

**THE COMING OF GOD'S KINGDOM
THE HEALING AND LIBERATING POWER
OF JESUS' WORD
Matthew 8:1 - 9:35**

Introductory Comment

In Section Three (4:17 - 7:29), we listened as Jesus spoke to us about the kingdom of God and how we might belong to it as his disciples. Having given us examples of the kind of teaching which astounded the crowds, Matthew is now ready to show some of the astounding ways in which people experienced healing and liberation when they dared to open their minds and hearts to Jesus' word.

In this section, Matthew has collected ten words spoken with 'authority' (7:29), ten 'deeds of power' — to use a phrase which Matthew has used in another context (7:22). We see the meaning of Jesus' teaching by watching his deeds. We see the kingdom of God being established as God's promises are fulfilled by Jesus who 'cures every disease and every sickness among the people' (4:23 and 9:35). We see people enjoying the blessing of God spoken of in the beatitudes (5:3-10).

Matthew is not simply recording incidents from Jesus' life. He is selecting carefully and presenting incidents in such a way as to bring out their significance for his own community. For us, reading them nearly two thousand years later, the significance of these narratives lies in their power to attract us to faith in the risen Christ present among us and able to heal and liberate us, too, if we believe.

Let us contemplate Jesus as he takes to himself our infirmities and bears our diseases (8:17). Matthew wants us to see him as the suffering yet glorified Servant of the Lord.

As we identify with each of the characters in the following narratives, let us watch closely how they relate to Jesus. How do they address him? How do they respond to him? What does this reveal about our personal relationship to him? What does it reveal about the relationship to him of the Christian community of which we are part?

¹ *When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him;*

² **and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.'**

³ **He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.**

⁴ **Then Jesus said to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.'**

compare
Mark 1:40-45
Luke 5:12-14

PART A: Three healings (8:1-15)

A Jewish leper is cleansed

The man could have had any one of a number of virulent skin complaints. Whatever the exact nature of his disease, he was considered 'unclean', that is to say, people judged that he was within the power of evil spirits and that he endangered anyone whom he might contact. This made him a social outcast. The fear of the spreading of the evil pollution meant that everyone would have been forbidden, in God's name, to have any contact with him.

The law is clear. As soon as anyone noticed signs of what might be leprosy, this was to be reported to the priest, who, in turn, had no choice but to banish the sick person from the community. Furthermore, everyone understood that to disobey the Law in this matter was to disobey God.

The person who has the leprosy shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be dishevelled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

– Leviticus 13:45-46

It is important for us to realise that behind the repulsive exterior of this leper is a real person with memories and feelings. This is the case for all the characters of the gospel. Whenever people happened by chance to find themselves anywhere near him, they did what we are tempted to do: they failed to see the person and so all he ever saw was the fear and horror in their eyes as they quickly withdrew. Nor was religion any help. On the contrary, everyone 'knew' that he was being punished by God for some terrible crime. He did not know the crime, but he, too, concluded that God must have rejected him to have allowed this terrible thing to happen to him.

One day he happened to see Jesus. Hiding somewhere out of sight so as not to be sent away, he had heard him speak so tenderly of God's love. At first he found it too unbelievable, that God might actually delight in him and want to heal him and welcome him back into the community. Could this be possible? But as he listened, his heart wanted to believe the words spoken by this extraordinary man, and so he broke all the rules and approached Jesus.

This already tells us a lot about Jesus. What kind of person must he have been for a leper to have dared to approach him, breaking all conventions (including the ‘word of God’ as understood by all his contemporaries), and risking the ire of the crowd? Something in him tells him that Jesus can cure him. Did Jesus know this prior to this encounter? We lack the evidence to give a confident answer to this question. Lepers would not have been new to Jesus. He would have come across them as a boy and as a young man. It is quite possible that prior to the encounter recorded here in the Gospel, his heart would have gone out to the lepers, but he may not have been ready for the grace which he receives here. After all, we come to know ourselves through the responses of others. Possibly it was something in this man’s eyes, especially the absolute trust, that stirred Jesus deeply and moved him to embrace and heal him.

Jesus knew that the Law, at its best, recognised God to be ‘merciful and gracious ... abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness’ (Exodus 34:6). Moved by the Spirit of God who hears the cry of the poor (Job 34:28), Jesus reaches out to the leper, and, bypassing the injunctions of Leviticus, touches him. Jesus is not setting out to break the Law. This is clear from the instructions he gives the healed leper (see Leviticus 13:49). He will not, however, let the surface words of the Law stop him from obeying its profound message.

