

THE PRESENCE OF THE SON OF MAN

Matthew 24:1 - 25:46

Introductory Comment

These two chapters, Matthew's fifth and final discourse, are a commentary on the final statement of chapter twenty-three: 'You will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord"' (23:39). From the beginning, Matthew has presented Jesus as Israel's shepherd-Messiah. He quoted the following words of Isaiah as applying to Jesus: 'Here is my servant whom I have chosen, my Beloved in whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim my just verdict to the nations' (12:18). Here, in the final discourse, Matthew wants to reflect upon God's just verdict on the whole of human history. As we will see this judgment is determined by the way we respond to our encounter with the Son of Man.

At the heart of Israel's faith lies the experience of the exodus. For the people of Israel, the liberation from slavery in Egypt was the event which gave them their basic insight into God and their basic insight into their identity as a people. It was a mighty act of God, or, as they preferred to call it, a 'Day of the Lord'. On that 'day' God was revealed as one who hears the cry of the poor and oppressed and delivers them from slavery:

The Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

– Exodus 3:7-8

On that 'day', the Lord, the God of mercy and compassion, liberated them through Moses, formed them into a people, made a covenant with them, and gave them the Promised Land. They believed that it was the Lord who, again and again in their history, delivered them from oppression. Two notable 'days of the Lord' were the miraculous saving of Jerusalem from the Assyrian army which had already overrun Judah (701BC, 2Kings 18:13 - 19:37), and the deliverance of the Babylonian exiles through Cyrus of Persia (538BC, 2Chronicles 36:22-23).

Catastrophes in their history were also understood as 'days of the Lord', for they judged that God could not allow injustice to triumph, and so they saw God as punishing them for their infidelity to the covenant. Two such 'days' were the untimely death of the saintly king Josiah in the battle of Megiddo (609BC, 2Kings 23:29-30) and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army (587BC, 2Kings 25:9). Many of the prophetic scrolls include passages which look forward to a final 'day of the Lord', when all evil will be destroyed and good will ultimately be vindicated by God. This is the background and context of this present discourse.

It is Matthew's belief that, at the moment of our death, Jesus will be present to each of us. In that encounter we will be revealed for who we really are, and for what we have chosen to become by the free choices we have made. Jesus, as the Son of Man, has identified with us in our human condition, especially in its fragility and suffering and oppression. He has identified with us. The question is, Have we identified with him? Have we heeded his words? Have we believed the good news and chosen accordingly?

This final discourse is a comment on the section which we have just completed, in which we have seen God's judgment of the temple religion which rejected Jesus. It introduces the passion narrative which, for Matthew and the Christian community, is the ultimate revelation by which each of us and all human history will be judged. It is the crucified and resurrected Jesus who comes to each of us at every moment of our existence, and in a definitive way at our death, to invite us to believe the good news.

The presence of Jesus, the Son of Man, to each person, when our present experience (this age) has reached its term, is called the 'coming', or the 'presence' (Greek *parousia*) of the Son of Man. It will happen to each of us. It will happen to all of us. The whole of human history as we know it will be judged by this encounter, for Jesus reveals who God truly is and how we, as human beings, are to respond to God.

There are two technical words which are commonly used in describing this discourse: 'eschatological' and 'apocalyptic'. The first has to do with content; the second with style.

'Eschatological' is a word taken over from the Greek *eschata*, meaning 'the final things'. This section is sometimes referred to as the 'eschatological discourse', because, as we have just noted, it is concerned with God's ultimate judgment of human history.

'Apocalyptic' is a word taken over from the Greek *apokalypsis*, meaning 'revelation'. It is used to describe the kind of literary form which we find in passages that look above and beyond actual historical events to present in visionary form, and in language that relies heavily on images and symbolism, an inspired insight into God's transcendent design. It is found, for example, in large sections of the book of Daniel and in other biblical material from the last years of the Old Testament. It was also a favourite literary form for much of the non-biblical material of the two hundred years prior to Jesus — literature which focuses attention on the way in which God will intervene decisively to bring about the fulfilment of his promises and the climax of Israel's history.

Matthew presents the life of Jesus as the way in which God has chosen to vindicate the just, to bring Israel's exile to an end, to rebuild the true temple, and to establish a final covenant, meant for the whole world. God has done something ultimate in Jesus' ministry. People must repent if they are to belong to God's new order.

¹ As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple.

