there is a tendency to stay fixed in a situation which works, which feels comfortable, and in which we feel affirmed. Suffering threatens this equilibrium, and psychic energy is engaged which drives us to face whatever it is that is causing the suffering and the effects it has upon us, and to listen at every level to what is going on in our psyche as well as our body.

Suffering

We may choose simply to hold on, to stay put, and to defend our position. However, when we listen, we hear ourselves being asked to let go, and to allow to die something that has seemed good, and perhaps has in fact been good, and to entrust ourselves to the grace that is being offered us in and through the suffering.

We are free to choose to avoid the pain of 'dying', or we can cry out in pleading prayer to God on whom we depend, entrust ourselves to God's grace, courageously endure whatever suffering is involved, and allow ourselves to 'die' (mortification) believing that God will raise us up.

Death is the ultimate situation in which this happens, but all along the road of life there are 'dyings': the ordinary psychic stages of maturation; any occasion which requires that we leave someone or something we value; coming up against our own or other people's limitations which require us to let go our self-image or our image of others, and our unrealistic hopes and dreams and expectations. The pain of 'dying' can sometimes be in proportion to the success and duration of the adaptation we have made to whatever it is that is being threatened.

Each time we accept to 'die', we experience a deeper communion with God who loves us through our dying, and who raises us up to a fuller life of deeper intimacy with him. Our fidelity, generosity and courage enable God to keep offering us a fuller life, beyond our experienced horizons. But each acceptance of the offer requires a new dying. This will involve suffering until all roots of resistance to God's love have been burned (purified) away by God's Holy Spirit, the living flame of love.

The truths contained in the above have been communicated by God to human beings in every culture and in every generation, for everyone in every situation is graced. However, the lesson is difficult to learn, and God chose that his Word would become flesh in Jesus to show us the pattern. By sharing his Spirit with us, Jesus encourages and enables us to follow him along the path of letting go, the path of suffering.

We are called to be human. To be human means to be finite, to be dependent, to receive all we are and have as a gift. As human beings, we are not immortal. Once life has been given to us as a gift, the only life we ever know comes through dying. The whole process of maturing is one of accepting the 'dyings' that the human condition, and our own and other people's sinful decisions, inflict upon us. This certainly does not mean submitting inactively to injustice. But it does mean that even when a 'dying' is laid on us unjustly, we must come to an acceptance of the reality of the dying, if we are to find a deeper life through it.

We are called, as disciples of Jesus, to choose the 'dyings' involved in giving ourselves to and for others in love. To attempt to avoid this dying leads to a destructiveness in regard to self and others.

The deepest roots of sin are in our refusal of dying, in our desire to ‘be like God’ (Genesis 3:5) — that is, to be immortal, in our attempt to build our own gods whom we can control and who will save us from dying. To resist death is to resist life, for death and life are organically related. By his dying, Jesus demonstrated this fact, released us from the fear of death (Hebrews 2:15), and taught us to persevere in trust to the end.

Perhaps the beginnings of an understanding of the cross as outlined above might help us grasp why the cross — or rather, the crucified one — is so central to Christian spirituality:

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

– Galatians 6:14

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings, by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

– Philippians 2:10-11

The fruit of Jesus’ suffering on the cross can be seen all around us, in those people who, sustained by their contemplation of Jesus crucified, have grown through suffering to a special wisdom, and compassion and gentleness. The suffering itself did not produce the fruit, but it did provide an experience of powerlessness which invited the sufferers to focus, in faith, upon the grace of God’s love, and to open themselves to receive this grace patiently, humbly and courageously.

We are called to love. We are called to suffer only in so far as suffering purifies our love. When, in the cause of love, suffering comes our way, Jesus shows us that we are not to stop loving in the hope of avoiding the suffering. Rather, through the suffering, we are to open ourselves to a purer and more refined love. It is the love that gives meaning to the suffering.

There are some especially beautiful flowers that grow only in the bed of suffering. One of these is the self-knowledge that suffering can bring us. It strips away pretence and penetrates to the core of our soul, revealing the roots of our self-reliance, pride and presumption. It makes us aware of our helplessness in a way that is not easily avoided. When we learn to accept suffering and to bear it patiently, it can purge away our pride. Humbled by pain, we turn to God who draws us into his mysterious embrace.

Suffering can bring us to the point where we come to recognise our need for love, and our total dependence upon it. This theme is particularly dear to Paul:

We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Suffering

But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture – ‘I believed, and so I spoke’ – we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.

– 2Corinthians 4:7-14

In our weakness and suffering, we experience a special strength that is not our own:

He [the Lord] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

– 2Corinthians 12:9-10

Much pain in our world results from our reaction to unjust suffering inflicted on us by others. We tend to hurt back. Or, when we do not do that, we store up the hurt and pass it on to others. In either case, the pain goes on and on.

If, however, we can bear suffering in love; if we can continue to offer love (‘offer the other cheek’, 5:39); if, while working against injustice, and while working to alleviate suffering, we are hated, excluded, reviled and defamed because of Jesus (5:11) — then indeed we are blessed, for the suffering stops with us. What is more, it exercises an extraordinary power for the conversion of those who cause us the suffering. It can give courage also to those who suffer and who do not know how to bear it.

For the disciple of Jesus there is a profound sense in which suffering can unite us to him. Truly, love is the greatest gift. But if we love the way Jesus loved, it will not be long before suffering enters our lives as it entered his. If, like Jesus, we are to love the outsiders, we, like Jesus, will become outsiders. If, like Jesus, we are going to take the part of the oppressed, we, like Jesus, will be oppressed. This was Paul’s experience. However, he could write:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

– Galatians 2:19-20

If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

– Romans 6:5

[We are] heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ-- if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

– Romans 8:17-18

Perhaps the most mysterious thing about suffering is that, through it, Jesus invites us to join with him in redeeming the world. It is this truth that caused Paul to find joy in his sufferings:

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church.

– Colossians 1:24

It seems true that, to experience Christ as exalted, we have to experience him as crucified. To know the power of God's redeeming love, we need to look upon the one we have pierced (John 19:37). We need to put our hand into his pierced side and our fingers into his wounds (John 20:27) — the wounds of his brothers and sisters with whom, as the Son of Man, he still identifies.

The amount of good that is in our world, as a result of suffering that is borne in love, is immeasurable. Both Paul (Philippians 1:29) and James (1:2) consider such suffering a privilege. There is a mystery here that goes beyond our understanding. But our life-experience will not allow us to ignore it.

Christianity has no answers to the meaninglessness of suffering brought upon ourselves and others by our failure to listen to God. It does, however, show us a way to integrate suffering into our lives.

At the same time, it is apparent that there is excessive suffering in our world. People are degraded by it, dragged down by it, and have their lives rendered inhuman by it. Christianity lays upon everyone the duty to work against suffering and its causes. Like Jesus, we are to act as instruments of God, bringing healing and liberation to the sufferer.