Jesus enjoins silence upon the healed man. Could this be because, with so many false ideas around, Jesus knew that it was necessary for people to enter into a personal relationship with him, and not simply hear of him through others? Or is Jesus, at this early stage of his ministry, anxious to avoid the kind of publicity that would bring him into conflict with the authorities? In fact it was actions such as the one described in this scene that did eventually lead to his condemnation by the Jewish religious leadership. When opposition came, Jesus faced it; but it was not his intention to provoke it unnecessarily.

Who of us does not need healing? Who of us does not know the feeling of being alone, isolated from others, a ‘leper’ and an outcast? There are two questions we might ask ourselves. Firstly, do we really want to be healed? And secondly, can we, like this simple man, dare to approach Jesus and say to him: ‘If you want to, you can heal me’, believing that he does want to and will not fail to hear our cry? This is not to say that we will necessarily obtain the healing that we think we need. But we can be certain that God who knows us will grace us with whatever healing will release us to be more closely united to God’s Son, Jesus, and more able to love. To know that is enough. So let us, like children, dare to ask for whatever we desire, so long as we trust that God knows best what is good for us.

Furthermore, let us learn from Jesus how to welcome those who feel themselves to be outcasts. Who knows what miracles of healing are possible if we are willing to share each other’s pain?

5 When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him

6 and saying, 'Lord, my servant is lying at home paralysed, in terrible distress.'

7 And he said to him, 'I will come and cure him.'

8 The centurion answered, 'Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed.'

9 For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go," and he goes, and to another, "Come," and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this," and the slave does it.' ¹⁰ When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.'

A Gentile centurion pleads for help and is heard

The leper of the previous passage was a Jew. The centurion is a Gentile. This may be another indication of the mixed nature of Matthew's community. It certainly demonstrates Matthew's keen interest in the mission of the church to the Gentile world — an interest already indicated in the prologue (1:5; 2:1-11), and in the early part of the gospel (4:15-16,24).

Jesus' mission is to heal the paralysis of the non-Jewish as well as the Jewish world. The fact that Jesus had died and so was not physically present in Matthew's community did not prevent his healing action from continuing, for he is alive, in the presence of God. It is enough that he speak his word for healing to take place.

Healing, however, does not happen by some magical power unrelated to the condition of the one making the request. Healing is offered, but is effective only where there is faith. We are called to listen to God's word, to place our trust in God, and to act accordingly. Where this disposition is present, all that love can do will be done, as it is faith that removes all obstacles to the working of the mysterious power of God's creating, healing and liberating love.

It is important to pause here to investigate more closely what Matthew means by 'faith'. While 'faith' is impossible without 'trust', biblical usage is against identifying them. Hebrew words which express trust are never translated by the Greek word *pistis* which is the word invariably translated into English as 'faith'. *pistis* only ever translates words from the Hebrew root 'mn. To understand the meaning of faith as used in the Bible, therefore, we need to examine the meaning of Hebrew 'mn.

The noun 'mnh denotes the quality of behaving reliably according to one's nature or commitments. It is often translated 'faithfulness', and it picks up the notion of reliable, secure, sure, certain, trustworthy. God has this quality because God always acts according to who God is:

The word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in *faithfulness*.

— Psalm 33:4

I will take you for my wife in *faithfulness*; and you shall know the Lord.

— Hosea 2:20

compare Luke 7:1-10

To speak of Yahweh in this way is to say that he is the real God, not a false God, that he always acts according to the truth, and so we can be secure in him and place our trust in him. When applied to us it does not state that we are *trusting*, but that we are *trustworthy* because what we do and say is in accordance with the truth. If we seek the truth (Jeremiah 5:1,3), and deal honestly and carry out our obligations (2Chronicles 31:12,15,18; 34:12; Proverbs 3:3), then we share in this quality of the Lord. People who are faithful can be relied on (Jeremiah 15:18).

The adjective derived from *'mnh* is generally translated 'faithful'. When used of God, it states that he is real, sure, faithful, and so trustworthy: Abraham is said to have a faithful heart (Nehemiah 9:8), and Moses is spoken of as being trustworthy because of the intimacy of God's communication with him (Numbers 12:7). We hear of a faithful priest (1Samuel 2:35) and a trustworthy prophet (1Samuel 3:20). The city is spoken of as being faithful (Isaiah 1:21,26), witnesses as being reliable (Isaiah 8:2), and a supply of water as being sure (Isaiah 33:16).

