

# **JESUS' DEATH AND RESURRECTION**

**Matthew 26:1 - 28:15**

**PART A. The Passion Narrative (26:1 - 27:54)**

The many parallels in vocabulary and in theme between this and the previous section highlight the fact that for Matthew the presence, the coming and the revelation of the Son of Man happens in Jesus' dying and being raised to glory by God. The Son of Man who identifies with the oppressed and who is vindicated by the judgment of God is the crucified and risen Jesus. He is the one who comes to us. He is the one we are invited to see.

We have reached the climax for which Matthew has been preparing us from the beginning of the gospel: Jesus' death on the cross. He first presents Jesus' own understanding of its significance by recounting Jesus' last supper. Then he invites us to contemplate the unfolding of the drama till the point of ultimate revelation when a Roman soldier and those with him say: 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

<sup>1</sup> *When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples,*

<sup>2</sup> *'You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.'*

<sup>3</sup> *Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas,*

<sup>4</sup> *and they conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.*

<sup>5</sup> *But they said, 'Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.'*

**The final conspiracy to arrest Jesus**

We are familiar with the opening phrase, as Matthew has used a similar expression after each of the four previous discourses (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1). In saying that the Passover is coming 'after two days', Matthew reminds us of Jesus' prediction concerning 'the third day' (16:21; 17:23; 20:19). The title 'Son of Man' (see the commentary on 8:20) provides an immediate link with the previous passage which spoke of the coming in glory of the Son of Man (25:31).

Jesus' death occurred during the period of the celebration of the Passover, and the events of his final days are placed by Matthew within the context of the themes and motifs associated with that feast.

Originally Passover was a pastoral festival celebrated on the night of the first full moon after the spring equinox. The finest year-old lamb from the previous spring was offered in sacrifice to God as a prayer for a good season of new lambs. It took only a small step to associate the festival with God's choice of Israel as his 'flock'.

Egypt saw itself, and with reason, as the mightiest nation on the earth. In their religious consciousness, they identified themselves as the first-born and favourite of the gods. In their liturgical reliving of the Exodus, the people of Israel re-enacted God's rejection of the Egyptians, their oppressors. Israel is the Lord's first-born, not Egypt.

compare Mark 14:1-2  
Luke 22:1-2

Through the mighty action of the Lord, the Israelites avoided the terrible catastrophes that Egypt brought upon itself by its arrogance. They were passed over (hence the name 'Passover') and redeemed from Egypt to begin their journey to the Promised Land.

The slain lamb was called the 'Passover Lamb' (*pascha*). Its blood was poured out upon the ground, symbolising the return of its life to God, and its body was eaten in a communal meal, celebrating the familiarity of the people with their God.

According to the ritual, the Passover was first celebrated on the eve of God's saving act. From then on it was to be celebrated as a memorial, so that each year the community would re-enact the Exodus and receive anew the grace and the promises attached to it.

The ritual text is found in the Book of Exodus:

This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every first-born in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

– Exodus 12:11-14

Matthew is preparing us for the new Passover Lamb, for the death of the new first-born, for our redemption from all that enslaves us, and for the new covenant that God will make with us as we journey towards the fullness of the promise.

Those plotting Jesus' death wanted to avoid his becoming a rallying point for disaffected elements among the pilgrims, and so were looking for a way of bringing about his death, but not during the festivities.

**<sup>6</sup> Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper,**

**<sup>7</sup> a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table.**

**<sup>8</sup> But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, 'Why this waste?**

**<sup>9</sup> For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.'**

**<sup>10</sup> But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, 'Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me.**

**<sup>11</sup> For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. <sup>12</sup> By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial.**

**<sup>13</sup> Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'**

compare Mark 14:3-9

### **Jesus is anointed**

The contrast between this and the previous scene is striking. While the authorities are plotting to kill Jesus, an unnamed woman performs an extravagant action of love. Pouring perfumed oil over Jesus' head is a gesture of welcome (Psalm 23:5). It was also central to the consecration of a priest (Psalm 133:2; Exodus 30:22-33) and also of the king (Psalm 45:7; 1Samuel 9:16-17). The prophetic anointing received by Jesus at his baptism, when the Holy Spirit came down and rested upon him (3:16), finds its fulfilment in the death for which he is now being prepared.

Jesus tells the troubled disciples to stop their angry outburst against her. There is more to what she has done than they realise. Though she does not know it, she is anointing his body for burial (one of the traditional acts of mercy, Tobit 1:16-20; 2:1-8). She has also seen in Jesus the representative of the poor.

Matthew knows that measuring the needs of the poor in economic terms (which is what the disciples are doing) is not enough. True care for the poor will be expressed only if the focus is on the person of the poor, and, for Jesus' disciples, this will be enlightened only when they look at the poor in the light of Jesus himself, the Poor One in their midst. The woman's love for Jesus justifies her action. Love for the poor will justify what may appear extravagant to a person who sees only the economics involved.

The proclaiming of the good news in the whole world (compare 24:14) will ensure that what she has done for Jesus will be done everywhere for the poor with whom Jesus identifies.

In the light of the circumstances of Jesus' death and hasty burial, Matthew sees this event as indicating a special providence of God, caring for his beloved son, even to the details of ensuring that he receives the proper ritual of anointing. It might appear that Jesus is simply the victim of the plotting of his oppressors, but, as this scene indicates, God is present to him, caring for him. Jesus is about to face the final trial as the forces of evil gather to destroy him, but, as Matthew tells us in his prologue, God is caring for his Son struggling in the wilderness. This woman, in her love, is yet one more example of an 'angel' sent by God to 'wait on' Jesus (see 4:11).

### Judas arranges to betray Jesus

In this and the previous scene, Matthew captures the whole range of behaviour of those who follow Jesus: from extravagant love to betrayal.

The betrayal by Judas (compare 24:9-11) comes to the reader as no surprise, for already, when he was first introduced, Matthew described him as ‘Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him’ (10:4). Nevertheless, now when it happens, it heightens the dramatic tension. Up to this point, we have seen Jesus rejected by the religious authorities and by the ordinary people. Now we see him being rejected even by one of his closest disciples. Step by step, we see Jesus being abandoned by everyone, till he faces his bitter death in total isolation.

Matthew alludes to the writings of Zechariah in which the sheep merchants insult God’s prophet by paying him as a salary ‘thirty shekels of silver’ (Zechariah 11:12), the price of a slave (Exodus 21:32). Though he mentions that they offered Judas money, Matthew makes no attempt to enter into Judas’s motivation for the betrayal.

Let us not underestimate the pain this betrayal must have caused Jesus. When he chose Judas, his heart must have been filled with hope for himself, for Judas, and for the mission which he saw Judas as being graced to share with him. Not even the pure and constant love of Jesus could prevent whatever sin it was that Judas allowed to cause decay in his soul.

In this, too, we see what it meant for Jesus to share to the full the weakness of our human condition. Love cannot force entry. Love cannot control. Love cannot ensure success. Love can only love and wait for the invitation of a free response to enter into and to remain in communion. If love is rejected, there is nothing love can do – except to keep loving.

**<sup>14</sup> Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests**

**<sup>15</sup> and said, ‘What will you give me if I betray him to you?’**

**They paid him *thirty pieces of silver*.**

**<sup>16</sup> And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.**

compare Mark 14:10-11  
Luke 22:3-6

### Preparations for the Passover Meal

**17 On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?'**

**18 He said, 'Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, "The Teacher says, *My time is near*; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'"**

**19 So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.**

The festival of Unleavened Bread (*Matzoth*) was originally an agricultural feast celebrating the beginning of the grain harvest (Exodus 34:18). Like the festival of Passover, it was a spring festival, beginning with the first full moon after the spring equinox – the 15th day of the month called 'Nisan' according to the Jewish practice of beginning the day at sunset. The celebrations went for a week (Exodus 12:15-18). At some time prior to our historical records, it was combined with the feast of Passover.

There appears to be a connection between this and the previous scene. Does Jesus' guarded language indicate his desire to ensure that Judas does not know where the supper is to be held?