² Then he asked them, 'You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

³ When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?'

compare Mark 13:1-4
Luke 21:5-7

Introduction: Jesus foresees the destruction of the temple

Jesus has already warned that the temple will be left desolate (23:38). Now Matthew takes us back to the 'Mount of Olives' (see 21:1), and so to the theme of judgment associated with it (see Zechariah 14:4). Centre stage is Jesus 'going away' from the temple which he has prophetically rejected. The failure of the temple authorities to accept the gospel has fixed them on a path of destruction.

In this passage Jesus echoes the lament of Jeremiah on the occasion of the destruction of the first temple centuries earlier (587BC).

Because you have done all these things, says the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh.

– Jeremiah 7:13-14

The Christian community interpreted the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD as the consequence of the failure of its people to heed the word of peace preached to them by Jesus. Matthew begins this discourse with the temple because it stands as a warning to every generation of the importance of heeding the revelation of the good news given by Jesus.

The disciples ask three interrelated questions. The first concerns the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem; the second concerns the presence (*parousia*) of the Son of Man and so of God's judgment; the third concerns the end of this age and so the consummation of history as we experience it. The three questions are interrelated. The common theme is God's just verdict. In the rest of the discourse Jesus' words shed light on one or other of these three questions.

**PART A. Signs of the presence of the Son of Man
and of the end of the age (24:4-36)**

A warning against deception by false messiahs

Matthew warns his community, as Jesus warned his disciples, not to be surprised at the emergence of false Messiahs (antichrists: 2Thessalonians 2:3-12; 1John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2John 7; Revelation 13:4-18) and false prophets (see 7:15-20).

Paul's letters witness to the fact that many disciples were led astray by people who claimed to be speaking in Jesus' name but who were false prophets. One need only think of the divisions in the Church in Corinth. Matthew reminds his readers that Jesus warned them to expect this, and to be vigilant.

⁴ Jesus answered them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray.

⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, "I am *the Messiah!*" and they will lead many astray.

compare Mark 13:5-6
Luke 21:8

A warning to expect wars and catastrophes

⁶ ‘And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet.

⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places:

⁸ all this is but the beginning of the birthpangs.

compare Mark 13:7-8
Luke 21:9-11

Jesus’ disciples believed that he had inaugurated the new creation. One can readily sense their alarm when, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the old patterns of war, earthquake and famine continued as though nothing had happened.

Matthew attempts to encourage his community not to lose heart. These are, indeed, painful happenings, but they are ‘the beginning of the birthpangs’. Life can come from these sufferings, just as it came from the sufferings of Jesus. The new creation has been realised in Jesus. It is in process and if sufferings are borne patiently and in faith they can be the pangs that herald birth. Matthew is drawing on imagery such as the following from Isaiah:

O Lord, in distress they sought you, they poured out a prayer when your chastening was on them. Like a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near her time, so were we because of you, O Lord.

– Isaiah 26:16-17

Persecution must not deter them from their mission

Matthew warns his disciples not to be surprised by persecution, a theme developed already in the sermon on the mount (5:10-11) and in the missionary discourse (10:16-25). They should not be surprised when members of the community fall away and betray other Christians, and when others lose their fervour.

Matthew repeats a statement which can be said to summarise the essential message of all eschatological writing: 'The one who endures to the end will be saved' (see 10:22; compare Revelation 13:10; 14:12).

Of course they are longing for the fulfilment of the new creation; and of course they find suffering hard. They must, however, take heart. Jesus' mission will not fail: the good news will be proclaimed throughout the world. Only then will the end come. Moreover, the proclamation of the good news is intimately related to their perseverance in faith amid persecution.

The warnings have a special poignancy when we remember the terrible treatment of Christians in Rome in the persecution of Nero after the great fire of 64AD, and the awful experiences of the Roman-Jewish war (66-73AD). It is likely that Matthew's community includes refugees from that war, and that the following passage draws upon their experiences.

⁹ *'Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name.'*

¹⁰ *'Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another.'*

¹¹ *'And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.'*

¹² *'And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold.'*

¹³ **But the one who endures to the end will be saved.**

¹⁴ **And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come.**

verse 9 compare
Matthew 10:22; Mark 13:13
Luke 21:17

verse 13 compare
Matthew 10:22; Mark 13:13;
Luke 21:19

verse 14 compare Mark 13:10

¹⁵ **‘So when you see the desolating sacrilege *standing in the holy place, as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel* (let the reader understand),**

¹⁶ **then those in Judea must flee to the mountains;**

¹⁷ **the one on the housetop must not go down to take what is in the house;**

¹⁸ **the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat.**

¹⁹ **Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days!**

²⁰ **Pray that your flight may not be in winter *or on a Sabbath*.**

²¹ **For at that time there will be *great* suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.**

²² **And if those days had not been cut short, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.**

compare Mark 13:14-20
Luke 21:20-24

The Jewish-Roman war: an example of the suffering that Christians are to expect

The expression ‘desolating sacrilege’ is borrowed from the Book of Daniel, the classical reference book for writings concerned with the last things (*eschata*). The author was referring to the sacrilege of placing a statue of Zeus on the altar of holocausts in the sanctuary of the Jewish temple (2Maccabees 6:2; see Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11. See also 1Maccabees 1:55). Matthew seems to be applying the expression ‘desolating sacrilege’ to all the acts of desecration that happen in a time of violence and persecution.