The Hebrew verb *'mn* means to trust in the faithfulness of another and to behave in a trustworthy way. Both these ideas are contained in the word 'believe'. We might sum up this study by stating that God has faith in its fullness – God is faith-full. God always acts according to who God is. He is love and so can be depended on to act lovingly. He has made promises and can be depended upon absolutely to keep faith. Jesus has faith in its human perfection. He always acts towards God as Son, in perfect trust and obedience. In doing so he reveals who God is for us and how we are to respond to grace. He is our 'leader in faith' (Hebrews 12:2). We have faith when we act in accordance with who we are: creatures who are totally dependent on God and who are adopted as Jesus' brothers and sisters, children with him of God. Faith is a fruit of trust. It goes beyond trust in that it consists in the following five elements:

- To believe is to listen to God's word, trusting that God is revealing himself to us.
- To believe is to heed what God says (reveals), trusting that God is faithful and so accepting his word as true with all our hearts and minds and soul and strength.
- To believe is to act in accordance with God's will, trusting that God is our wise and loving Father.
- To believe is to respond in love to God, trusting that God is love. The English word 'be-lieve' nicely expresses this aspect.
- To believe is to live in communion with Jesus, sharing his faith.

It is this quality that Jesus admires in the Gentile centurion, a man who did not belong to the Jewish faith tradition expressed in the law. Luke presents him here as an illustration of the truth argued by Paul:

We hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

– Romans 3:28

¹¹ 'I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,

¹² while *the heirs of the kingdom* will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

¹³ And to the centurion Jesus said, 'Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.' And the servant was healed in that hour.

verses 11-12 compare
Luke 13:28-29

The 'many who will come from the east and the west' may be an allusion to Psalm 107:3 and other places where the hope is expressed that the dispersed Jews will be gathered back to Israel. In the setting of this passage, however, it may well refer to Gentiles: 'the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light'(4:16).

In either case, many who were 'heirs of the kingdom' and who should, therefore, have recognised the light when it shone among them, are not sharing table-fellowship with the Messiah, and will find themselves 'thrown into the outer darkness', where, too late, they will realise and regret their folly.

The expression 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' is one that recurs frequently in Matthew's gospel (13:42,50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30).

A disciple is 'raised'

Matthew seems to be presenting 'Peter's house' as a symbol for the Christian church (compare 2:11). As we watch the mother-in-law we are watching how Jesus heals those who belong to the Church of Jesus' disciples. Jesus took her by the hand and she 'got up' (8:15). This appears a simple enough statement. We find it again in the healing of the paralysed man (9:5-7) and in the story of the little girl (9:19,25). However, it is not without significance that it is the same word that is used for the resurrection of Jesus (27:63,64; 28:6,7). In response to Jesus, Peter's mother-in-law is rising to new life.

Matthew tells us that 'she began to serve them'. The Greek word for 'serve' is *diakoneō*, from which we get our word 'deacon'. It is used in the New Testament for ministry performed by a person commissioned by God. Matthew has already used it of the angels sent by God to minister to Jesus (4:11). This woman is healed, and the fruit of the healing is that she places herself at God's disposal to be a minister of love.

We all have love to offer. We all have something to give to others in service. How often we, like Peter's mother-in-law, can be so overwhelmed by our own pain that we are tempted to give up and isolate ourselves from those who need our love. We, too, need Jesus' healing touch, that we might share with him his ministry of service.

We might reflect on the following statement from Saint Paul:

There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord;
and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God
who activates all of them in everyone.
To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit
for the common good.

– 1Corinthians 12:4-7

Paul is speaking of the Christian life. From the Spirit of God we each receive all that we have as a gift of grace. From the risen Christ we are commissioned to use the gifts we have to carry on his mission in the world: to 'serve' God in serving others. Nor should we be despondent if our gifts seem so poor, for it is God, who creates out of nothing, who

by the power at work within us is able to accomplish far more
than all we can ask or imagine.

– Ephesians 3:20

¹⁴ When Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever;

¹⁵ he touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve him.

Compare
Mark 1:29-30
Luke 4:38-39

PART B: Who is Jesus and what does it mean to follow him? (8:16-22)

Jesus, the Suffering Servant of the Lord

¹⁶ That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick.

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

'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.'

compare
Mark 1:32-34
Luke 4:40-41

In the previous three passages we have seen Jesus cleansing Israel (the leper), healing the paralysis which has crippled the Gentile world (the centurion's servant), and raising up disciples to share his ministry (Peter's mother-in-law).

Once again Matthew presents Jesus as the one who fulfils the promises made by God to Israel. He does so by quoting from the last of the songs of the Servant of the Lord:

He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.

– Isaiah 53:4; see also 1Peter 2:24

Jesus is able to heal so effectively because he shares the condition of those to whom he ministers.

The Servant is one whose appearance, like that of the leper, was 'marred beyond human semblance' (Isaiah 52:14). Like the centurion, the Servant is considered an outsider (Isaiah 53:9). Furthermore, like Peter's mother-in-law, he was raised up by the Lord (Isaiah 52:13). Matthew wants us to see Jesus as the fulfilment of the ideas expressed in the Servant songs of Isaiah. Jesus knew what it was to be ostracised, to be treated as an outsider. Jesus knew what it was to place his trust in God and to be raised by God to life from the terrible rejection of the cross.