The dramatic effect is to leave the reader with the impression that Jesus is somehow master of his own fate, acting in accordance with a higher divine design that transcends the evil plotting of those around him. He may appear to be the victim of other people's evil decisions, and in part this is true. But there is something else happening here as well. He remains free, and he is choosing to continue his mission in the face of the betrayal and its consequences. Convinced of his Father's love, he entrusts himself to God.

The deliberate vagueness of the expression 'a certain man' suggests that Matthew has his own community in mind. The invitation is to any and every person to make his or her home available for the celebration of the Christian Passover. Jesus wants to keep the Passover at your house and at mine with his disciples.

In the prologue Jesus was called Emmanuel, 'God is with us'(1:23). Notice how frequently in this section we are told that Jesus is with us (26:18,20,29,36) and we with him (26:23,35,38,40,51). However, the community, as we shall shortly see, goes through scandal, denial, betrayal and runs away. It is only Jesus' fidelity that keeps calling us back. He is the bond that unites us.

The expression 'my time is near'(compare 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 21:1,34), reminds us of the parable of the fig tree (24:33). What Jesus spoke about in the eschatological discourse is about to 'take place'(24:34).

compare Mark 14:12-16  
Luke 22:7-13

## Jesus and his betrayer

A common feature in the New Testament is the attempt by the early Christians to search through the sacred Scriptures to find indications in God's word that would help them make sense of what happened to Jesus. Matthew states that 'the Son of Man goes as it is written of him'. He is probably meaning to take in the full sweep of references that had been built up within the Christian community by this time, which were seen as shedding light on the suffering of Jesus, the Messiah.

In Daniel the Son of Man is representative of the suffering faithful (see commentary on 8:20). Matthew's statement here presumes all that has gone before in the gospel since Caesarea Philippi, and the link that Jesus himself has made between the expression 'Son of Man' as applied to himself, and the necessity of suffering. See the commentary on Matthew 20:18, and 'The Son of Man came ... to give his life a ransom for many' (20:28). More specifically, in the present context, Matthew may be alluding to the following psalms:

Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me.

– Psalm 41:9

It is not enemies who taunt me – I could bear that; it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me – I could hide from them. But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend, with whom I kept pleasant company.

– Psalm 55:12-14

Each of the twelve, greatly distressed, says: 'Surely not I, Lord'. Matthew wants each of his readers to ask the same question, for the betrayal is not something going on 'out there', but concerns each of us, in every generation. Judas knows what to say, too, but notice he says 'Rabbi', not 'Lord'. He is a disciple in appearance only.

Jesus' reply: 'You have said so', is the same reply that he gives to the high priest (26:64) and to Pilate (27:11). We judge ourselves by the way we relate to Jesus. There is no need for an extra judgment to come upon us from outside. As Jesus said earlier: 'By your words [and deeds] you will be justified, and by your words [and deeds] you will be condemned' (12:37). Jesus' lament over his betrayer (26:24) is not a condemnation to hell. It is a judgment on the how awful it is to betray the 'Son of Man' — to betray the poor and the one who gives his life for them. Who of us has not been guilty of this?

**20 When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve;**

**21 and while they were eating, he said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.'**

**22 And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, 'Surely not I, Lord?'**

**23 He answered, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.'**

**24 The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.'**

**25 Judas, who betrayed him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi?'**

**He replied, 'You have said so.'**

compare Mark 14:17-21

Luke 22:21-23

**<sup>26</sup> While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread,**

**and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.'**

**<sup>27</sup> Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you;**

**<sup>28</sup> for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.**

**<sup>29</sup> I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'**

## **The supper**

This last meal of Jesus with 'the twelve' is set, as has already been noted (see commentary on 26:2), within the context of the Passover. There is no mention of a Passover Lamb, for Jesus himself is the one whose life is about to be taken, whose body is about to be broken, whose blood is about to be poured out.

It is at this supper that Jesus gives his meaning to the events which were about to overtake them all, expressing eloquently, in word and symbol, what he was going to give them the following day in the silence of his passion, when his 'Father's kingdom' would be revealed.

He wants his disciples to remember, when his life is so brutally taken from him, that he is not just a victim of his enemies. He has always given himself for them and for 'many' (that is for the multitude – see commentary on 20:28). On the cross this self-giving will reach its consummation.

When he broke the bread this night, and when he shared the blood-red wine, he gave them a special meaning, symbolising the final offering he was about to give. When they took and ate this bread, he wanted them to know that it was his body they were taking. It was his whole person that he was giving, everything he was and everything he did in sharing the human condition: his weakness, his brokenness, his dying — and all as a gift of love to nourish their hearts and their minds, their bodies and their souls.

When they took the wine this night and drank it, he wanted them to know that it was his life poured out for them, his Spirit given them, that they were drinking into their thirsty souls. Yes, his life was about to be taken from him, but he wanted them to know that he was giving it for them as his final act of love. All he had left now was himself, and he was offering himself to them in love.

This is the new Passover meal. It is the new meal of the covenant. The first covenant of Sinai was also sealed, symbolically, with blood, and was celebrated in a meal. As we read the ritual text in the Book of Exodus, notice (in our italics) the parallels with Matthew's account of the supper:

compare Mark 14:22-25  
Luke 22:14-20

Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do." And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up *twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel*. He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of wellbeing to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.' Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, "*See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you* in accordance with all these words.' Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also *they beheld God, and they ate and drank..*

– Exodus 24:3-11

Like the Passover meal at the time of the Exodus, Jesus' final supper celebrates God's great act of redemption to be realised the following day. As in the first Passover meal, the covenant is sealed by the pouring out of blood (compare Zechariah 9:11). Likewise, the twelve tribes of Israel, symbol of the universality of God's saving action, are symbolically represented by the twelve, who beheld God as they eat and drink.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews recalls the Sinai covenant (Hebrews 9:18-20). Recognising its imperfection, he goes on to quote Jeremiah, who looked forward to the establishing of a new covenant:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people . . . for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

– Jeremiah 31:31-34

It is this new covenant that Jesus sealed when he poured out his life in love right to the very end:

He has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.

– Hebrews 9:26

Our earliest account of the last supper is found in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, written from Ephesus probably in 54AD:

I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

– 1Corinthians 11:23-26

## The last supper

The meal, as we have just said, is a meal held in anticipation of the morrow when Jesus, the Passover Lamb, will give his life for the world. It is also held in anticipation of the final communion with God when the process of redemption and salvation of the world is consummated. It proclaims the Lord's death 'until he comes'. Already it is the beginning of the Messianic banquet promised by the prophets and celebrated in Hebrew poetry:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

– Isaiah 25:6

Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.

– Proverbs 9:5

Paul's account reminds us that it is not only a meal held in anticipation of the redemptive act of God, but that it is also a meal to be continually re-celebrated so that the memory of what Jesus did will never be forgotten, and so that, in the ritual celebration, the fruits of Jesus' self-giving can be enjoyed by his disciples. The ritual meal celebrates the fact that Jesus is always with them. Jesus is inviting his disciples on the last night of his life to share this meal with him, and to continue to share it together with him after his death.

We know that Jesus' disciples celebrated this memorial meal on the first day of the week in memory of the resurrection of Jesus and as a statement of their belief in his real presence among them, sustaining and nourishing them to carry on his mission in the world (1Corinthians 10:16-22; 11:17-34; Luke 24:30,35; Acts 2:42,46; 20:7,11; 27:35). It is still celebrated by the Church as the great Thanksgiving ('Eucharist') Prayer.

The beauty and heroism of Jesus' self-offering is highlighted by the two scenes on either side. The scene immediately preceding speaks of betrayal by one of the twelve, and the following scene speaks of denial and desertion.

To eat his body and to drink his blood is to accept his self-offering and to take into ourselves his life, his love, and above all the intimate communion he experienced with God. It is also to accept a commitment to carrying on his mission. At the last supper, Jesus invited his disciples to do what he was about to do: to give their lives in love. Holiness, as is stated clearly in the Second Vatican Council, consists in tending to the perfection of love:

The holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful, and so must it be. It is expressed in many ways by individuals who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love.