Discernment is necessary, and the causes of suffering need to be named and opposed. But it is not for us to sit in judgment, to look for culprits or to apportion blame. We are to work for just institutions and just structures. But we cannot wait for this to happen. We are called upon to feed the hungry now. We are called, now, to give drink to the thirsty, to visit those in prison and to work to heal the sick.

Finally, we need to remember that death necessarily sets limits to any possibilities we have of alleviating suffering. There can be no solution short of the resurrection. In the words of Peter and Paul:

In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

– 2Peter 3:13

Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

– Philippians 3:20-21

Suffering

While we strive, in response to God's grace and call, to be faithful 'servants' of the Lord in bringing about the reign of God here on earth (Luke 11:2), we recognise that our ultimate homeland is in heaven (Philippians 3:20). In a future life we are assured of being finally and totally embraced by the Father of Jesus (2Corinthians 4:16 - 5:10).

People who think that whatever suffering exists in this world is willed by God (either directly intended by God or permitted by God), will see their task as one of accepting suffering in all its forms. They will see such submission as doing God's will, while trusting in God's wisdom and love.

If, however, we recognise that, whatever the circumstances, God's will is that we be faithful to love, and if we recognise that suffering is part of life and that its causes are complex and sometimes quite contrary to God's will, then we will see our task as accepting the suffering which we are unable to prevent. We must not let suffering deter us from loving faithfully. We may even draw so close to Jesus through suffering that we embrace the opportunity to share with him in revealing God's love in this special way to those for whom Jesus gave his life.

We are called to believe that suffering comes within the loving and wise providence of God. We are called to believe that God's will is to heal us and to liberate us from suffering. Ultimately, this will happen when we share his glory with his Son in heaven; but we can experience liberation here on earth when love heals, and when healing leads to greater love.

If we or others continue to suffer, let us continue to believe in God's love. Let us keep hoping for God's redemption. Let us remain faithful to loving. Then suffering itself will be experienced as a grace, deepening our love and bringing about our own purification and redemption, as well as the purification and redemption of others. If the cross must be part of Christian living, let us embrace him who died on it, knowing that we are never beyond his embrace.

Disciples must be ready to give their lives like Jesus

The disciples still fail to grasp Jesus' message of suffering and of trust. They are still thinking in terms of saving their life rather than losing it (16:5). They are still thinking in terms of reward and of power, rather than of the service of being faithful to a sacred commission given them by God.

Jesus speaks of the 'cup' that he must drink: a theme that will recur at Jesus' final meal (26:27-28) and in his agony (26:39). The allusion to the Eucharist should not be missed.

Unaware, like Peter (16:16; 19:27), of the significance of their response, James and John express their intention to follow Jesus whatever the cost. Later in the gospel it will emerge, ironically, that the places which they so eagerly sought on Jesus' right and left in his kingdom were occupied by crosses (27:38). Jesus accepts their willingness, but insists with them that whatever God gives them cannot be earned. It is always a grace. Just as Jesus, the Son, accepts his Father's will in this matter without question, so must they. The angry response of the other ten disciples shows that their mentality is no different from that of two brothers.

Greatness, for a disciple, is measured by willingness to do the will of God; that is to say, to be God's servant. Here, for the first time in Matthew, we meet the important word *diakonos* translated here as 'servant', but better translated as 'one who carries out a sacred commission'. We have met the related verb in two previous passages. While Jesus was being tested in the wilderness, 'angels waited on him' (4:11); that is to say, they were sent by God to minister to him. When Peter's mother-in-law was healed 'she began to serve them' (8:15); that is to say, she performed a sacred task, given her by God along with the healing, to care for them.

A *diakonos* is one who is sent by God to carry out a sacred ministry. For a disciple of Jesus this is a sharing in Jesus' ministry. Obviously the precise way in which an individual Christian contributes to the mission of the Christian community will be determined by the gifts of the Spirit which the disciple is given. It ought also be obvious that ministry should be discerned within the community, be recognised by the community and be named by it; and that the community should commission the minister to carry out his or her ministry.

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him.

21 And he said to her, 'What do you want?' She said to him, 'Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.'

22 But Jesus answered, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?' They said to him, 'We are able.'

23 He said to them, 'You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.'

compare Mark 10:35-45

24 When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers.

25 But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant,

27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave;

28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

The disciples are to share in Christ's mission. They must, therefore, learn that obedience to God's call is of the essence of divine service. When Matthew speaks of the 'disciples' he is thinking of the 'twelve', but always as symbolic of all those who would learn to follow Jesus.

It is true that carrying out one's sacred commission will be characterised for the disciple, as it was for Jesus, by humility, by compassion and by love, as well as by all the other qualities we see in Jesus. The essential focus of ministry, however, is not on the one to whom the minister is sent but on the one who is sending the minister, that is to say, on God. Jesus is God's 'minister': the servant of the Lord. So must it be with the disciple.

Doing God's will, being God's servant, places us in a special kind of relationship to others, the relationship of a 'slave', whose whole life is given over to wanting to be at the disposal of others in total dependence on God's will. Matthew sums up the mission of Jesus: 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

This is what it means to be the Messiah, and this is what is asked of anyone who would be a disciple of Jesus. As the Son of Man, Jesus identifies with all who are oppressed and who cry out to God (see commentary on 8:20). Jesus' mission is to do God's will (to 'serve'), and God's will is that he 'give his life a ransom for many'.

When we read the word 'many' in English, we tend to distinguish it from 'all'. It is important to understand that the Semitic idiom carries a different significance. 'Many' is in contrast to 'few'. It can mean 'all' so long as a large number is implied. As the 'Son of Man', in other words, Jesus is not giving his life for a sect, or for a remnant. Those who are meant to benefit from his gift of self are many.

Paul came to see that it was God's will to embrace all, and he understands the 'many' as excluding none and as potentially embracing 'all'. This is clear from the following statement taken from his Letter to the Church in Rome:

Just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

– Romans 5:18-19

It is of interest, also, to note the only other passage in the New Testament where the word ‘ransom’ is found:

Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave his life a ransom for all.

– 1 Timothy 2:6

There is also an allusion to the fourth song of the Servant of the Lord:

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. Out of his anguish he shall see light . . . The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors’.

– Isaiah 53:10-12

Jesus’ mission is to deliver (‘redeem’) all those suffering from any kind of slavery. The cost of doing so is the offering of his life, and, as he has already stated on three occasions (and so persistently and definitively) that he will lose his life because of his unwillingness to compromise the good news. However, like the Servant spoken of in Isaiah, he will be vindicated by God. Whatever may happen in the short term, ‘on the third day’, that is to say when God’s judgment is declared (when the truth is known), he will appear in glory as the Son of Man with all those who have put their trust in him. This powerful summary of this central theme is something that the disciples can grasp only through a miracle of grace; hence the following scene.

²⁹ As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him.

³⁰ There were *two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, 'Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!'*

³¹ The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, 'Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!'

³² Jesus stood still and called them, saying, 'What do you want me to do for you?'

³³ They said to him, 'Lord, let our eyes be opened.'