Fourth Song of the Servant (Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12)

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

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 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.

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

Jesus, the Son of Man

18 Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side.

19 A scribe then approached and said, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.'

20 And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'

21 Another of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'

22 But Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.'

A scribe, impressed by Jesus' teaching, wants to follow Jesus. In spelling out what this involves, Matthew includes a saying of Jesus in which, for the first time, we meet the expression 'Son of Man'. Apart from Acts 7:56 and Apocalypse 1:13 and 14:14, it is found only in the gospels and always on the lips of Jesus himself. As explained on the following page, 'Son of Man' identifies Jesus as the one who belongs to the oppressed and who, together with them, is vindicated by the judgment of God.

The term 'foxes' may refer to Herod and his supporters, while 'birds of the air' may refer to the Roman occupying forces. These are the groups that exercise power in the land. If the scribe is seeking power he had better join them. To follow Jesus is to follow the Son of Man who demonstrates the judgment of God, but who does so by associating with the oppressed and powerless.

Matthew does not tell us how the scribe responded. The invitation is left open for the members of Matthew's community to make their own choice. The same option is there for us.

The second person is already a disciple, so he addresses Jesus as 'Lord'. However, family pressures are being brought to bear on him and he feels that he should carry out the duties expected of him as a responsible son. He asks to go 'first' to 'bury my father'. From the fact that the man is not already at home, it is clear that his father is alive at the time of speaking. What he is actually asking is to leave off following Jesus, to go back and stay with his father until his father dies, and then, having buried his father, he would be free to come back and rejoin Jesus.

Jesus' reply makes it clear that nothing, not even family obligations, can come before being a disciple. We must follow Jesus even if it means leaving our father (see 4:22 and 10:37). With Jesus there is a new creation, a new life. Apart from Jesus there is only death. A disciple must leave everything to follow Jesus, seeking 'first' the kingdom of God and his righteousness (see 6:33).

compare Luke 9:57-60

verse 18

compare Mark 4:35

The Son of Man

We find 'Son of Man' in the Old Testament as an idiomatic alternative to 'man', in the sense of human being (Psalm 8:4 and frequently in Ezekiel). There is a quite specialised use, however, in the Book of Daniel, and it is to this text that we must turn to discover its meaning in the New Testament.

The Book of Daniel was written at the time of the persecution of the Jews by the Syrian king, Antiochus IV (c.165BC). The invading army seemed to be winning, but the author of the Book of Daniel gives expression to his faith in God's providence in an imaginative portrayal of the last judgment: 'The court sat in judgment and the books were opened'(Daniel 7:10). In his vision he sees:

One like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One [God] and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

– Daniel 7:13-14

There follows an explanation of the vision in which the 'Son of Man' is the heavenly counterpart or representative of the ordinary, downtrodden and persecuted people of God who will ultimately prevail and who will be exalted by God in the final judgment. The text reads:

The kingship and dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.

– Daniel 7:27

In identifying himself as the 'Son of Man', Jesus is declaring his solidarity with the poor, the oppressed and the victims of injustice in all its forms. In this there is already a hint (to be developed later in the gospel) that this solidarity is expressed by suffering with and for the oppressed.

He is also asserting his faith that God will vindicate him and those who identify with him and his mission. God's Messiah will ultimately triumph, but not in the earthly and nationalistic way popularly associated with the Messiah. His triumph lies with God and God's judgment of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness - a vindication which lies outside the realm of human history.

PART C: Three victories over evil (8:23 - 9:8)

Jesus conquers evil that threatens from outside

23 And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him.

It is clear from the primeval narratives of creation (Genesis 1:2,6-8) and the flood (Genesis 6-9), that the sea was for the Jews a symbol of chaos, and therefore of the forces which resist God's creative and redeeming action.

24 A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep.

In the scene before us, Jesus is venturing out into the midst of chaos, and the waves hurl themselves against the boat, seeking to destroy him. Jesus is clearly unafraid. The same cannot be said of his disciples.

25 And they went and woke him up, saying, 'Lord, save us! We are perishing!'

The scene would have carried a special relevancy for the Christian community at the time Matthew was writing, as it still does wherever there is persecution. Jesus appears not to hear the cry, but the awakened Christ (the Greek could be translated 'risen Christ') is truly caring, and at his command the forces of evil fall silent. We are watching the Creator vanquishing the sea monster:

26 And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?'

You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.

– Psalm 89:9-10

Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm.

We have just heard Jesus speak of what it means to be a disciple. Here it becomes clear that it means facing the forces of chaos with him, and doing so in trust. Matthew is instructing his own community. He alone has the disciples 'following' Jesus into the boat. He alone has them address him as 'Lord', using the liturgical formula 'Lord, save us!', the equivalent of the Hebrew 'Hosanna!' Matthew's focus is on the living Christian community, too fragile to survive the storms that threaten to destroy it, and calling out to its risen Lord who promised to be with it always (28:20).