– Lumen Gentium, n.39

Moreover, as Jesus demonstrated throughout his life, but especially in the way in which he offered his life on the cross, to love is to offer oneself with Christ in the obedience of faith to God and in self-giving for others:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

– 1 John 3:16

The documents of the Second Vatican Council make it clear that sharing in the Eucharist means welcoming the glorified Christ into our lives so that we, as his disciples, may offer ourselves as he did:

Christ's faithful should be instructed by God's word, and be nourished at the table of the Lord's body. They should ... learn to *offer themselves*. Through Christ the mediator they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and each other so that finally God may be all in all'.

– Sacrosanctum Concilium, n.48

All their works, prayers and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, if they are accomplished in the Spirit — indeed even the hardships of life if they are patiently borne — all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. In the celebration of the Eucharist these may most fittingly be offered to the Father along with the body of the Lord. And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.

– Lumen Gentium, n.34

<sup>30</sup> **When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.** <sup>31</sup> **Then Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'** <sup>32</sup> **But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.'** <sup>33</sup> **Peter said to him, 'Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.'** <sup>34</sup> **Jesus said to him, 'Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.'** <sup>35</sup> **Peter said to him, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.' And so said all the disciples.**

compare Mark 14:26-31  
verse 34,  
compare Luke 22:34

### **Jesus' disciples will all desert him**

The Mishna (composed c.200AD), records the tradition of singing the Hallel (Psalms 114-118) after celebrating the Passover. Matthew is probably referring to these psalms which praise and thank God for the wonders he has done in creation and in history.

This portrayal of the Messiah, betrayed by a close companion, going out of the city, praying in sorrow, and crossing the Kidron to the Mount of Olives, has interesting parallels in the story of David (2Samuel 15). The Mount of Olives, as we have already noted (24:3), is associated also with the final judgment.

In commenting on Matthew 21:1-11, we noted that Zechariah's prophecy forms the literary background for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. In verse thirty-one of the present passage Jesus quotes directly from Zechariah 13:7. Zechariah is speaking of the final ordeal which is to precede the dawning of the Messianic age and the inauguration of the new covenant. The one appointed by God to be the shepherd and leader of the people, will be struck down. In citing Zechariah, Jesus is warning the disciples that the final Messianic ordeal is imminent.

As with his earlier predictions of his passion (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19), Jesus leaves them in no doubt as to the outcome of the ordeal, by referring immediately to his resurrection. He has faith in the One in whom he has placed his trust. The disciples will all lose heart and desert Jesus because of what is about to happen to him. Even Peter will persist ('three times') in denying him, but Jesus wants them to trust him as he trusts his Father.

It was in Galilee that he first called them (4:18). They have failed him before but he has always renewed the call. The final hour is imminent. They will fail him again, but he will not fail them. He will go before them into Galilee and call them again.

What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?

– Romans 3:3

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

– Romans 11:29

After the intimacy of the Supper, this passage strikes the reader with tragic force, and prepares us for the terrible isolation Jesus is to experience in the following scenes. Jesus' disciples will all lose faith in him and desert him. Before the night is over, and in spite of all protestations, Peter will deny him.

### Jesus faces his bitter struggle alone

'Gethsemane' is a transliteration of an Aramaic word meaning 'oil-press'. After the supper, Jesus goes with the disciples to a grove of olive trees on the Mount of Olives, on the eastern side of the Kedron valley facing Jerusalem. He instructs them to wait, much as Moses instructed the elders to wait when he climbed the mountain to meet with God (Exodus 24:14). However, he does not go into prayer on his own. He takes with him the same three disciples who witnessed his glorification (17:1).

On the mountain, they saw him transfigured in glory, and they heard God call him 'Son'. Here they see the full reality of his human weakness as he experiences deep sorrow and anguish. No one can help him, for no one can understand or cope, not even the chosen three. He has to go into the agony alone as he struggles to discover God's will, and to conform his will to it. No response from God is heard.

God cannot will injustice, and what is about to happen to Jesus is clearly unjust. To imagine that it was God's will that Jesus be crucified, is to totally distort the image of God that Jesus has been revealing throughout the gospel. No, Jesus was crucified because people, refusing to believe the good news, decided to have him murdered. This decision was a sinful one. They refused to listen to God's word coming to them through his Son. They rejected the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

This much Jesus knew. Hence his struggle. All his life he had longed only to do God's will. God had given him a mission, a mission that seemed far from being successfully accomplished. The Pharisees on the whole had not changed. The Sadducees were still content to use religion for their own advantage. Elements of the population still hated their Roman oppressors and were committed to violence. The ordinary people were still confused and caught between the security of listening to their religious leaders and the frightening freedom offered them by Jesus. Even the twelve were clearly not ready to be left alone.

God, for Jesus as for us, transcends all aspects of human experience. Jesus knew the darkness of faith, and the failure of all our human efforts to experience the divine or to conceive of God. Faced with human treachery and isolation, Jesus knew what it was to reach out to God and be greeted by silence. Was part of his struggle also the fact that it was apparent to him that if he continued the way he was going he could no longer avoid death – a death that would appear to cause the failure of his mission?

**36 Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.'**

**37 He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated.**

**38 Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.'**

**39 And going**

compare  
Mark 14:32-34  
Luke 22:39

**a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.'**

**<sup>40</sup> Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?'**

**<sup>41</sup> Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.'**

**<sup>42</sup> Again he went away for the second time and prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.'**

**<sup>43</sup> Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy.**

**<sup>44</sup> So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words.**

**<sup>45</sup> Then he came to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.**

**<sup>46</sup> Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'**

compare Mark 14:35-42; Luke 22:41-46

In his distress, Jesus cries out, alone, to God that he might not have to drink the 'cup' of suffering (compare 20:22-23). At the same time, he expresses his complete willingness to do God's will. Finally, it becomes clear to him that he must fall back to a simple solution. God has told him to love; he would keep loving. God has told him to challenge injustice; he will continue to challenge it. God has told him to speak the truth about God and about the proper human response to God; he will continue to declare it.

That the agony persisted is dramatised by the three-fold prayer and return. Praying to God as 'Father', Jesus trusted that somehow, if he continued moment by moment to do the will of God, God would achieve through him all that God wanted to achieve. Jesus knew that for God 'all things are possible' (19:26). With the peace that comes only from total conformity to the mysterious will of God and total trust in spite of appearances, Jesus comes back to his sleeping disciples, ready to face the hour.

We are reminded of the reflections of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews:

We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

– Hebrews 4:15

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.

– Hebrews 5:7-8

While the focus is upon Jesus facing his terrible struggle alone, there is a lesson here also for Jesus' disciples. Each one has to learn to do what Jesus did. No one can accompany us in our agony and no one can suffer it for us. On our own we cannot help another to go through it. Furthermore, on our own we cannot go through it ourselves for 'the flesh is weak'.

Jesus, however, reminds them that ‘the spirit is willing’. He is referring to the Spirit of God that is eager to come down upon them, to encourage them and to grace them to come through their trial as Jesus has come through his. They are to call on God’s Spirit who will breathe God’s life and courage and energy into them. We are reminded of the prayer:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

– Psalm 51:10-11

This calls for vigilance (26:38,40), a theme that was prominent in the eschatological discourse (24:42 - 25:46). It is also clear that we are not capable of this prayer on our own. The focus throughout this scene is on Jesus’ prayer: ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray’. We have to wait for Jesus to invite us, as he invited Peter and James and John, to join him in his prayer. Our only hope of not failing in ‘the time of trial’ is to ‘keep awake’ and to enter with Jesus into his prayer. We cannot pray as Jesus prayed, but we can allow the Spirit of Jesus to pray Jesus’ prayer in us:

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

– Romans 8:26-27

Only through the power of the Spirit of God will we be able to accept Jesus’ invitation to ‘drink the cup that I am about to drink’(20:22). On the centrality of conforming our will to the will of God, we refer the reader to the commentary on Matthew 7:21 and 12:50. The expression ‘your will be done’ is found in the ‘Our Father’(6:10).