³⁴ *Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.*

compare Mark 10:46-52
Luke 18:35-43

Discipleship is possible only through a miracle of grace

Jesus is leaving Jericho. He is therefore on the last section of his journey to Jerusalem. Will the disciples ever learn to follow him? Again and again he has spoken of suffering as an essential part of his mission. Again and again they have failed to understand.

In this last scene the disciples are symbolised by blind men. Having two blind men (Mark and Luke in the equivalent scene have only one), Matthew is dramatically stating that we are blind not only as individuals. It is the community, Jew and Gentile, that so often fails to see.

These men are not walking with Jesus on the way, but sitting by the side of the road. They are symbolic of disciples for they address Jesus not only as the Messiah ('Son of David'), but also as 'Lord'. Jesus, with typical respect, does not presume to know what they want but asks them: 'What do you want me to do for you?' They want him to open their eyes.

Jesus is 'moved with compassion' (compare 14:14; 15:32; 18:27). This is the shepherd Messiah (9:36) giving expression to God's compassionate for the lost and the needy who cry out to Him in their distress. Jesus touches (compare 8:3,15; 9:20,21,29; 14:36; 17:7) their eyes and they gain their sight.

Only Jesus' compassionate touch can keep on restoring our sight, thus making it possible for us to follow him on the way to Jerusalem, and so to death: the way through death to the resurrection and the fullness of life as God's beloved.

In the silence of prayer, let us contemplate this scene, and taste our experience of being blind, by the side of the road, missing out on life. Let us cry out for help. Let us anticipate a response and listen for it.

Matthew wants us to do the same in each of the scenes in this and other sections, for the gospels are born of reflection, and capture the essence of the relationship with Jesus which his early disciples came to experience.

We are to identify with the disciples in their folly, but also in their staying with Jesus and their wanting to learn. We are to identify with the epileptic boy, a victim of the evil that invades and surrounds us. We are to identify with his desperate father, incapable of helping the one to whom he has given life, but willing to believe with whatever little faith he finds in his heart. We are to identify with the pharisees, as we try to secure our own positions in a world that Jesus keeps upsetting, and as we put him to the test and resist his grace. We are to identify with the rich man, keen to live more meaningfully, but unwilling to pay the price.

And so for all the other characters of the gospel. For the people of the gospels are each part of us, and Jesus' way of relating to them all is always a grace: disturbing, encouraging, welcoming, threatening, warning, but always loving, and never content to see us where he found the blind men. He wants us, all of us, and every bit of us, to 'follow him', because it is the only way to life.

¹ When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt *with her*; untie them and bring them to me.

³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.” And he will send them *immediately*.’

⁴ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵ ‘Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’

compare Mark 11:1-10
Luke 19:28-38

PART B Confrontation in Jerusalem (21:1 - 22:46)

Jerusalem seems to welcome the Messiah

This scene is charged with excitement and Messianic expectation. The temple of Solomon was destroyed by the Babylonian army in 587BC as a result of an ill-conceived uprising, some ten years after the capture of the city and the beginning of exile for many of the leading citizens.

However, the Babylonian Empire was powerful only during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, and in 539BC, king Cyrus of Persia was welcomed into Babylon as a liberator. The following year he issued an edict permitting the exiles to return home (Ezra 1:2-4; 6:3-5; 1Chronicles 36:22-23).

In 520BC Zerubbabel, a prince of the Davidic line, was sent to Jerusalem, not as an independent king but as an administrator of Persian rule, along with Joshua the high priest, at the head of a large contingent of returning Jews (Ezra 2:2b-70 = Nehemiah 7:7b-73; 1Chronicles 3:19). Encouraged by Haggai and Zechariah, he organised the rebuilding of the temple.

The prophet Zechariah saw Zerubbabel as God’s instrument to restore the fortunes of the house of David. He was the ‘Branch’ that, having learned humility from the experience of the exile, would at last bear fruit, and bring about the time of Messianic peace:

Now listen, Joshua, high priest, you and your colleagues who sit before you! For they are an omen of things to come: I am going to bring my servant the Branch. For on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven facets, I will engrave its inscription, says the Lord of hosts, and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day. On that day, says the Lord of hosts, you shall invite each other to come under your vine and fig tree.

– Zechariah 3:8-10

Zechariah continues:

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Here is a man whose name is Branch: for he shall branch out in his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. It is he that shall build the temple of the Lord.

– Zechariah 6:12-13

He then describes the entry of the God's Messiah into the temple:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

– Zechariah 9:9; quoted Matthew 21:5

In the period between Zerubbabel and Jesus, the words of the prophet were understood as reaching beyond his own time to the time of the coming of the promised Messiah. The restoration and re-dedication of the temple was, indeed, a Day of the Lord. It came to be seen as a foreshadowing of the ultimate Day of the Lord, when God's reign would come and God's chosen people would be vindicated against their enemies. In visionary material added to the Zechariah scroll we read:

Then the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley.

– Zechariah 14:3-4

Matthew is alluding to this passage when he sets the scene 'at the Mount of Olives', preparing us for a scene of divine judgment. Incidentally, 'Bethphage' also has symbolic importance for this section. It means 'house of unripe figs'.

Jesus is presented as 'the Lord'. This is the Lord who 'will suddenly come to his temple' (Malachi 3:1). His instructions to the two disciples portray him as being in complete command of the situation. He enters, however, as the humble one, the Servant of the Lord of whom Isaiah spoke (Isaiah 42:1-4, quoted Matthew 12:18-21). The people 'spread their cloaks on the road', indicating their submission to the kingly rule of the Messiah. The branches and the song from Psalm 118 (Matthew 21:9 = Psalm 118:26) are from the liturgy of the feast of Tabernacles, commemorating the universal kingship of the Lord and the dedication of the temple.

Surely here is the one who inherits the promise made to David. Surely he is now going to 'build the temple of the Lord' (Zechariah 6:13). Surely now the fig-tree which is Israel will be covered with fruit to nourish God's people (Zechariah 3:10). The following scenes demonstrate that this is not the case. Jesus is indeed the one who fulfils the prophecies, but in a way that is totally unexpected, and that transcends everything that was ever imagined of the Messiah.

¹⁰ **When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'** ¹¹ *The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'*

¹² **Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.** ¹³ **He said to them, 'It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers.'** ¹⁴ *The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them.*

¹⁵ **But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David,' they became angry** ¹⁶ **and said to him, 'Do you hear what these are saying?'** **Jesus said to them, 'Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?'** ¹⁷ **He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.**

compare Mark 11:11,15-19;
Luke 19:45-46

The Messiah enters the Temple

The triumph of Jesus' Messianic entry into Jerusalem, described in the previous scene against the background of the prophecies of Zechariah, prepares the reader for Jesus, as the Messiah, to 'build the temple of the Lord' (Zechariah 6:13). The whole city, is reacting as to a theophany, and the crowd enthusiastically proclaim Jesus a prophet.