The plight of the fugitives created by such violence is graphically portrayed in the extreme language typical of this form of literature. Jesus speaks of ‘great suffering such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be’. The prophet Joel uses similar language when he speaks of:

a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds
and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon
the mountains a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old, nor will be
again after them in ages to come.

– Joel 2:2; see also Daniel 12:1; 1Mac 9:27

Matthew reminds his readers that, horrible as it all is, everything does come within the providence of the all-powerful God, and ‘those days will be cut short’. Whatever suffering they may endure as a result of the action of evil, there is an over-arching providence which is caring for those whom God has chosen.

The presence of the Son of man will be unmistakable

The opening verse repeats the warning given by Jesus at the beginning of the discourse (see 24:4-5). It is clear from other books of the New Testament that the problem of discerning true from false prophecy was a major one in the period of heightened expectation just after the resurrection of Jesus.

Paul tells the community in Thessalonica not to quench the Spirit, and not to despise prophesying. However, he goes on to warn them to ‘test everything’ and to hold fast only to what is good (1Thessalonians 5:19-22). He returns to the problem with greater urgency in his Second Letter to the same community (2:1-15), and concludes by urging them to ‘hold fast to the traditions which you were taught by us’ (2Thessalonians 2:15).

He tells the community in Corinth that when prophets speak the others are to ‘weigh what is said’ (1Corinthians 14:29). In his letter to the Roman community he writes:

I warn you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offences, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them.

– Romans 16:17

The warnings become more urgent in the later works of the New Testament (1Timothy 4:1-5; 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 4:3-4; 1John 4:1; 2Peter 2:1-3; Revelation 2:20).

Matthew focuses on the need for a believing that is genuine (24:23,26). For those with true faith, the presence of the Son of Man will be as unmistakable as lightning.

No one doubts where the corpse lies in a field of battle. The vultures make it obvious. The death that follows from rejection of the Son of Man and his gospel message will be just as obvious.

²³ **‘Then if anyone says to you, “Look! Here is the Messiah!” or “There he is!” – do not believe it.**

²⁴ **For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.**

²⁵ **Take note, I have told you beforehand.**

²⁶ *So, if they say to you, “Look! He is in the wilderness,” do not go out. If they say, “Look! He is in the inner rooms,” do not believe it.*

²⁷ **For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.**

²⁸ **Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.**

verses 23-25 compare Mark 13:21-23

verse 27 compare Luke 17:24

verse 28 compare Luke 17:37

29 'Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken.

30 Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see "the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven" with power and great glory.

31 And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

compare
Mark 13:24-27;
Luke 21:25-27

The presence of the Son of Man affects the whole of the created universe.

Matthew paints a picture of the 'final judgment', that is to say of the ultimate significance of our human existence and of how our lives are ultimately judged. The images come from Isaiah. In an oracle against Babylon, seen as a symbol of any power that dares to stand against the Lord, we read in the Isaiah scroll:

Wail, for the day of the Lord is near ... They will look aghast at one another ... See, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation, and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light... Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the Lord of hosts in the day of his fierce anger.

– Isaiah 13:6-10,13

Jesus' disciples have nothing to fear from God's judgment, because Jesus, the Son of Man will be there, and those who have 'endured to the end' will all be gathered to him. These are those who have mourned for him as the people mourned the death of king Josiah (see Zechariah 12:10-14). Their hearts were moved by his death and they repented. Jesus has been raised 'with power and great glory'. His true disciples will share in this. Perhaps the best commentary on 'the sign of the Son of Man [that] will appear in the heaven' is found in the symbolic portrait of the risen and glorious Christ found in the Book of Revelation:

Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.

– Revelation 1:7

Matthew quotes from Daniel and brings to a climax his description of Jesus as the Son of Man. For those with eyes to see, this vision is realised on Calvary, for, as Jesus goes on to say in the following passage, they will 'see these things'(24:33). It is in Jesus' loving way of giving his life that God's final judgment on humankind is revealed as one that offers salvation.

You, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. ... For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

– 1Thessalonians 5:1-6,8-10

God's final judgment is imminent: The timing of the final consummation of history is known only to God

The destruction of the temple (24:2) will happen within the lifetime of Jesus' contemporaries. The deception, the violence, the persecution, and the sacrilege ('these things', 24:33) are about to take place in the passion and crucifixion of Jesus. They will be able to see it all for themselves (24:34; see 16:28).

Matthew seems already to be presenting a theology of the cross that will be developed by John who sees it as Jesus' hour of glory. Those who look with the eyes of faith will see in the crucified Jesus the 'Son of Man coming with power and great glory' (24:30). God is revealing on the cross his ultimate judgment upon humankind, and, in redeeming his Son from death in the resurrection, God is promising to redeem also all those who believe in him and who follow him as disciples.

The kingdom of God comes close in Jesus (3:2; 4:17; 10:7). For those who remain close to Jesus, heeding his words which 'will not pass away' (see 5:18), the saving judgment is always imminent. Those who refuse him and his revealing word choose to remain on the path of self-destruction, refusing the saving power of God.

As to the timing of the final manifestation of the effects of the redemption in the consummation of the new heavens and the new earth — that is something known only to 'the Father'. Jesus, called here 'the Son' without any qualification (see also 11:27), knows what he knows only from the Father, and the timing of the consummation for each person and for the whole of the created universe is not something that can be predicted. It is not something known to Jesus. It is not a question that should concern his disciples.

³² **'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.**

³³ **So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.**

³⁴ **Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.**

³⁵ **Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.**

³⁶ **But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.**

compare Mark 13:28-32
Luke 21:29-33

³⁷ **‘For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.**

³⁸ **For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark,**

³⁹ **and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.**

⁴⁰ *Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left.*

⁴¹ **Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.**

⁴² **Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day *your Lord* is coming.**

⁴³ **But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he *would have stayed awake* and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.**

verses 37-39 compare Luke 17:26-27

verse 40-41 compare Luke 17:34-35

verse 42 compare Mark 1:35

verses 43-44 compare Luke 12:39-40

PART B. Jesus will reveal his presence. We must be watchful (24:37 - 25:30)

The need to be vigilant

Matthew refers to the time of Noah (see Genesis 6:6-12; Ezekiel 14:14-20). There is nothing wrong with the behaviour of the people as described here. The problem lies in what is missing: they have no concern for what is fundamental — their relationship with God. In this sense ‘they knew nothing’. Faced with the collapse of his world, Noah listened to God’s word and built an ark (symbol of the temple). There, living in the presence of God, he rose above the surrounding chaos, a beacon of light in the darkness, and it was from this temple that all life issued. Jesus wants his disciples to be as vigilant as Noah and as obedient.

Vigilance is necessary for, as everyday experience teaches us, we do not know the moment when death might come to us: the moment when we end our existence in this ‘age’ and face eternity. Jesus is asking us to be present in the real circumstances of our life and to respond as he responded: in faith and hope and love. This is what it means to be vigilant: watching for his presence and listening for his word.

At the moment of death, our lives will be revealed in their true light. It is then that the Son of Man will be present to each of us. It is then that we will see what meaning our life has had and how we really relate to God. Since we cannot predict this moment, we must always be vigilant.

This theme of vigilance is taken up in the three following parables, which illustrate various responsibilities we each have, as well as the waiting which we cannot avoid, and the certainty that Jesus will make his presence known to us if we are attentive.

The consequences of fidelity and infidelity in the ministry of leadership

The reference to ‘hypocrites’ takes us back to Jesus’ lamentations concerning the religious leaders (23:13-32), and the final line repeats the refrain used by Matthew to describe the despair and frustration of those who have chosen to remain obstinate in their refusal of the salvation offered them by Jesus (8:12; 13:42,50; 22:13).

This parable, too, focuses on those who have been given a ministry of leadership in the community. They are to fulfil their responsibilities, following the example of Jesus (20:24-28). If they do so, when the time of waiting is over they will receive their reward; if they do not, they will reap the harvest of their ‘wicked’ deeds.

⁴⁵ ‘Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time?’

⁴⁶ Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives.

⁴⁷ Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions.

⁴⁸ But if that wicked slave says to himself, “My master is delayed,”

⁴⁹ and he begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards,

⁵⁰ the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know.

⁵¹ He will cut him in pieces and put him with the *hypocrites*, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

compare Luke 12:41-46

¹ 'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bride-groom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.

³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept.

⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." ⁷ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps.

⁸ The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out."