27 They were amazed, saying, 'What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?'

Matthew alone has the phrase 'you of little faith'. We have already met this phrase in 6:30, where, as here, it refers to a failure to be open to the wonders that God can do for us if we would only have faith. Jesus does not contrast faith with doubt but with fear. There is a kind of doubt that is consistent with faith: the doubt that rises from a humble mind which recognises the limits of its own understanding. This kind of doubt is important. It is the cutting edge of the mind seeking deeper insight. Such doubt is accompanied by wonder and is characteristic of a mind that is open to the mystery of life.

compare
Mark 4:36-41
Luke 8:22-25

There is, however, another kind of doubt: one that feeds on fear. This is the doubt of a small mind, a self-centred doubt, a doubt that leads to cynicism and to despair. It is as though a person expects to be able to understand everything, and the realisation that this is not the case produces insecurity and fear. Again and again in Matthew's gospel, we hear Jesus repeating a phrase often found in the Old Testament: 'Do not be afraid!' (see 1:20; 10:31; 14:27; 17:7; 28:5,10). We are not speaking here of the spontaneous feeling of fear that can sometimes overtake us. We may be powerless either to prevent or stop it. We are not powerless, however, in our response to this feeling. To simply give in to it is to be enslaved by it. We can take this feeling to prayer. We can remember with gratitude moments of love that have been real to us. We can learn to counteract the often nebulous and dysfunctional thoughts that are at the root of our feeling with what we know and believe to be true. We are not powerless to respond to God's encouraging grace. We need not be a victim of fear.

Yet there is another and more profound 'fear' which overwhelms us when we realise the tremendous distance that separates us from God. Out of this 'fear' faith can be born, so long as we do not sink into our own misery, but cry out to Him who alone can save us. We are not to remain locked in this fear. Whatever might be happening around us and to us, Jesus, though apparently ignoring our cry, is there with us in the boat. He does care for us. He wants to save us. As Paul says:

Nothing in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

– Romans 8:39

We are called to trust:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

– Psalm 46:1-3

An appropriate reflection on this scene can be found in the prayer of Jonah, whose lack of faith provoked a storm similar to the one in our gospel narrative:

I called to the Lord out of my distress,
and ... you heard my voice.
You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows passed over me.
Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight ...
The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me ...
As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord;
and my prayer came to you ...
Deliverance belongs to the Lord!

– Jonah 2:2-9

28 When he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs coming out of the tombs met him. They were so fierce that no one could pass that way.

29 Suddenly they shouted, 'What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?'

30 Now a large herd of swine was feeding at some distance from them.

31 The demons begged him, 'If you cast us out, send us into the herd of swine.'

32 And he said to them, 'Go!' So they came out and entered the swine; and suddenly, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the water. 33 The swineherds ran off, and on going into the town, they told the whole story about what had happened to the demoniacs.

34 Then the whole town came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their neighbourhood.

compare Mark 5:1-20
Luke 8:26-39

Jesus conquers evil that threatens from inside

Sometimes we are able to believe even though everything around us seems to be in chaos. But what about when the chaos is experienced within? What about when our psyche is falling apart and we experience a profound oppression from within? In this scene Matthew demonstrates that not even that kind of situation can separate us from the healing and redeeming word of God coming to us in Jesus.

Matthew locates the episode on the eastern, and therefore non-Jewish, side of the lake, in the 'country of the Gadarenes'. The city of Gadara was about six miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee. In Matthew's account there are two demoniacs. He has scenes later in which two blind men appear together (see 9:27 and 20:30). It is likely that this is a catechetical device, one person symbolising the Jewish element in Matthew's community, and the other the Gentile element. These deranged men, wandering among the tombs, have been broken by the awful meaninglessness of their world. Others cannot cope with them.

Then Jesus enters their world, and with Jesus comes the power of God. The deranged men see Jesus with the kind of lucid clarity known only to those who have suffered severe mental illness. Across the chasm that separates the pure from the impure, they cry: 'What have you to do with us, Son of God?'. In one sense the appropriate answer would be 'nothing', for there is no place for evil in the presence of God. However, as this scene demonstrates in a dramatic way, God does not stay away from them because of the evil that holds them bound. He comes to liberate them.

They ask Jesus: 'Have you come here to torment us before the time?'. 'The time' refers to the final eschatological triumph of God over all the forces of evil. Matthew wants us to see that this final judgment of God is already breaking into the world in the person and the ministry of Jesus. The kingdom is already being established; evil is already being vanquished. Not even the gates of Hades will prevail against the reign of God's liberating love (see 16:18).