This makes the anticlimax of the present scene all the more dramatically powerful. In a symbolic gesture, as the Messiah, Jesus takes charge of the temple and purifies it, removing all that is profane, and acting out the final words of Zechariah:

There shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day.

—Zechariah 14:21

Jesus explains his action: 'My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers.' This prophetic condemnation is drawn partly from Isaiah and partly from Jeremiah. Both texts are instructive. The quotation from Isaiah is taken from the beginning of the material added to the Isaiah scroll by the disciples of the anonymous author of Isaiah 40-55. They were active in the first years of the temple of Zerubbabel, and they tried to retain the universal vision of their master, at a time when many were using the word of God and the institutions of religion to support their own narrow nationalist ends.

The whole text is worth quoting as it provides an excellent commentary on the scene before us. It is a call for justice, and an indictment of those who would keep religion for themselves to the exclusion of others:

Thus says the Lord: 'Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed . . . Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely separate me from his people"; and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." For thus says the Lord: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant- these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered”.

– Isaiah 56:1-8

Jesus is passing judgment on the religious institution as used by the authorities who rejected the good news in favour of their own interpretation of God’s will. The second quotation takes us back to the last days of Solomon’s temple, just before the destruction of Jerusalem. Once again the whole text provides a powerful commentary on the scene upon which we are reflecting:

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Stand in the gate of the Lord’s house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’ For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are safe!’ – only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord.

– Jeremiah 7:1-11

Jeremiah’s contemporaries thought that they were safe because God’s temple was in their midst. Jeremiah warns them that God will only dwell with them if they honour the covenant. God is not a prisoner of a building or of an institution. God remains faithful. If, however, we are unfaithful we do not receive the grace God is offering, nor can we mediate it to others. Jesus is making the same critique of those who maintained the temple institution, but who, as he said earlier, ‘break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition’(15:3).

According to the Jewish law, the blind and the lame were not permitted entry into the temple (2Samuel 5:8; Leviticus 21:18). Jesus, however, welcomes them and cures them. He is the one in our midst who is ‘greater than the temple’(12:6). The children give exultant expression to their faith in Jesus (see 18:3). The chief priest and the scribes (see 2:4), already identified as those who will bring about Jesus’ death (16:21; 20:18) object. Jesus’ reply is taken from Psalm 8:3, and reminds us of his earlier prayer of praise to God: ‘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’(11:25). Jesus withdraws to Bethany, the ‘house of poverty’. His place is with the ‘poor in spirit’(5:3).

¹⁸ In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry.

¹⁹ And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once.

²⁰ When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, 'How did the fig tree wither at once?'

²¹ Jesus answered them, 'Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done.

²² Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.'

compare
Mark 11:12-14, 20-25

Faith: the basis of discipleship

Jesus is hungry, sharing in the hunger of every man and every woman for the food that satisfies the soul. We recall the hunger he experienced in the desert and his refusal to satisfy that hunger in any other way than in listening to God's word and doing God's will (4:2-4).

He goes to the tree that is a symbol for the religion of his people, a tree that was supposed to blossom and bear fruit in the promised Messianic times (Zechariah 3:10; 1Maccabees 14:12). This tree is all leaf, all show. Jesus' judgment causes the fig tree to wither immediately. Its time is over. We will have to look elsewhere to satisfy our hunger.

When I wanted to gather them, says the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.

– Jeremiah 8:13

What is the alternative? Jesus' answer is immediate: They are to have faith. Faith should not be simply identified with trust. We cannot believe without trust, but to have faith we must have the trust that causes us to listen to God's word, to take it to heart, and to act upon it.

Jesus' constant complaint was that his disciples were people of 'little faith' (6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20). The faith he looked for was the faith shown by the centurion (8:10,13) and by the Canaanite woman (15:28); the faith shown by the friends of the paralysed man (9:2), by the woman with a haemorrhage (9:22), and by the blind men (9:28).

Jesus' statement about lifting up a mountain and throwing it into the sea calls to mind his earlier statement made on the occasion of his healing the epileptic boy: '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' (17:20). It is God who creates. It is God who gives life. It is God who saves. With the temple closed, and the fig tree withered, we are reminded that nothing can substitute for God, and nothing can mediate God without faith.

In the period leading up to the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army, the prophet Habakkuk could say:

Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.

– Habakkuk 3:17-19

The disciples of Jesus should not fear the collapse of the old institutions and the old forms. The good news, the wine of God's Spirit, needs 'fresh wineskins'(9:17), and so they should expect to need to develop new styles of leadership and organisation. God is the source of their faith, and God remains faithful whatever else might change.

Jesus has already spoken of the 'little ones who believe in me'(18:6), and of the need to receive the kingdom of God like a little child (19:13-15). Here, he encourages in his disciples the simple prayer of trust. We recall his words in the sermon on the mount (7:7-11; see also 18:19-20). God is our Father-Mother, who delights in us (3:17) and cannot refuse a heart filled with faith. Jesus is not suggesting that we always have the wisdom to know what is best for us and therefore to ask for what we really need, but he does assure us that God will answer the little ones who cry out to God in their need.

In this scene, and in fact in this whole section following the emptying of the temple, Jesus is making cryptic claims of being the Messiah through whose ministry the regn of God is being realised on earth.

Who is the Messiah?

23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said,

‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’

24 Jesus said to them, ‘I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.

25 Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’

And they argued with one another, ‘If we say, “From heaven,” he will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?”

26 But if we say, “Of human origin,” we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.’

27 So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’

And he said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.’

compare Mark 11:27-33
Luke 20:1-8

Jesus’ Messianic authority

The authority with which Jesus speaks has been apparent from the beginning of the gospel: ‘The crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes’ (7:28-29)

Matthew places this scene here to make the obvious but important point that Jesus’ authority for acting the way he has in the temple is an authority, like that of the Baptist, which comes from God. Furthermore, to believe John the Baptist is to believe in Jesus, for Jesus is the Messiah heralded by John (3:11-12; 11:10-15).

It is clear that those who claim religious authority, identified here as the chief priests and elders of the people (see 16:21) lack it, for they have no genuine concern for the truth. In the words of the author of the fourth gospel, who is making much the same point:

How can you believe when you accept glory
from one another and do not seek the glory that
comes from the one who alone is God?

– John 5:44

Repentance and doing the will of the Father

Words without action are worthless (compare 7:21-27). At the heart of discipleship, and so of working in the Lord's vineyard, is doing the will of the Father (6:10; 7:21; 12:50). Jesus came to call sinners (9:13), and the tax collectors and prostitutes are heeding his words. The chief priests and elders of the people, who claim religious authority, have shown that when God's word is revealed to them as it is being revealed in Jesus, they show no interest in listening or obeying. The was the critique offered also by the Baptist (3:7-10).

²⁸ 'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today."

²⁹ He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went.

³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go.