Jesus persisted in prayer; the disciples persisted in failing to be vigilant. This is the meaning of the threefold repetition (compare Peter’s threefold denial, 26:70-74). When Jesus comes to them for the third time, he tells them that ‘the hour’ of confrontation with evil ‘is at hand’. He also identifies himself as ‘the Son of Man’(see 8:20 and especially 17:22; and 20:18). God’s final judgment is about to be revealed.

Jesus’ last words (till after his resurrection) to his disciples in Matthew’s gospel are encouraging. In spite of their persistent failure, Jesus persists in calling them: ‘Get up’. They fail now, but Jesus knows them, and he knows that they will learn to stand with him against the powers of evil. He invites them to follow him through his ordeal: ‘Let us go’.

**<sup>47</sup> While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people.**

**<sup>48</sup> Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.'**

**<sup>49</sup> At once he came up to Jesus and said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him.**

**<sup>50</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Friend, do what you are here to do.' Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him.**

**<sup>51</sup> Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear.**

compare Mark 14:43-47  
Luke 22:47-50

### **Jesus' arrest**

Jesus is the victim of treachery and betrayal, and he is powerless. The sudden appearance of Judas comes as a surprise to the reader: we have not been told that he left the supper, and have no reason for thinking that he was not with the other disciples in the garden. The religious leaders have authorised the arrest (see 16:21; 26:3,14), and Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss. Jesus calls Judas 'friend', indicating that the conflict is all from Judas's side. Comparison with earlier texts indicates that there is also a challenge in Jesus' greeting (see 20:13; 22:12).

All his disciples desert Jesus and flee. He is utterly alone. Jesus has already prepared us for this desertion (26:31), while stating that even in this desertion the Scriptures were being fulfilled. Jesus may appear to be the victim of treachery, but there is also a larger divine providence being worked out in these terrible events.

Divine providence does not change Judas or the crowd or the authorities who sent them. It does not stop the disciple attempting to defend Jesus through violence. Providence is love, and love does not control. It invites, it makes possible, it forgives, but it always respects human decision, and human decision may, as here, resist grace.

Jesus disapproves of the use of violence (see 5:39; 10:39), citing a maxim found elsewhere in the Bible (Genesis 9:6; Revelation 13:10). He must face the awful betrayal in the same way that we all must face it should it be our experience — without any angelic legions to defend us (see Daniel 12:1; 2Maccabees 5:2-3; 10:29-30; 15:22-23). He has only his trust in God to support him as evil works its chaotic havoc around him.

For the second time Matthew refers to the sacred Scriptures, inviting the reader not to lose sight of what God is doing in these terrible events.

**52 Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.**

**53 Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?**

**54 But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?'**

**55 At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me.**

**56 But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.'**

**Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.**

compare Mark 14:48-50  
Luke 22:51-53

<sup>57</sup> **Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered.**

<sup>58</sup> **But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest; and going inside, he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end [to see the end].** <sup>59</sup> **Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death** <sup>60</sup> **but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward** <sup>61</sup> **and said, "This fellow said, "I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.""**

compare Mark 14:53-59  
Luke 22:54-55; 66

### **Jesus' testimony before the Jewish authorities**

Jesus is taken to Caiaphas, who had been high priest since 18AD. We know from John's gospel of a meeting of the Sanhedrin at which a decision to kill Jesus had been taken (see John 11:47-53). John also mentions an investigation which took place at the house of the high priest on the night of Jesus' arrest (see John 18:12-25). Matthew seems to be bringing these two events together in order to dramatise the rejection of the Messiah by the official Jewish establishment.

Immediately after the trial Matthew tells us of Peter's denial of Jesus (26:69-75). Mentioning Peter here at the beginning has the effect of highlighting Jesus' isolation. Even the leader of his disciples failed to support him in his time of need. When Matthew says that Peter was there 'to see the end', we are meant to recall Jesus' words about 'the end' in his eschatological discourse (24:6,13,14). The key to the meaning of history is to be found in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The council manage to get to testify against Jesus the two witnesses required by law (see Deuteronomy 19:15). The words which they claim Jesus to have spoken are brought up again by those who mock Jesus as he is dying on the cross (27:40), and can be found also in the gospel of John (2:21).

Matthew claims that the testimony is false - the witnesses are distorting Jesus' meaning. We know already from Matthew that Jesus claimed to be 'greater than the temple' (12:6), and that he foretold the temple's destruction (24:2). He was not the first prophet to give such a warning (Jeremiah 7:14; 26:6,9; Micah 3:12). John understands Jesus' words as referring to his own body which would be raised up at the resurrection, and in the New Testament the community is referred to as a temple built by Christ (2Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21; 1Peter 2:5).

A claim to build the sanctuary carried with it Messianic overtones, for only the Messiah could 'build the temple of the Lord' (Zechariah 6:13). Since Jesus remains silent (see Isaiah 53:7; 1Peter 2:21,23), the high priest declares: 'Tell us if you the Messiah, the Son of God'. This is the very same claim made at Caesarea Philippi by Peter (16:16; see also 14:33; 27:54), who, ironically, is, at this very moment, declaring under oath that he does not even know Jesus (26:74). Jesus' reply to Caiaphas, 'You have said so' is the same reply given earlier to Judas (26:25), and later to Pilate (27:11). It is a qualified affirmation, since the one making the statement fails to understand its true implications.

In Matthew's dramatic portrayal of this scene, Jesus chooses to speak of himself in terms of the Son of Man of Daniel 7:13, the one 'coming on the clouds of heaven'. Matthew includes a reference to Psalm 110:1 which speaks of the Messiah as being in the position of authority as God's right hand.

To understand the way in which Jesus is the Messiah we must understand this title in terms of Jesus being the 'Son of Man'. Jesus is the Messiah because he is the one who represents the oppressed and who comes before God at the final judgment and is vindicated along with the oppressed against their oppressors. Furthermore this is something that Caiaphas 'will see': it is imminent, to be realised in Jesus' death and resurrection, when he will 'see' Jesus vindicated as the Messiah through whom God is achieving victory. We cannot miss the irony. Jesus stands alone before his trial judges. Yet he claims that it is they who are on trial and that all those whom they have oppressed for their own benefit, including himself at this moment, will be vindicated by God while they, his judges, stand accused.

Jesus' opponents have been attempting to catch Jesus out (see 22:15). Many aspects of his behaviour offended them, particularly his challenging their understanding of the Law and of the temple. The words Jesus has just spoken in their presence are seen as blasphemy, as insulting God by making arrogant claims for himself (compare 9:2-6). Under the law against false prophets who lead people astray (Deuteronomy 13:2-6; 18:20-22), they condemn Jesus to death. We have already been prepared for this (see 20:18).

Those of us who are in positions of organisational leadership in the Christian community have to see in the behaviour of the religious authorities a warning for ourselves. We ought not to assume that they were consciously acting in an immoral way. Presumably they saw themselves as upholding the rights of religion and therefore the rights of God against someone whom they saw as a danger to the community.

They were so sure of their position that it did not occur to them to look at Jesus honestly and to listen to him. They too readily dismissed what they were not accustomed to and were not expecting. Was their problem that they too readily identified God with the practices and tenets of their religion? Were they too self-reliant to keep seeking the Lord with humble and broken hearts? Were they too afraid to face the radical insecurity that is part of being human?