We have to go to the imaginative drama of folklore for the account of the expulsion of the demons into the pigs — unclean animals (Leviticus 11:7) and so fitting recipients for unclean spirits — and of their flight into the lake, and so into the abyss — their proper home. The effect on the local people is instructive. When they saw Jesus ‘they begged him to leave the neighbourhood’. We are reminded of the following words from Isaiah:

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, ‘Here I am, here I am,’ to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; a people who provoke me to my face continually ... who sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat swine’s flesh ... who say, ‘Keep to yourself, do not come near me’.

– Isaiah 65:1-5

The good news brought to this Gentile country by Jesus is that nothing - not even a psyche that has collapsed before the onslaught of evil - ‘will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Romans 8:39). Under the broken psyche of these poor men was a self made by God in God’s image: a hidden self, an ‘inner being’ that yearned for communion with God and for a place in the community. We might pray for each other the prayer of Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians:

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

– Ephesians 3:14-21

This work cannot happen without the pain of purification. Let the cry of the tormented man be ours, and let it be a prayer to Him who purifies us that we may experience the freedom to love.

¹ *And after getting into a boat he crossed the sea and came to his own town.* ² **And just then some people were carrying a paralysed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.’**

³ **Then some of the scribes said to themselves, ‘This man is blaspheming.’** ⁴ **But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts?’**

⁵ **For which is easier, to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Stand up and walk”?**

⁶ **But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ – he then said to the paralytic – ‘Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.’** ⁷ **And he stood up and went to his home.**

⁸ **When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.**

Jesus liberates from sin which paralyses

In this scene Jesus’ vanquishing of evil reaches its climax, for he overcomes the greatest evil, the evil that paralyses us, the evil of sin. In commenting on 1:21, we noted that the word ‘sin’ means ‘missing the mark’. It includes many aspects of our human condition that result from fear, insecurity, ignorance and lack of freedom, as well as from stubbornness, laziness, envy, lust and pride. We are not wholly responsible for the sin that is in our lives, any more than the man in the gospel is responsible for being paralysed. Our sinful condition is largely the result of factors that are hereditary and environmental (hence the term ‘original sin’ – from our origins).

We know, however, that there are times when we choose to say Yes to sin, when we fail to resist its attraction though we know we are able to do so. We bear some responsibility for who we are and for what we do. Whatever the measure of our personal responsibility, the fact is that we are sinners who so often ‘miss the mark’, and the result of sin is a paralysing of our spirit.

Jesus knew our fears and our insecurity. He knew the pain of rejection. He knew what it was like to be misunderstood and wrongly judged. He knew what it was like to feel abandoned not only by friends but also by God. He showed us that sin is no answer to any of these experiences. He also showed us that it is possible to be human and not sin. He witnessed to the truth that to give in to sin is to fall short of what as human beings we are called and graced to be.

Nothing can separate us from God’s love, and no circumstance can prevent us loving, no matter how limited our capacity to love may be. In this passage, Jesus sees the faith of the man and his friends, and knows that God’s healing love is touching the paralysed man. To sin is one thing. To remain bound in sin is another. Whatever our sin, there is a liberating power at work in us that is greater than our sin, and Jesus knew the importance of forgiveness. The English word ‘for-give’ captures well what it is that is asked of us in relation to each other. To love is to *give oneself for* another. To ‘for-give’ is to give and give and continue to give ourselves, even to someone who is offending us.

Of course, reconciliation and so communion in love is possible only when the one who is causing the offence admits the sin, accepts the forgiveness that is being offered and alters the offending behaviour. The person who is offended may be willing to forgive, but he or she cannot effect reconciliation alone. At the same time, it is of the essence of love that we do not take it upon ourselves to judge the exact nature of other people's sin or their readiness for reconciliation, but that, whatever the circumstances, we keep our hearts open and continue our willingness to offer love, whether or not the one offending us is willing to receive it. There is no more difficult lesson to learn than this, but we have Jesus to keep reminding us of the challenge before us. He also keeps on demonstrating that whatever our sin we cannot stop God loving us. The offer of forgiveness from God is never closed.

We can choose to remain paralysed. It is difficult to understand why we would do so, but there is no doubt about the fact. Are we too stubborn to admit the fact that we are paralysed? Are we afraid of what might be involved if we have to begin walking again? Is our self-esteem so low that we cannot believe that anyone would want to heal us? Even if we refuse healing and deny the love that is being shown us, we cannot cause God to stop loving us. This is the good news demonstrated by Jesus.

In this scene the love of God penetrates to the deepest recesses of our hidden paralysis. The scribes are scandalised by Jesus' words. They claim that only God can forgive sin. And they are right. Only the creator God can dispel the darkness. There is no love and no forgiveness that does not have its source in God. Their mistake, and it is a serious one, is to forget that God, though transcendent (God is not an object of direct human experience) is at the heart of creation. God can forgive through us, as he forgives in this scene through Jesus, and through the love and faith of this man's friends.