³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

³³ *Listen to another parable. There was a landowner [master of the house] who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.*

³⁴ *When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce.*

³⁵ *But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.* ³⁶ *Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way.*

³⁷ *Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." ³⁹ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.* ⁴⁰ *Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?'*

⁴¹ *They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'*

compare Mark 12:1-9; Luke 20:9-16

The fruits of the kingdom

This is clearly a judgment on those who are responsible for carrying out God's will in caring for the community, but who are unfaithful to the covenant, who use God's gifts for their own advantage rather than in service of their Lord (compare Hosea 2:7-10; Ezekiel 16:15-19), and who reject the prophets (23:37) sent to speak God's word. We find a similar judgment in Isaiah:

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

— Isaiah 5:1-7

Jesus' parable adds the idea that 'the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom'. Those responsible for rejecting Jesus, identified here as 'the chief priests and the Pharisees' will not enjoy the fruits of the kingdom. Those, Jews and Gentiles alike, who form the renewed Israel, the 'holy nation' (Exodus 19:6) — in other words the Christian Church (1 Peter 2:9) — will be the ones who carry on God's commission to give God the produce at the time of the harvest. The presence of Jews in the Church, and the continuing relationship between God and the people of Israel (see Romans 9-11), indicate that this is not meant as a rejection of Judaism. God is faithful to his promises, and the call to discipleship goes out to all.

Jesus, the son is seized, thrown out of the vineyard and killed: a clear allusion to Jesus being rejected by the Sanhedrin, handed over to non-Jews, and killed and buried outside the city. Jesus quotes from Psalm 118:22. The image is of a stone which is judged unsuitable for inclusion in a wall, but which is later found to be the perfect shape for the angle of the wall, thus fulfilling a critical role in shaping the whole building.

The application to Jesus is obvious, and the image is used elsewhere in the New Testament (Acts 4:11; 1Peter 2:6-8). Addressing himself to non-Jews, Paul sums up his teaching on the significance for them of Jesus:

You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

– Ephesians 2:19-22

Jesus the cornerstone is also a stumbling block for those who refuse to accept him or heed his message:

The Lord will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against . . . And many among them shall stumble.

– Isaiah 8:14-15

There are close parallels between this parable and the following from the First Letter of Peter. It is worth quoting at length:

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,' and 'A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

– 1Peter 2:4-10

⁴² Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"?'

⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.

⁴⁴ The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.

⁴⁶ They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

compare Mark 12:10-12
Luke 20:17-19

The wedding banquet

¹ *Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying:*

² *'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.*

³ **He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.**

⁴ *Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet."*

⁵ *But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business,*

⁶ *while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them.*

⁷ *The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.* ⁸ *Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy.*

⁹ *Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet."*

¹⁰ *Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.*

God invites all to his Son's wedding banquet

It was customary to send out an invitation, and to prepare food according to the number of those who accepted. In other words, those who decline to come to the wedding banquet in Jesus' parable are assumed to have already formally accepted the initial invitation. However, in fact, they are more interested in their own affairs. Worse still, they mistreat and kill the servants (the prophets, 21:34-36) sent to insist that they come. The punishment seems to be expressed in terms of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD.

The master of the house then invites all, good and bad, to the feast (compare 5:45).

compare Luke 14:16-24

Enjoying the banquet is not something automatic. God respects human freedom, and it is necessary to ‘produce the fruits of the kingdom’(21:43). Hence the person who has failed to do this (is not wearing a wedding robe) cannot enjoy the feast. He finds himself in ‘the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’(see 8:12; 13:42,50; 24:51).

‘Many are called’. That is to say, God’s offer of salvation through intimate communion with his Son is not offered to an elite. The heart of God is open to all his children. Jesus has just said: ‘The Son of Man came to give his life a ransom for many’ (20:28; see commentary) and at the last supper he will declare: ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sin’(26:28). It is necessary to remember that in the Semitic idiom ‘many’ is distinguished, not from ‘all’, but from ‘few’. It does not imply any limitation.

However, Jesus immediately follows with the words: ‘few are chosen’. This is meant as a warning, not as a statement of fact or an ultimate judgment. We are allowed to share the hope expressed by Paul that those who are disobedient now may receive mercy, so that God ‘may be merciful to all’(Romans 11:32).

The point of the parable is that enjoyment of the blessings of God is always a matter of free choice. God invites all but forces no one. We must respond to love, and if we choose not to we cannot enjoy divine communion.

¹¹ *‘But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe,*

¹² *and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless.*

¹³ *Then the king said to the attendants, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

¹⁴ *For many are called, but few are chosen.’*

¹⁵ **Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.**

¹⁶ **So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’**

¹⁸ **But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?’**

¹⁹ **Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius.**

²⁰ **Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ ²¹ They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’**

²² **When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.**

compare Mark 12:13-17
Luke 20:20-26

Jesus exposes the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Herodians

To understand why the question put to him by the Pharisees and the Herodians was indeed a trap, we need to recall the political situation at the time. Herod the Great (2:1), an Idumean by birth, had won favour with the Emperor Octavian (Caesar Augustus), and had been appointed king of Palestine by the Roman senate. On his death in 4BC, the country was divided between three of his sons. Herod Antipas (14:1) took Galilee and Transjordan. Philip took the area north of Galilee (we mentioned him in relation to Caesarea Philippi, 16:13). Archelaus (2:22) took the largest area, comprising Judea, Idumaea and Samaria.

In 6AD the Jews petitioned Rome to have Archelaus removed, and Rome took the occasion to establish direct rule over his area. Judea (including Samaria and Idumaea) was set up as a small imperial province, under a military prefect (also called a procurator) who was directly answerable to the emperor. He was also connected in some way with the legate of the more established province of Syria. A military garrison was quartered at the port city of Caesarea. Quirinius, the legate of Syria, arranged for a census to be taken with a view to organising a poll tax to be paid into the Imperial treasury. It is with this tax that the present passage is concerned. The Greek word translated ‘tax’ (22:17) is *kensos*, a transliteration of the Latin *census*.

Many Jews resented Roman occupation and the poll tax, and Judas, a Galilean (Acts 5:37) — not the Judas whom we know as one of the apostles — organised a resistance movement which was quickly suppressed. Foreign tax is never well received, but, at the time of Jesus’ public ministry, the Pharisees accepted to pay the tax as a price for retaining their religious ‘freedom’, and the Herodians supported it.

The scene before us took place just before the feast of Passover. There were many Galileans among those gathering for the feast, and no doubt the Romans were prepared for any disturbance. What better way to get Jesus into trouble than to have him speak out against the tax? He would certainly lose a lot of his following if he spoke in its favour.

Jesus meets their question with one of his own: 'Whose head is this, and whose title?'. On one side of the coin was an impression of the Emperor Tiberias, and on the other the inscription 'Tiberias Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, High Priest'.

There is a certain irony in his question. They had attempted to flatter Jesus by saying to him: 'You show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality'. Little did they realise how true their statement was: it applied even to the emperor, who was considered to be the most important man in the world!

They produce a coin, thus trapping themselves. If they really object to the coin, what are they doing with one? The Herodians, certainly, and probably a number of the Pharisees, as leaders in the community, have learned to benefit from the economic advantages of Roman occupation.