**<sup>62</sup> The high priest stood up and said, 'Have you no answer? What is that they testify against you?'**

**<sup>63</sup> But Jesus was silent.**

**Then the high priest said to him, 'I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.'**

**<sup>64</sup> Jesus said to him, 'You have said so. But I tell you, From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.'** **<sup>65</sup> Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. <sup>66</sup> What is your verdict?' They answered, 'He deserves death.'**

compare Mark 14:60-64  
Luke 22:67-71

**67 Then they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him,**

**68 saying, 'Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?'**

compare Mark 14:65  
Luke 22:63-65

### **Jews abuse and mock Jesus**

There will be a parallel to this scene later, after the Roman trial (27:27-31). Here Matthew focuses on the insults heaped upon Jesus by his own people. They mock what, for them, are his pretentious and blasphemous claims to be God's prophet and Messiah. The irony is apparent. Matthew has just been portraying Jesus precisely as one who can see the depths of the human heart and its intentions. His prophecy about the betrayal by Judas (26:25) and the scattering of the twelve (26:31) have been shown to be right. As we are soon to discover, his other prophecy concerning Peter (26:34) is being fulfilled even as they insult Jesus. What is more, Jesus' words about the temple, and his claim to be God's Son, will also soon be shown to be true (27:51,54).

The outrages to which Jesus is subjected recall the third servant song from the Isaiah scroll:

I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

– Isaiah 50:6

### Peter denies that he knows Jesus

Peter's behaviour is tragic. At Caesarea Philippi, it was he who had acknowledged Jesus in terms identical with the words of the high priest: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'(16:16). It was Peter who boasted that whatever the others did, he would be faithful: 'Even though I must die with you I will not deny you'(26:35).

Yet here, when put to the test, he persists (the significance of the three times) in denying that he as much as knows Jesus. We, too, can only tell the genuineness of faith when it is put to the test. We are reminded of Jesus' earlier warning: 'Whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven'(10:33). Yet, thanks to the fidelity of Jesus (12:32; 26:32; 28:16), there is hope. Remembering Jesus' words (see 26:34), Peter 'went out and wept bitterly'.

Peter is a symbol of us all. He wants to follow Jesus, otherwise he would not be there. But he is too busy 'warming himself' to be attentive to Jesus. He wants to be close to Jesus to fulfil his own self-reliant boast, and for his own pleasure. When the demand is placed upon him to be with Jesus and to take the consequences of this belonging, he is afraid and backs away.

Let us pray that at such moments we will do what Peter did and remember Jesus' words, for otherwise despair will come all too easily to us. Jesus' words will bring us, even in our sin, to look to him and not to ourselves and, like Peter, to repent. It is Jesus' love, and what he reveals of God that attracts us to him. What he showed Peter is what he shows us: that God's love is faithful and God's call is irrevocable:

If we are faithless, he remains faithful.

– 2Timothy 2:13

Let us not forget this truth, however lacking in courage we find ourselves to be.

**69** Now Peter was sitting *outside* in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, 'You also were with Jesus *the Galilean*.'

**70** But he denied it before all of them, saying, 'I do not know what you are talking about.'

**71** When he went out to the *porch*, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, 'This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.'

**72** Again he denied it with an oath, 'I do not know the man.'

**73** After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, 'Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.'

**74** Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know the man!' At that moment the cock crowed.

**75** Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: 'Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly.

compare Mark 14:66-72  
Luke 22:56-62

**<sup>1</sup>When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death.**

**<sup>2</sup>They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor.**

compare Mark 15:1; Luke

### **Jesus is handed over to Pilate**

Matthew tells us that Jesus was ‘handed over’ to Pilate (see 17:22). The reason for taking Jesus to Pilate is not given. It seems that the Sanhedrin’s power to inflict death was restricted under Roman rule. However, even if they could have stoned Jesus on their own authority, it may well have suited them to put the responsibility for his death onto the Roman military prefect, thus avoiding the responsibility and possible backlash of such an action (see 26:5).

The verb ‘handed over’ (Greek: *paradidômi*) is used three times in this chapter (27:2,18,26). It is likely that Matthew is alluding to a passage from the fourth song of the servant of the Lord which uses *paradidômi* three times of the servant (confer commentary on 27:27-31 where the song

### The death of Judas

Before recording the Roman trial, Matthew speaks of the suicide of Judas. He links it with a part of the Gehenna valley called the 'Field of Blood' (see also Acts 1:16-19), and with the prophecy of Jeremiah. Matthew 27:9-10 is actually a free rendition of Zechariah 11:12-13 combined with themes from Jeremiah 18:2-3, 19:1-2 and 32:6-15.

As Jerusalem was about to fall to the Babylonian army, Jeremiah was instructed by God to buy a field. This was to be a sign to the people that God would ensure that Jerusalem would one day be prosperous again. Matthew seems to want to remind his readers that God's providence is still at work and that he will bring good even out of Jesus' betrayal and rejection.

The text attributed by Matthew to Jeremiah refers to the treachery of those who were supposed to be the shepherds of the people, but who refused to listen to God's prophet and who insulted God by offering his prophet the price of a slave (Exodus 21:32) for wages. The Jewish leaders are treating Jesus in the same way.

Matthew's account of Judas' death recalls the death of Ahithophel, who betrayed David and tried treacherously to bring about his death:

When Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey and went off home to his own city. He set his house in order, and hanged himself.

– 2Samuel 17:23

Drawing on these various scriptural themes, Matthew portrays Judas as attempting to rid himself of the guilt of betraying the innocent Jesus. The chief priests and elders, by refusing to place the money back in the treasury, are indirectly admitting Jesus' innocence. They, too, try to pacify their conscience by putting the money to good use. We will see Pilate, in the trial that is about to begin, also attempting to distance himself from the responsibility of condemning an innocent man (27:24). None of these ploys works. Each of them highlights Jesus' innocence.

<sup>3</sup> When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. <sup>4</sup> He said, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.' But they said, 'What is that to us? See to it yourself.'

<sup>5</sup> Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. <sup>6</sup> But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, 'It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money.'

<sup>7</sup> After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. <sup>8</sup> For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. <sup>9</sup> Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, 'And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, <sup>10</sup> and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me.'

**11 Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?'**

**Jesus said, 'You say so.'**

**12 But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer.**

**13 Then Pilate said to him, 'Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?'**

**14 But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.**

**15 Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted.**

**16 At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called *Jesus Barabbas*.**

**17 So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, *Jesus Barabbas* or *Jesus who is called the Messiah*?'**

**18 For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.**

compare Mark 15:2-10

Luke 23:2-5

### **Jesus' testimony before the Roman authorities**

Part of Matthew's reason for recording both the trial before the Jewish authorities and the trial before the Gentile authorities is to highlight the truth that no one group can be blamed for the condemnation of Jesus. Matthew wants his readers, whether Jew and non-Jew, to realise that they are to be judged by the way they respond to the presence and revelation of Jesus.

When Judas tries to avoid responsibility, all the chief priests and elders can say is: 'What is that to us? See to it yourself' (27:4). When the crowd insist on condemning Jesus, Pilate, too, tries to avoid responsibility: 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves' (27:24). It seems that it is everyone else's responsibility.

However, if we reject Jesus and his revelation, we stand with Caiaphas, Pilate, Judas and the crowd, and no tearing of our clothes (26:65) or washing of our hands (27:24) will excuse us. If we reject Jesus, we join our voices to that of the crowd: 'His blood be on us and on our children' (27:25).

Each of us is responsible for condemning Jesus to death in so far as we fail to recognise that his blood is 'the blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (26:28).

Since Jesus was not a Roman citizen, the summary form of the Roman investigation as presented by Matthew is quite plausible. Jesus accepts the title 'King of the Jews', but in a qualified way: not as understood by either his accusers or Pilate. The whole of the Gospel has portrayed him as having a special role in effecting what he constantly speaks of as 'the kingdom of God'.

Jesus' response allows Pilate to take an easy way out, especially as he has no desire to provoke a riot with so many pilgrims in the city for the feast. Though not persuaded of Jesus' guilt (27:23), and in spite of the message received from his wife (27:19), he summarily hands Jesus over, thus supporting the judgment already made by the Jewish leadership (26:66).

The drama is superb. Centre-stage stands Jesus, eloquent in his silence, free despite his bonds. Around him can be heard the accusations of the chief priests, the interrogation by Pilate and the shouts of the crowd. He alone is a free man.