Jesus' name symbolises his mission to save us from our sins (1:21). He has already taught the importance of forgiveness (5:24; 6:12, 14-15). The expression 'Son of Man', as explained earlier (see commentary on 8:20), has as one of its elements solidarity with the oppressed. It is as the Son of Man that Jesus forgives sin, for he has faced the tests of our human journey and remained sinless (4:1-11). In solidarity with us, he is demonstrating that we, too, in communion with him, can and should learn to do the same. We, however, are sinners, and we can become 'perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect' (5:48), only through the forgiveness of God — a forgiveness which we need to mediate to each other. Jesus' action demonstrates that God has given the power to forgive 'to human beings'. We must use this power generously, to enable each other to 'stand up and walk'.

The choice before us is clear. We can close our eyes and fall back to the security of established ways of thinking and harbour evil in our hearts; or we can look at what is happening before our eyes and be filled with awe and glorify God. Let us thank God for those who, when we have been paralysed, have held us and carried us to Jesus by their faith and their love. Let us also know that God does want to forgive through us, so that when we see others who are too afraid to move, let us help to lift them up and take them to God.

⁹ As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called *Matthew* sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.'

And he got up and followed him.

¹⁰ And as he sat at dinner in *the* house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples.

¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does *your teacher* eat with tax collectors and sinners?'

¹² But when he heard this, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.'

¹³ *Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."* For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

compare Mark 2:13-17
Luke 5:27-32

PART D: Who is Jesus and what does it mean to follow him?(9:9-17)

Jesus, the doctor who has come to heal sinners

Capernaum was the most northern fishing village on the west side of the lake. It was on the main trade route connecting Egypt and Damascus (the Via Maris). Taxes were collected before the traders moved north into the tetrarchy of Philip.

The tax alluded to was a symbol of Roman oppression, and of humiliation for the Jews who rejected any subjection except to God. In Galilee the proceeds went to the Roman puppet, Herod Antipas. The tax collectors were Jews and were despised as traitors. Many of them were especially despised because to earn a living they extorted as much as they could from the farmers, fishermen and merchants under their jurisdiction. They were excommunicated from attending the synagogue. At Jesus' invitation, Matthew leaves his work to become a disciple (compare 4:18-22).

This scene reinforces the profound difference between the religious attitude of Jesus and that typified by a number of the Pharisees of his day. Of course Matthew and his friends need a doctor (don't we all!). We are not healed by being condemned and ostracised. Jesus loves them. He seeks them out to share with them the homely intimacy of a meal. Whatever healing they need will be possible only through such love.

Jesus is the physician come to heal. 'The house' is probably Jesus' house (see 4:13) as he seems to be the host. As used by Matthew it is probably a symbol of the Christian community where outsiders are welcomed to share table fellowship with the Lord. Commenting on the close familiarity of Jesus with the outcasts and the excommunicated of his day, Matthew quotes the prophet Hosea (9:13 = Hosea 6:6; see also Matthew 12:7).

Jesus is going against the expectations of those who considered themselves faithful to the law, but it is he, and not they, who has understood the law correctly. Jesus is fulfilling the law and the prophets (see 5:17), and living a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees (see 5:20). Filled with the mercy of God (see 5:7), he shares his love with 'the righteous and the unrighteous' (see 5:45).

Matthew may be asking those members of his community who were unhappy to see sinners at the Eucharist to ask themselves whether they are following the scribes or Jesus.

That Jesus would call such a man to be part of his mission, and would enjoy the company of his friends, should surely give us confidence in the compassion of the heart of God. We need not fear that we have nothing to offer. We are all called to love, and Jesus welcomes us and invites us to take our part in bringing about that communion of love which is God's kingdom on earth.

There are people who criticise the Church because of the sinners that are in it. We should not be complacent about sin, and we should expect the Christian community to challenge us to repent of our sin by accepting the grace of forgiveness offered us by Jesus. However, any community desiring to follow Jesus must have within it the whole range of humanity, from the most broken of sinners to the purest of saints. If there is no room for sinners in the Church, there is no room for anyone, and it is not the Church of Jesus.

It is because we are sinners that we need the intimacy of communion with Jesus. Let us humbly and with gratitude accept his invitation to dine with him:

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door,
I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

– Revelation 3:20

¹⁴ Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?'

¹⁵ And Jesus said to them, 'The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?'

The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.

¹⁶ No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made.

¹⁷ Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.'

compare Mark 2:18-22
Luke 5:33-39

Jesus, the bridegroom who treasures the new and the old

Perhaps there are still disciples of John the Baptist who have not joined Matthew's community. Are they, as well as the Pharisees, concerned with the way Jesus' disciples seem to neglect traditional religious practices?