Jesus bypasses the question of tax and goes to the heart of the matter. If the coin they have belongs to the emperor, then give it back to the emperor, but make sure that they give God what belongs to God. The answer to their question, and to every other question in the complex arena of politics, will be found only if they 'strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness'(6:33).

In avoiding their trap, Jesus is not saying that their question is unimportant, nor is he denying the importance of politics. He himself took up a deliberate political stance. He could see his people heading towards war and destruction (another gehenna) unless they made a radical change. He was convinced that the change had to be, first and foremost, in their relationship with God. Everywhere Jesus looked he saw oppression; he saw people downtrodden, enslaved, oppressed. Whole groups of society were lost, frustrated, helpless, living in disgrace, suffering under the weight of guilt, anxiety and superstition. The only answer was a change of mind and heart.

Jesus, therefore, took the political decision to align himself with the oppressed. It is for this reason that he identified himself as the Son of Man. As we have seen, part of the liberation he strove to achieve was liberation from oppression, including that caused by those who exercised power in God's name because of their position in regard to the teaching of the Scriptures (the 'Law') and the organisation of the temple cult.

In the scene before us he challenges them to give back whatever power they have that comes from the emperor and to give to God 'the things that are God's'. He is speaking against Jewish compromise with paganism, whether by benefiting from the Roman system or by revolting against it. They are to obey God and love their enemies by carrying out the mission given them by God to reveal the true God to the nations.

²³ *The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying,*

²⁴ *‘Teacher, Moses said, “If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.”*

²⁵ *Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother.*

²⁶ *The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. ²⁷ Last of all, the woman herself died.*

²⁸ *In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.’*

²⁹ *Jesus answered them, ‘You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. ³⁰*

For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ³¹ And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, ³² “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.’

³³ *And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.*

compare Mark 12:18-27
Luke 20:27-40

Jesus exposes the errors of the Sadducees

We met the Sadducees quite early in the gospel (3:7; see commentary). They acknowledged the importance of the Law, but opposed ideas that could not be firmly established from the central constitution of Judaism, the Pentateuch (the five scrolls of the Law). One such idea was that of the resurrection from the dead (Acts 23:8).

Traditionally, the Jews, like their neighbours, assumed that at death a person went to the underworld (Sheol: the Greek Hades). Here the dead person continued, but in an existence that was shadowy and lifeless. There are indications of this idea in the sacred Scriptures:

My soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand.

– Psalm 88:3-5

The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence.

– Psalm 115:17

Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you; those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living, they thank you, as I do this day; fathers make known to children your faithfulness.

– Isaiah 38:18-19

At the same time, the people of ancient Israel longed for an enduring relationship with God, that would somehow, and against all the evidence, preserve them from death and Sheol:

My heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures for ever more.

– Psalm 16:9-11

God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.

– Psalm 49:15

I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honor. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

– Psalm 73:23-26

It was this faith in the fidelity of God that grew into an explicit belief that God would raise to life after death those who put their trust in God and were faithful to the covenant. The historical situation that brought about this conviction was the martyrdom of many pious Jews at the time of the Syrian persecutions (168-165BC). It seemed impossible for God not to reward with life those who gave their lives so heroically for their faith.

The first explicit statements concerning the resurrection from the dead belong to this period:

At that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

– Daniel 12:1-2. See 2Maccabees 7

The resurrection from the dead is a very different idea from the Greek notion of the continuance beyond death of the soul. The Pharisees and others believed that the whole human person in some way would be given fullness of life again by God.

It is clear in the passage upon which we are commenting that the Sadducees are trying to be smart by showing up the stupidity of the idea of resurrection. They argue from the impossible complications it would introduce into one particular regulation of the Law.

It was necessary for the maintenance of a family's heritage that there be an heir. This was so important that if a man died childless, his brother was obliged to take his sister-in-law as his wife, and in that way provide an heir for his dead brother and so thwart a serious consequence of death (Deuteronomy 25:5 and Genesis 38:8-9).

Jesus' reply in no way denies that the special relationship of married love experienced in this life finds its perfection in the life to come. His reply is geared directly to the question asked. There is no death in heaven and so no need to have an heir to thwart it.

The Sadducees are wrong because they 'know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God'. God's power is such that, like the angels, those who are raised to life will never die. Furthermore, Jesus appeals to one of the central passages of the Scriptures acknowledged by the Sadducees (Exodus 3:6), and suggests that a more profound reading of the text points to the truth that the patriarchs are alive, not dead. His argument is simple and direct: God is 'the God not of the dead but of the living'.

³⁴ *When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together,*

³⁵ *and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.*

³⁶ *'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?'*

³⁷ **He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."**

³⁸ *This is the greatest and first commandment.*

³⁹ **And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."**

⁴⁰ *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'*

compare Mark 12:28-34
Luke 10:25-28

The commandment of love

Jesus' reply to the Pharisee lawyer expresses traditional wisdom. The first commandment, called the *Shema*⁴ after its first word in Hebrew, is found in Deuteronomy, where it is followed by the injunction:

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

– Deuteronomy 6:6-9

It was a pious practice to wear a small container with this text inside. It was worn on the forehead as a reminder to keep the command always before one's eyes. It was worn on the arm as a reminder to act always in accordance with it. A mezuzah which contained the text of the *Shema*⁴ was also hung at the entrance to the home.

The importance of the second commandment, which is a quotation from Leviticus 19:18, is borne out by the following tradition concerning Rabbi Hillel the Elder who died when Jesus was in his early teens. Asked to give a summary of the Law, he is said to have replied:

What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbours. This is the whole Law, and the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.

– The Babylonian Talmud, Shabbath 31a

The first commandment defines love as understood by Jesus. It is first and foremost that which characterises God's relationship with us: a relationship expressed by the redemption effected through Moses, and now by the redemption effected through Jesus. It is this love which makes possible in us a wholehearted response of love to God, and it is this wholehearted response to God that flows over into our relationships with others.

The final comment: 'On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets' is reflected in an earlier statement from the sermon on the mount: 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets'(7:12). Compare the following statements from Paul:

The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'.

– Galatians 5:14

The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself'.

– Romans 13:9

Love of God, that is to say, a commitment to listen to God's word and to obey his will, makes possible a love of others that transcends natural friendship, convenience and self-interest (5:43-48). Love of others is the test of the reality of one's love of God. As John says:

Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.

– 1John 4:20

Who is the Messiah?

⁴¹ *Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question:* ⁴² **‘What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?’**

They said to him, ‘The son of David.’

⁴³ **He said to them, ‘How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,**

⁴⁴ **“The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’”?**

⁴⁵ **If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?’**

⁴⁶ **No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.**

compare Mark 12:35-37
Luke 20:41-44

verse 46 compare
Mark 12:34; Luke 20:40

Who really is the Messiah?