There is a terrible irony, too, in the name of the released prisoner. 'Jesus Barabbas' is Aramaic for 'Jesus, son of the father'. He is a symbol for all of us. The guilty son of the father is freed; the innocent one is burdened with the sins of us all, and dies in our place. In Paul's words: 'He loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

Pilate makes a public display of distancing himself from the guilt of condemning an innocent man by washing his hands (see Psalm 26:6; 73:13; Deuteronomy 21:7). It is hardly convincing. However, the primary guilt, according to Matthew, lies with the Jewish crowd and their leaders (see 23:29-35). This is the meaning of their cry 'His blood be on us and on our children' (see Leviticus 20:9-11; 2Samuel 1:16; Jeremiah 26:15; 51:35).

This acceptance of responsibility is to be read in the light of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. Just as the destruction of the city in 587BC was judged to be a punishment by God for the people's sins, so it is not surprising that Christians interpreted the destruction in 70AD as resulting from the rejection by the people of their Messiah.

Later use of this passage to place the guilt on the Jews as a race, and for ever, is a witness to the terrible power of religious prejudice. It fails, moreover, to appreciate Jesus' own words when he speaks of his blood as 'the blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (26:28). In this deeper sense, the blood of the Messiah is on all peoples, forever, for their healing.

<sup>19</sup> *While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.'*

<sup>20</sup> **Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed.**

<sup>21</sup> *The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.'*

<sup>22</sup> **Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!'** <sup>23</sup> **Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!'**

<sup>24</sup> *So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.'*

<sup>25</sup> *Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!'*

<sup>26</sup> **So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.**

compare Mark 15:11-15; Luke 23:13-25

**27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him.**

**28 They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him,**

**29 and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'**

**30 They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head.**

**31 After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him.**

**Then they led him away to crucify him.**

compare Mark 15:16-20

### **Gentile soldiers mock the King of the Jews**

This is the Gentile equivalent of the mockery inflicted upon Jesus by the Jewish council (26:67-68); a mockery that continues right through till his death (27:39-44). Note the awful contrast with the homage paid Jesus by the Gentile wise men in the prologue (2:1-12).

We are meant to ponder the song of the servant, so let us do that. The promised exaltation is yet to come; but it is he, Jesus, who is the one through whom God's glory is about to be fully revealed to the world. As Isaiah asks (53:1), and Paul (Romans 10:16) and John (12:38) following him: 'Who has believed what we have heard?' Everyone is keen to acclaim a Messiah; but, this man? Could he be the anointed of God? Is this what God looks like when he communicates himself to us in human form?

**Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12**

## The promise of glory

See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.

## The servant who will be glorified

Just as there were many who were astonished at him – so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals –

## The promise of glory

So he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.

## The servant who will be glorified

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on [paradidōmi] him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.

## The promise of glory

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; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. 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;

## The servant who will be glorified

because he poured out [paradidōmi] himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore [paradidōmi] the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

<sup>32</sup> **As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross.**

<sup>33</sup> **And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), <sup>34</sup> they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.**

<sup>35</sup> **And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots;**

<sup>36</sup> *then they sat down there and kept watch over him.*

<sup>37</sup> **Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, ‘This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.’ <sup>38</sup> Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.**

<sup>39</sup> **Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads <sup>40</sup> and saying, ‘You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! *If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.*’**

compare Mark 15:21-30  
Luke 23:26-43

## The crucifixion

Cyrene was a Greek city on the coast of Libya with a large Jewish population. As we watch Simon carrying the cross, we are reminded of Jesus’ words: ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’ (16:24).

On Calvary (*Calvaria* is the Latin for ‘Place of a Skull’), the soldiers offer some drugged wine to Jesus. In the Book of Proverbs we read:

Give strong drink to one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more.

– Proverbs 31:6-7

Jesus declines to drink. Is Matthew telling us that, though Jesus is about to die, he is not about to perish? Or is he telling us that Jesus is determined to drink the cup of suffering (26:42) in full consciousness?

The remaining details contain a number of allusions to Psalm 22, a psalm which will become even more important when we come to the next scene which describes Jesus’ death. It was especially from this psalm that Jesus’ early disciples found help, as they tried to penetrate the mystery of the heart of Jesus at the end, and to give expression to their reflections.

Before continuing this commentary it may be of value to pause and read Psalm 22. We will divide it into various sections, applying the psalm to Jesus on the cross and putting in italics the parts that relate to the passage upon which we are reflecting:

The opening lines invite us to contemplate Jesus’ situation as he hung on the cross:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

– Psalm 22:1-2

The next verses present Jesus remembering his tradition and the faith of his religious community:

Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.  
In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved;  
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

– Psalm 22:3-5

However, the situation of abandonment persists:

But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others,  
and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me;  
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;  
“Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver  
– let him rescue the one in whom he delights!.”

– Psalm 22:6-8. See Matthew 27:39-44

We are then invited to watch as Jesus remembers his personal religious experience:

Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

– Psalm 22:9-11

Even these tender memories fail to alleviate his condition:

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death. For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shrivelled; I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; *they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots* ‘.

– Psalm 22:14-18; see Matthew 27:35

Jesus continues to cry out to God in his distress:

But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!... I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.

– Psalm 22:19, 22

***41 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 42 ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, “I am God’s Son.”’ 44 The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.***

compare Mark 15:31-32  
Luke 23:35

## Jesus is crucified

Only at the end is Jesus' persistent cry heard, and his abandonment issues into a song of praise and delight as he sees the face of God:

You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.

– Psalm 22:23-24

The following passage from the Wisdom of Solomon is also useful as a reflection on the scene before us:

Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training. He professes to have knowledge of God and calls himself a child of the Lord. He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange. We are considered by him as something base, and he avoids our ways as unclean; he calls the last end of the righteous happy, and boasts that God is his father. Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; for if the righteous man is God's child, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. Let us test him with insult and torture, so that we may find out how gentle he is, and make trial of his forbearance. Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for, according to what he says, he will be protected.

– Wisdom 2:12-20

Those who happen to be passing repeat the accusation made by the false witnesses at Jesus' trial and add words that echo the temptations faced by Jesus in the desert: 'Save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross'(27:40). Saving oneself is precisely what Jesus has said we cannot do: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it'(16:24-25).

The chief priests, scribes and elders taunt Jesus in the same way, as do the two bandits crucified on his right and left: 'He saved others; he cannot save himself'(27:42). It is ironical to hear the religious leaders echoing the temptation of the devil, equating trust with putting God to the test. Jesus is 'God's Son' and he does 'trust in God'. This does not mean that he expects that God will intervene and take him from the cross. Jesus is the Son of Man. He identifies with the oppressed, and like them suffers at the hands of his oppressors. He trusts, however, that God will, indeed, redeem him, but in God's way and when the glory of God is revealed 'on the third day'(Matthew 16:21, see commentary).

## The death of the Son of God

The ‘darkness’ has the dramatic effect of further isolating Jesus. One thinks of the darkness that preceded God’s creation of light (Genesis 1:2-3), and the darkness that came over Egypt prior to God’s redeeming action (Exodus 10:21-23). The primary reference, however, is to the eschatological darkness referred to earlier by Matthew: ‘After the suffering of those days, the sun will be darkened’ (24:29). This is the Day of the Lord, ‘a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!’ (Joel 2:2; see Zephaniah 1:15; Amos 8:9-10).

Jesus’ isolation reaches its climax in his final cry. Even in the agony, he could address God as ‘My Father’ (26:39). Here, for the first and only time in Matthew, Jesus addresses God simply as ‘God’. There is no suggestion of despair, for he does cry out to God, and ‘My God’ retains an element of intimacy. It is true, as we noted in the commentary on the previous passage, that Psalm 22 does end in joy, as God hears the cry, but this should not obscure the utter isolation and desolation of Jesus at the end (compare Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-10). God’s intervention comes only after his death.

The similarity in sound causes some of those present to think that Jesus is calling on Elijah, and to continue the mockery that has characterised this terrible scene. Here, again, there may be an allusion to Psalm 22. The text translated ‘you have been my God’ (Psalm 22:10) is rendered in Aramaic ‘Eli ‘atta (‘My God, it is You!’) which could easily be taken as ‘Elia’ ta (‘Elijah, come!’). We may have here an indication of the actual cry that came from the lips of the dying Jesus: ‘My God, it is You!’