⁹ But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves."

¹⁰ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹ Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us."

¹² But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you."

¹³ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

The consequences of being and not being attentive to the one who loves us

The oil is the anointing of God's Spirit that fills the hearts of those who respond in love to the invitation to be with the bridegroom. Of course one cannot give one's oil to another any more than one person can love for another. We are ultimately responsible for our own personal attitude.

Words are not enough; acknowledging Jesus as 'Lord, lord' is not enough (compare 7:21-23). It is our heart that matters and what we actually do from the heart, ever attentive to the bridegroom (compare 9:15) who approaches us in love. In his presence, what may appear as small thoughtless neglect is shown to be a profound lack of attentiveness to the one who really matters to us, and so a self-absorption that neglects the divine. Jesus is warning his disciples to look at their present life only in the light of its goal, which is a communion of love with him and so with his Father.

We are responsible for the graces given us

(See text on opposite page)

We are not being invited to admire the reprehensible behaviour of the master. Jesus wants us to focus on the slaves. They are in a position of responsibility for which they must render an account. Just as the slave who failed to use his money well ended up by losing everything, so it will be with those who fail to use their God-given gifts in carrying out the mission entrusted to them.

We are made in the image of God. We are called to be creators, life-givers. Love that is not offered lies stagnant. The more we love, the more capable of love we become. The less we love, the less capable of loving we become (25:29). We are not to be afraid of God. We are to trust the gifts he gives us to build a community of love. Not to do so is to choose to exist in the outer darkness, separated from the community of love in which one shares only by giving.

See commentary on opposite page

¹⁴ For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

¹⁹ After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.

²⁰ Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." ²¹ His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." ²³ His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." ²⁶ But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.

²⁹ For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

For a similar parable, see Luke 19:12-27

³¹ **‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.**

³² **All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,** ³³ **and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.** ³⁴ **Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;** ³⁵ **for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,** ³⁶ **I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”**

³⁷ **Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?**

³⁸ **And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?** ³⁹ **And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”**

⁴⁰ **And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”**

Conclusion. Jesus coming in glory and God’s judgment

The parable focuses on the coming of the Son of Man, that is to say, the coming of the definitive presence of Jesus before each and every human being. As the Son of Man he identifies with each of us in the weakness of our human condition, and especially in the unjust oppression which we suffer because of the accidents and absurdities which we cannot avoid. He offers us a way to live in the midst of meaningless situations. He offers us the assurance of the presence of God’s action which can create meaning for us in any circumstance. How we respond to his invitation determines how our lives are ultimately going to be judged.

He is the Son of Man. He is also the Messiah-king who sits ‘on the throne of his glory’. He is not only our model and representative; he is also our judge. Rather, we are judged according to our relationship to him. He knows the hearts of all. It is important to note that his judgment comes as a surprise: our own assessment of ourselves is not ultimately trustworthy.

Who are ‘the least of these who are members of my family’? At one level they are the ‘poor in spirit’(5:3), the ‘little ones’ who are his disciples (10:42), those who are humble, like little children (18:3-4; 19:14), those who, following Jesus, give their lives in service of others (20:26-28).

But, while Jesus attracts people to join the community of his disciples, some who appear to respond and who claim to be among his disciples will not really be such, and some of those who do not belong to the Christian community will, by their lives, show that they are. Judgment in this matter is not ours to make. The parable warns us to be ready for surprises. The mystery of Jesus’ love and of our response to him cannot be confined to the sphere of explicit human consciousness or to the community that claims to be Christian. In this, as in every other matter, ‘you will know them by their fruits’ (7:16).

The key is to do the will of God (7:21; 12:50), a will expressed here in the simplest and most demanding terms. What matters is practical, real love that can be recognised as such by anyone: simple, but as demanding as was the ministry 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 in these ways that we express our love for God and others (22:37-40). It is this love that is the fulfilling of the law and the prophets (5:17).

The fact that Jesus identifies with those who are oppressed has led some to speak of seeing Jesus in the poor and serving him in them. No doubt there is a very precious value being expressed here and many who espouse it love very well. However, there is a danger that we might see ourselves as loving Jesus, but not really be loving the person suffering the oppression.

Others speak of seeing the oppressed in Jesus; that is to say, seeing them through his eyes and with his heart. This might be closer to what Matthew has in mind in this scene. To be a disciple of Jesus is to live Jesus' life. It is to have his mind and his heart. It is to identify where he identifies. It is to know and give expression to the compassion of one who is 'gentle and humble in heart' (11:29).

⁴¹ 'Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;

⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,

⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."

⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?"

⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'