Jesus has responded to three questions posed as a test by those who refused to accept him. Now it is his turn to put a question to them, and it concerns his Messianic identity. They assume that the Messiah is the ‘son of David’, a title with which the crowds greeted Jesus on his entry into Jerusalem (21:9,15; see 20:30-31).

As in the previous three scenes, Jesus’ response forces his listeners to examine their assumptions and invites them to a deeper level of understanding. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter had acclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, adding ‘the Son of the living God’(16:16).

Jesus quotes the opening verse of Psalm 110. Here the psalmist (David) has God (‘The Lord’) speaking to the Messiah (‘my Lord’), Jesus interprets this verse in such a way as to focus the attention of the Pharisees on the Messiah as being David’s ‘Lord’, and so on the Messiah’s relationship to God.

It is clear that this psalm was used by the early church to support the Christian claim that the risen, exalted Jesus was the fulfilment of Jewish Messianic hopes (Acts 2:34; 7:56; Romans 8:34; 1Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3,13; 8:1; 10:12; 1Peter 3:22; Revelation 3:21). It is also the psalm that speaks of the priesthood of Melchizedek, not the Levitical priesthood. Jesus is confronting the priestly regime. The enthroned Messiah is their judge.

Paul sums up the faith of Jesus’ disciples when he speaks of:

the gospel concerning God’s Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness, by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

– Romans 1:3-4

By portraying the Pharisees as having nothing to say in reply to Jesus, Matthew is saying that the Judaism of his day has no answer to the Christian claims concerning Jesus, which, while transcending the expectations of the Law and the prophets, are consistent, as in Psalm 110, with their deepest aspirations.

Psalm 110

The Lord says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies your footstool.'
The Lord sends out from Zion your mighty sceptre.
Rule in the midst of your foes.
Your people will offer themselves willingly
on the day you lead your forces on the holy mountains.
From the womb of the morning, like dew,
your youth will come to you.
The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind,
'You are a priest forever
according to the order of Melchizedek.'
The Lord is at your right hand;
he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.
He will execute judgment among the nations,
filling them with corpses;
he will shatter heads over the wide earth.
He will drink from the stream by the path;
therefore he will lift up his head.

¹ *Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,*
² *'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat;*
³ *therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach.*
⁴ **They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.**
⁵ *They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.*
⁶ **They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues,**
⁷ **and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.**

verse 4 compare Luke 11:46
verses 6-7 compare
Mark 12:38-39
Luke 11:43 and 20:46

PART C A lament over those who reject the kingdom

(23:1-39)

A disciple must be a humble servant

Matthew selects these sayings of Jesus to highlight Jesus' criticisms of the religious authorities of his day. On another level, Matthew is concerned to warn his own community of the dangers that exist in any exercise of leadership.

Jesus recognises the importance, in principle, of religious authority and the respect which people should give to such authority (23:2-3). In principle, the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees is to be followed, while their behaviour is to be avoided. In practise, however, because of the way this authority was being exercised, Jesus had to warn people precisely not to follow even their teaching. Jesus has already given the following warnings: 'Let the Pharisees alone; they are blind guides of the blind. If one blind person guides another, both will fall into the pit'(15:14). 'The disciples understood that Jesus had told them to beware of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees'(16:12).

Matthew names five serious faults of which people need to be aware in regard to their religious leaders. The first is the hypocrisy of saying one thing and doing another (23:3). The second is being meticulously careful to protect oneself by insisting, for others, on all the small details of the law, while being learned enough to be able to argue a way out of them for oneself (23:4). The third is lack of real care in helping others bear the burden imposed on them by obedience (23:4). The fourth is behaving so as to attract the attention of others (23:5). The fifth is enjoying the perks and honours of office and the adulation that adheres to it (23:6-7).

What religious leader, then and now, does not need to be warned against these vices to which people in positions of authority are exposed? It is interesting to compare this chapter in Matthew with the sermon on the mount. Many of the same themes occur. For example, Jesus has already warned his disciples of the importance of our actions giving expression to our words: 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven'(7:21). Jesus has also warned against ostentation: 'Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them'(6:1).

Jesus' disciples are warned against honorific titles such as 'rabbi' (the equivalent of 'my lord' or 'Monsignor'), 'father', or 'instructor'. It is a sobering thought that in the religious community to which I belong, bishops are addressed as 'my lord', and priests, including myself, are regularly addressed as 'father'.

It is argued, no doubt rightly, that we are not meant to take Jesus' words literally here. Jesus himself seems to have allowed people to call him 'rabbi' (Matthew 26:25,49; Mark 9:5; 11:21; 14:45; John 1:38, 49; 3:2,26; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8); and he often used the word 'father' of people other than God.

Jesus is warning us to get our perspective right; he is warning us to be sure that in respecting our teachers, we recognise God as the source of all instruction, and in respecting those through whom life, whether natural or spiritual, comes to us, we recognise God as the source of all life.

However, it is difficult to imagine honorific titles not including precisely the attitudes against which Jesus is speaking in this scene. There are serious dangers for those using the titles, and even more so for those who enjoy them or, worse still, insist on receiving them.

The warnings are followed by a reminder of the essential position of a disciple: 'The greatest among you will be your servant'. The word 'servant' (Greek diakonos) occurs in Matthew's gospel only here and in 20:26. When commenting on 20:26, we noted that the word diakonos defines someone precisely in the carrying out of a commission from God. A disciple is to be someone who mediates God's love and God's grace to others. This has many implications, including an attitude of reverence and a recognition that everyone, as a child of God, is loved by God. There is no room for using others for one's own aggrandisement. The example, as always, is Jesus who 'came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many' (20:28).

The key attitude is that of humility. Jesus spoke of himself as being 'humble in heart' (11:29). On that occasion, too, he was addressing himself to those who were 'carrying heavy burdens' (11:28; see 23:3). There is only one other reference to humility in Matthew. Jesus says: 'whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven' (18:4). We refer the reader to the commentary on this text for a study of the meaning of humility for a disciple.

⁸ *'But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.*

⁹ *And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father – the one in heaven.*

¹⁰ *Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.*

¹¹ *The greatest among you will be your servant.*

¹² *All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*

¹³ ***‘But, 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.***

¹⁵ ***Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves***

¹⁶ ***‘Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.’¹⁷ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred?***

¹⁸ ***And you say, “Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.”***

⁹***How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?²⁰ So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it;²¹ and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it;***

verse 13, compare Luke 11:52

Lament over the hypocrisy of the religious leaders

The style of this passage is modelled on that of a number of the prophets who, like Jesus, lamented the failure of their contemporaries to listen to God’s word and to alter their lives accordingly (for example, Isaiah 1:4; Jeremiah 23; Ezekiel 13; Amos 5:16-20; Habakkuk 2:6-19). The key criticism is:

They have rejected the instruction of the Lord of hosts and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

– Isaiah 5:24

Jesus is attempting to open the eyes of these ‘blind guides’ (compare 15:14), by confronting them with the truth of their behaviour and its inevitable consequences if they continue in their obstinate refusal to listen. The first lament (23:13) focuses on the fact that they are not entering God’s kingdom, and that they are preventing others from entering. We are not told how, but the first time that Matthew speaks about entering the kingdom is when Jesus says: ‘Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’ (5:20). The whole of Matthew 5:21 – 6:18 can be taken as a commentary on this lament.