The action of trying to revive Jesus with bitter wine reminds us of Psalm 69:

Do not hide your face from your servant, for I am in distress— make haste to answer me. Draw near to me, redeem me, set me free because of my enemies. You know the insults I receive, and my shame and dishonour; my foes are all known to you. Insults have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none. They gave me poison for food, and *for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.*

– Psalm 69:17-21

<sup>45</sup> **From noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.** <sup>46</sup> **And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’**

<sup>47</sup> **When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, ‘This man is calling for Elijah.’**

<sup>48</sup> **At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink.** <sup>49</sup> **But the others said, ‘Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.’**

<sup>50</sup> **Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last** [gave up his spirit].

<sup>51</sup> **At that moment the**

compare Mark 15:33-37  
Luke 23:44-47

**curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.**

<sup>52</sup> *The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.* <sup>53</sup> *After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.*

<sup>54</sup> *Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'*

With still no response from God, and amid the mockery of those around him, 'Jesus cried again with a loud voice and gave up his spirit'. The Spirit that Jesus gave up is the Spirit that descended upon him at his baptism (3:16), the Spirit with which the Baptist promised that Jesus would baptise us (3:11).

Jesus was condemned to death, partly because of what he had said concerning the sanctuary (26:61). This was also a subject for mockery as he was dying on the cross (27:40). Now, in a sign that portends the destruction of the temple foretold by Jesus (23:37-38), the sanctuary veil is irreparably rent by God, making the sanctuary no longer holy. God has vindicated Jesus. He has abandoned the sanctuary, not his Son.

There may also be a hint here of a further meaning. The sanctuary curtain was a symbol of the fact that we cannot look upon the 'face' of the transcendent God. That was true, up to this moment. But upon his death, Jesus sees the face of the One who delighted in him, and we, looking upon the face of Jesus can now behold the glory of God unveiled.

At his baptism, the heavens were 'opened' (3:16). Now, at the end, Jesus the Lord, 'suddenly comes to his temple' (Malachi 3:1), entering beyond the veil into the embrace of his Father. The appeal is firstly to Jews. Up till now there has been a curtain between them and their God. Now they are invited to follow Jesus. But the appeal extends beyond them, for Jesus is inviting all to follow him into the 'house of prayer' (21:13).

Paul expresses it this way:

When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed ... And all of us, with unveiled faces, see the glory of the Lord.

– 2Corinthians 3:16,18

As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says:

He [Jesus] entered once for all into the Holy Place' (9:12), and 'We have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain.

– Hebrews 10:19-20

compare Mark 15:38-39  
Luke 23:44-47

To the tearing of the curtain, Matthew adds further images to highlight the significance of the death of Jesus. The association of earthquake with mighty acts of God is traditional (Judges 5:4; Isaiah 2:19; 5:25; 24:18; Ezekiel 38:19; Joel 2:10; Jeremiah 4:23-24; Zechariah 14:4; Nahum 1:5-6; see also Matthew 24:7). The opening of tombs and the raising of the dead recalls the words of Ezekiel:

Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.

– Ezekiel 37:12-13

Matthew is demonstrating the significance of Jesus' death by appealing to symbolic, apocalyptic imagery (compare Acts 2:19-20). At the end of his prologue, Matthew quoted from the Isaiah scroll:

The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.

– Isaiah 4:16

At Jesus' death the gates of Hades are opened and life penetrates the darkness of death bringing life to those who died in holiness. Since Jesus is the 'first-born from the dead' (Colossians 1:18), Matthew adds that it was after Jesus' resurrection that these saints appeared.

Finally, Matthew focuses on a pagan centurion and those with him. Matthew's aim in presenting his gospel is to demonstrate that Jesus is the 'Messiah, the Son of the living God' (16:16): the acknowledgment made by Peter at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus did not reject Peter's acknowledgment, but explained its truth in terms of himself as the Son of Man, and insisted on the place of suffering in his mission of identification with the oppressed.

Here a non-Jew, seeing the miraculous response of God to Jesus' faith, declares: 'Truly, this man was God's Son'. 'This man': naked, powerless, condemned, ostracised, despised, rejected, dying in utter abandonment; but continuing to believe, continuing to love, continuing to cry out to God for himself and for all the oppressed — this man, whom we have just crucified, was God's Son all the time, and we did not recognise him.

This is what God was proclaiming at the baptism (3:17), and at the transfiguration (17:5). This is what the disciples acknowledged on the lake (14:33), and at Caesarea Philippi (16:16). This was the point of the question put to Jesus at his trial (26:63), and it has been the subject of mockery as Jesus was dying on the cross (27:40,43).

Now, at last, an act of faith in Jesus' divine sonship is possible for anyone whose eyes are open to see and whose hearts are open to believe. Yes, the curtain has been torn away, and God is revealed. But we do not see God in God's transcendence. We see God as God has chosen to be revealed, in the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. We see a God who is all-powerful, but only with the power of unconditional love. At last we see God's glory revealed, but only because we see this kind of love revealed in one who shares to the full our human condition:

## Jesus' death

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. 8 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

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

– Hebrews 4:14-16

**PART B The Tomb and the promise (27:55 - 28:15)****Jesus is buried**

The two verbs used of the women identify them as disciples, sharing in Jesus' mission. They 'had followed Jesus' (Greek *akolouthēō*, see especially Matthew 4:20 and 16:24), and they 'had ministered to him' (Greek *diakoneō*, see commentary on Matthew 20:26).

Mary Magdalene is introduced here for the first time. The second Mary is identified as the 'mother of James and Joseph'. This Mary is surely not Mary the mother of Jesus or Matthew would have identified her as such and not in relation to two men who have been mentioned once in passing as being 'brothers' of Jesus (13:55). We can conclude from this that they were 'brothers' in a broad sense and not Jesus' blood-brothers.

Matthew may be contrasting these women who are merely 'looking on from a distance', and who do nothing and have nothing to say, with the faith-response of the centurion mentioned in the previous verse.

The fact that sunset is approaching adds a certain urgency to the burial.

When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not defile the land that the Lord your God is giving you for possession.

– Deuteronomy 21:22-23

Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man whom Matthew's community remembered as having become a disciple (contrast the young man of 19:16-24), takes it upon himself to see that Jesus is buried. It is a simple burial, with no mention of washing or anointing. Hence the relevance of the narrative of anointing recorded in Matthew 26:6-13.

<sup>55</sup> *Many women were also there, looking on from a distance;*

*they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him [ministered to him].*

<sup>56</sup> *Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.*

<sup>57</sup> *When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus.*

<sup>58</sup> *He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him.*

<sup>59</sup> *So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth*

<sup>60</sup> *and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away.*

<sup>61</sup> *Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.*

compare Mark 15:40-47  
Luke 23:48-56

The tomb is sealed

**62 The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate**

**63 and said, 'Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, "After three days I will rise again."**

**64 Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, "He has been raised from the dead," and the last deception would be worse than the first.'**

**65 Pilate said to them, 'You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.'**

**66 So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.**

### **An attempt to seal the tomb**

Matthew places this action on the Sabbath, Friday being 'the day of Preparation'. This is the only time the Pharisees are mentioned in Matthew's passion narrative, probably because of the role they were taking in the debate with the Christian community at the time Matthew is writing. They are portrayed as being familiar with the claims made by Jesus concerning his resurrection and as setting out to thwart them.

They are acting in the day but their actions issue from hearts plunged in darkness. They want to make sure that Jesus' followers do not get access to his body and Pilate accedes to their request giving them soldiers to seal and guard his tomb.

The tomb hewn out of rock was a symbol of Sheol, the underworld, where the shades of the dead were imagined as eking out a lifeless existence. Jesus is dead. Surely sealing the rock tomb will keep him that way. Evil has seemingly triumphed on the first day (Friday). Now on the second day (the Sabbath) it is consolidating its victory. And the third day?

## **The women go to the tomb**

In the previous scene, the powers of evil are working in broad daylight. Here, before the light conquers the night, the women, representing goodness, without any complications in their motivation, are simply going ‘to see the tomb’.

**<sup>1</sup> After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning,**

**Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.**

compare Mark 16:1-2  
Luke 24:1

## **Light conquers darkness**

In this powerful scene Matthew dramatises the divine significance of the resurrection of Jesus, as God’s conquering of the power of darkness, including the evil machinations of Jesus’ enemies. We are reminded of the night when God intervened to conquer the powers of evil in Egypt in order to liberate his people (Exodus 11:4; 12:12,29), a night upon which the Book of Wisdom reflects:

While gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior carrying the sharp sword of your authentic command, and stood and filled all things with death, and touched heaven while standing on the earth. Then at once apparitions in dreadful dreams greatly troubled them, and unexpected fears assailed them; and one here and another there, hurled down half dead.

– Wisdom 18:14-18

God is acting to demonstrate his power over death and to save all who believe in his Son. Fear and death affect only those who resist God’s action, and who attempt, by deception, to stop others believing.

**<sup>2</sup> And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.**

**<sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.**

**<sup>4</sup> For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.**

**<sup>5</sup> But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.'**

**<sup>6</sup> He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.**

**<sup>7</sup> Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him."**

*This is my message for you.'*

**<sup>8</sup> So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.**

**<sup>9</sup> Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him.**

**<sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'**

### **He is not here; he has been raised; you will see him**

They do not find the dead body of Jesus in the tomb as they expected. Rather they find an angel. The message of the angel is the revelation from God of his action regarding Jesus. It represents an early formulation of the faith of the early church: 'Jesus who was crucified is not here; for he has been raised ... you will see him'.

'He has been raised'

To point to something that is beyond our everyday experience, we must use imagery and analogy. To speak of what God did to Jesus after his death, Matthew chooses the simple word 'raised' (Greek: *egeirō*) that he used when Jesus raised Simon's mother-in-law from her bed (8:15), and when the disciples roused Jesus from sleep during the storm (8:25). More mysteriously, this same word was used when Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus from her 'sleep' (9:25).

When God raises a person from the 'sleep' of death, he raises that person not back to this life by a kind of resuscitation, but to the life-beyond-death. At the last supper, Jesus shared with his disciples his confidence that God would not leave him in death: 'After I am raised up, I will go ahead of you into Galilee' (26:32).

Because of certain ways in which they experienced the risen Jesus, Jesus' disciples came to believe that he who was crucified was in truth alive and active among them after his death. God had raised him from death into the life-beyond-death. It was the wonder of this that brought them through their fright and the shattering of their hopes to the new energy that empowered them to do to others what Jesus had done to them. It was this spirit that brought about the incredible growth of the Christian community.

It is this foundational belief that is presented by Matthew as the explanation for the absence of Jesus' dead body. The resurrected life is not simply a new beginning. All that made up Jesus' humanity is caught up in the transforming mystery of grace. The empty tomb and the dramatic language before us in this ritual text depict for us the wonderful truth that death is robbed of its prey, and that the final victory is not with darkness but with light.

compare Mark 16:6-8  
Luke 24:5-9

This is the fulfilment of Jesus' trust that God would act decisively ('on the third day', see commentary on 16:21), and that he would, indeed, rise again (16:21; 17:23; 20:19).

This is also the fulfilment of the promise Jesus made that the Son of Man would be glorified (16:27; 19:28; 24:30; 25:31). On the cross Jesus radiantly revealed the beauty of God as a God of unconditional love. The empty tomb is a sign for those with faith that Jesus' trust in his father was not misplaced.

'He is not here'

Death for Jesus was no different from death for any of us. It meant the end of the kind of presence that his disciples knew. No longer could they see him or touch him and be touched by him. The 'he is not here' raises the question: Where is he? And our faith answers: at the heart of the mystery of life; for as Jesus himself said: 'God is God not of the dead, but of the living'(22:32). Wherever God is Jesus is, and since God is everywhere Jesus is still present among us, though mysteriously beyond our empirical experience. Hence the call to 'keep awake'(24:42; 26:41) and to watch for his 'coming'(16:28; 24:3,27,30,37,39,44; 26:64).

'You will see him'

The word 'see', it must be remembered, is also used by analogy. Matthew uses it for a perception that involves much more than the eyes; as, for example, when Jesus promises that the pure in heart will 'see' God (5:8), and when Jesus 'sees' the faith of the friends of the paralysed man (9:2). He uses the same word for their 'seeing' the Son of Man coming in glory (16:28; 24:30; 26:64). The Greek word is *horaô*, a word to which our English word 'aware' is related. 'Seeing' the risen Christ refers to an awareness that only by analogy can be compared to the seeing we do with our eyes. Furthermore, it is always, necessarily, a seeing that is possible only to one who has faith.

Apart from the brief conclusion to his gospel, Matthew does not give us any of the experiences on which was based the faith of the Christian community in the resurrection of Jesus. He does, however, point the disciples to Galilee and the promise Jesus made to go there before them (26:32). In their panic at his death, they are to go back to where Jesus first met them, and he will be there again for them, for his love is faithful and his call irrevocable.

When the disciples fled at the time of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, they would presumably have left Jerusalem as quickly as they could and made their way to the relative safety of their homes in Galilee. It was back there that they experienced his presence again, forgiving them, calling them, urging them to continue his mission. Presumably, as each of them was moved by the Spirit of Jesus, they re-grouped and committed themselves to the journey of discipleship.

## Jesus is risen

The women have been presented to us as model disciples. They were disciples of Jesus in Galilee, where they also shared in Jesus' mission as servants of the Lord (27:55). When the men fled in terror, it was the women who stayed with Jesus at the death (27:55). It was they who were there when he was buried (27:16), and who were the first missionaries of the risen Christ (28:8).

The experience of an empty tomb already contains, for those with faith, a promise and a hope. Matthew's Church experienced Jesus, as do we all, as the one who 'is not here'. They have to wait on God. Like the deaf and the blind they can only wait for the divine miracle. But they have reason to wait, for 'he has been raised'. God was faithful to Jesus and God will be faithful to those who lose their lives because of him (16:25).

Matthew does not present the empty tomb as a proof for anything. It does, however, raise a question. It is a reminder of what Jesus himself hoped for, and it prepared the women, and it can prepare us, to be vigilant, so that when the risen Jesus comes to us we will be open to his presence and his call. If we are vigilant, we will see him when he comes.

Believing the revelation of God and obedient in faith to the mission confided to them, the women 'ran to tell his disciples'. Jesus himself suddenly appears to them, and personally communicates to them the same message which they had heard in the tomb. Matthew is drawing on a common Christian experience. We live in trust and are called to obey in faith. When we rely on God's word and not on our own perception, when we respond to divine revelation in faith and hope and love, we, like the women, are open to that mysterious personal communion with the risen Jesus which confirms our faith.

We cannot control this grace; we can only wait for it. But we must do our part in believing and in being vigilantly obedient. In this way we will be open to receive his grace and to recognise him when he comes.

### **An attempt to cover up the resurrection**

The powers of evil have, in fact, been defeated. Their only hope now is in attempting to conceal the facts. Ironically the soldiers end up being witnesses of the very thing which they wish to conceal. There are echoes here of an earlier scene in which the same leaders gathered together to give money to Judas (26:3; see also 27:1).

In the final sentence, Matthew speaks of ‘the Jews’ in such a way as to indicate that, at the time when he is writing, the break between Judaism and Jewish Christianity was such that the members of the Christian community no longer identified themselves as Jews.

The efforts of Jesus’ enemies cannot succeed, as will be demonstrated in Matthew’s concluding scene. There we see how, by the power of God, not only is the presence of the risen Jesus not hushed up, it is proclaimed to the ends of the earth.

**<sup>11</sup> While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened.**

**<sup>12</sup> After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers,**

**<sup>13</sup> telling them, ‘You must say, “His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.”’**

**<sup>14</sup> If this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.’**

**<sup>15</sup> So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.**