The expression ‘entering the kingdom’ occurs again when Jesus is insisting on the necessity of doing God’s will (7:21); also when he speaks of the need for becoming like a child, and explains this in terms of humility (18:3). He says that the rich will find it very difficult (19:23-24). Finally, to the chief priests and elders of the people, Jesus says: ‘the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you’ (21:31). All of these verses fill out the reasons for Jesus’ lament.

The second lament (23:15) speaks of ‘hell’ (see 5:22). In encouraging others to be like them, the scribes and Pharisees are taking them along a destructive path that does not lead to life, because it does not take them into communion with God. The third lament (23:16-22) speaks of subtle quibbling concerning oaths that does nothing except distract people from the need to speak the truth (see 5:33-37).

The fourth and central lament (23:23-24) accuses the religious leaders of neglecting three things. The first is 'judgment' (Greek *krisis*). Jesus is speaking of God's judgment (see 5:21-22; 10:15; 11:22,24; 12:36;41,42), God's verdict concerning what really matters: a verdict proclaimed by Jesus himself to the whole world (see commentary on 12:18-21). They have failed to listen to God's judgment about what matters and have laboured to convince people of their own.

Secondly, they have neglected 'mercy' (see 9:13; 12:7). Having failed to recognise the faithful and merciful love of God, they have failed to show mercy to others (see 5:7).

Thirdly, they have neglected 'faith'. They have failed to listen to God's word coming to them through Jesus; they have failed to accept his word as true; and they have not been faithful in living according to the truth.

The fifth lament (23:25-26) is concerned with the hypocrisy of seeming clean on the outside while inside (the heart) is 'full of greed and self-indulgence' (compare 15:1-20). In the sermon on the mount Jesus insisted in the importance of our actions coming from the heart ('in secret', see 6:1-18). Jesus has already warned his disciples against false prophets who are like 'ravenous wolves' (7:15).

In the sixth lament (23:27-28), Jesus accuses them of being full of 'hypocrisy and lawlessness'. This whole section is a comment on hypocrisy, and lawlessness is a general term for acting contrary to the law (see 7:23; 13:41). There is a special irony in this accusation as they prided themselves precisely on being people of the law.

²³ ***'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice [judgment] and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practised without neglecting the others.***

²⁴ ***You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!***

²⁵ ***Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.***

²⁶ ***You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.***

²⁷ ***Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.***

²⁸ ***So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.***

verse 23 compare Luke 11:42

verses 25-26 compare Luke 11:39-41

verse 27 compare Luke 11:44

Lament over the religious leaders

²⁹ ***‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!***

For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous,

³⁰ ***and you say, “If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.”***

³¹ **Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets.**

³² ***Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors.***

Finally (23:29-32), Jesus accuses them of taking glory in the fact that they have prophets in their religious tradition. He points out the irony of their decorating their tombs. They are carrying on, not from the prophets, but from those who killed them. Their treatment of Jesus himself is in line with the infidelity and obstinacy of their ancestors.

The fall and destruction of Jerusalem at the beginning of the sixth century BC was seen as the consequence of the people’s rejection of the prophets:

The Lord, the God of their ancestors, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord against his people became so great that there was no remedy.

– 2Chronicles 36:15-16)

Jesus can see history repeating itself.

compare Luke 11:47-48

Judgment of those who reject God's prophets

The terrible opening sentence recalls the strong words of John the Baptist (3:7; see also 12:34). Concerning 'hell' (gehenna) see the commentary on 5:22. It is not only those who reject Jesus who are spawning such evil and who must suffer the consequences, it is also those who continue to reject those whom Jesus sends (23:34). Matthew is including his own contemporaries here (compare 5:11-12; 10:16-25).

Just as Jesus is fulfilling the law and the prophets (5:17), so his contemporaries who refuse to accept him and are determined to destroy him are 'filling up' (23:32) the long history of rejection from Abel to Zechariah. The story of Abel is found in the Book of Genesis (4:8), the first book in the Hebrew Bible. The story of Zechariah is found in the Second Book of Chronicles (24:20-22), the last book in the Hebrew Bible. From beginning to end the history of the people has been one of constant rejection of those sent to them by God.

The religious leaders and those who follow them in rejecting Jesus ('this generation' - see also 11:16; 12:41,42,45) will suffer the consequences of their choice.

³³ *'You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?*

³⁴ **Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town,**

³⁵ **so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.**

³⁶ **Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.**

compare Luke 11:49-51

³⁷ 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

³⁸ See, your house is left to you, *desolate*.

³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

compare Luke 13:34-35

Lament over Jerusalem

This painful chapter, in which Jesus takes our freedom seriously and demands that we look squarely at the consequences of our choices, ends on a note of compassion and hope mixed with sadness. Love is a choice of the will. Jesus chose to reach out to them like a mother bird (compare Deuteronomy 32:10-11; Psalm 17:8; 36:8; Isaiah 31:5); they chose not to accept his offer. One result of this is that the temple, as in the days of Jeremiah, will be left desolate (Matthew 23:38 draws on Jeremiah 22:5).

Those who choose to take phrases from Matthew out of context and accuse him of being anti-Jew forget that Jesus was a Jew, as was Matthew himself and most of his community. They fail also to detect the pain in Jesus' words. The words of this chapter are a lament breaking forth from a heart that feels powerless in the face of such obstinate blindness, but that refuses to give up on love, and knows that only the truth can set free those who persist in rejecting him.

The final verse is full of hope. In its original context it is a blessing given to those who are processing into the temple with their king (Psalm 118:26; see Matthew 21:9). Just before these words we find the following:

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech you, O Lord.

– Psalm 118:22-25; quoted Matthew 21:42

The majority of Jesus' contemporaries did reject him. He did not fit their picture of the Messiah. Matthew, however, clings to the hope which filled the heart of Jesus, the hope that one day, having rejected Jesus, they will come to recognise him as the herald of God's love to them. Then they will repent, rejoice in him, and enter the 'temple' of the community of Jesus' disciples. We find the same anguish in the heart of Paul (Romans 9:1-5), and the same hope:

My heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.

– Romans 10:1

Have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means... Those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has power to graft them in again . . . All Israel will be saved.

– Romans 11:11,23,26

If this hope is to be realised, we must know that it is not anything that we can bring about of ourselves. The religious leaders and the people are too blind to see, and the disciples' faith is too weak. Our only hope is in God, and so we must wait in silence for God to act in a way that will respect our freedom (we can always refuse God's love), but that will penetrate to the depths of our humanity and overwhelm us with a love that will shake us from our self-reliance, but also protect us from despair.

Matthew has completed his account of Jesus public ministry. All that remains is to take an overview of history in the light of the gospel and then to take us into a contemplation of Jesus' final statement of love.