The Law required people to fast on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29; 23:29). The Pharisees used to fast twice a week (Luke 18:12) and they expected that if Jesus were truly a religious man he, like the disciples of John, would be similarly conscientious. It is clear from the dialogue that Jesus is not against fasting on principle. What concerns him is the false perspective which many of the officially respected religious people were giving. Their priorities were wrong. Jesus' position is consistent with the prophetic tradition found, for example, in Isaiah 58:6-7.

People seem to find it easier to follow the requirements of religious devotion and ritual rather than face up to the radical demands of a truly religious life. Jesus knew how easily we revert to insecurity and cling to religious practices, even when such practices fail to reveal God's true concern for us or to express our real response to God. Jesus knew that what the people needed most was not to be reminded of the Law but to experience God's love. He was intent on communicating to his contemporaries the essence of the good news, even if the pious were scandalised by his ignoring of practices customarily expected of the observant.

The Christian community for whom Matthew is writing had learned from Jesus to celebrate his continued presence as the Bridegroom among them. They also fasted because they experienced his absence and longed for the time when they could celebrate with him the fullness of communion for which their hearts yearned – a fullness that could come only when they joined him in the risen life.

A number of texts from the Old Testament liken God's love of his people to that of a bridegroom for his bride:

I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord;

– Hosea 2:19-20 ; see also Isaiah 54:5-8; 62:4-5; Ezekiel

16:8-14 .

In John's Gospel we find the Baptist speaking of himself as the 'friend of the bridegroom'. The bridegroom is Jesus (John 3:29). This same image holds a particularly important place in the Book of Revelation (19:7; 21:2). Likewise Paul writes to the Corinthians:

I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.

– 2Corinthians 11:2. See Ephesians 5:32

After reading the Law, Nehemiah could say:

This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep ... Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine ... and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

– Nehemiah 8:9-10

How much more right had Jesus to call his disciples to celebrate! Jesus knew that His contemporaries needed a change of mind and heart. They needed to know of God's love - that was the change of outlook. And it would be in celebrating that love that they would experience a change of heart and be inspired to change their behaviour. The old ways left them locked in their sin.

Using two simple but powerful metaphors, Jesus makes the point that the good news cannot be patched onto the old cloak of the Law, nor poured into its ancient skins. The new creation which he was initiating would need to be expressed in new ways. Matthew makes the point that, though the old wineskins of the Jewish law cannot hold this new wine, this does not mean that they have been destroyed. He is pleading with his fellow Jews not to see Christianity as the enemy of Judaism. Jesus did not come to destroy but to fulfil, that is, to bring to completion, to attain to the goal (5:17). The old wineskins did well to carry the old wine. Now that the goal has been reached, new forms are needed. Let them take up these new forms, grasp this new perspective, expand their minds and hearts and practices to give expression to this new spirit. Only in this way can the wine and the wineskins both be preserved.

However well-founded and inspiring the religious customs handed on to us may be, they cannot substitute for an openness to the surprise of God's self-revelation in the present moment. Every time a child is born into our world, a new cloth is created and we are gifted with new wine. Every generation brings with it a new energy and a new revelation — not contradicting the old, but certainly not able to be contained within it.

The call of Jesus is for us to be faithful to what has gone before, by being as open to the surprise of God's action in our lives as were our ancestors in faith. We are being called ever forward into a future full of hope. Our Christian faith is faith in that promised future, which God will create through us if we listen now to 'every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 8:3 — see Matthew 4:4). In our willingness to do God's will, we must be ready to be detached from everything, however sacred it might appear. We must be ready, like Jesus, to 'seek first the kingdom of God' (Matthew 6:33).

PART E : Four healings (9:18-34)

Jesus gives life

18 While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, 'My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.'

19 And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples.

20 Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak,

21 for she said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.'

22 Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.' And instantly the woman was made well.

23 When Jesus came to the leader's

compare Mark 5:21-34
Luke 8:40-48

Both these narratives are about life. Framing the scene is the story of a young girl who has just died. Jesus restores her to life. The centrepiece is a woman whose life has been wasting away for twelve years. She is restored to health.

The number twelve is symbolic. It speaks of completion from the heavenly aspect. The woman is losing blood and therefore life (see Leviticus 17:14), and her time has run out. Her ailment makes her ritually unclean (Leviticus 15:19). This means that anything or any person whom she touches has to be excluded from the assembly for the period prescribed by law. There is something about Jesus that encourages her, as it encouraged the leper (see 8:2), to ignore the law and approach him. He looks at her, speaks to her and restores her life.

The scene with the girl is not meant to raise our hopes that, when the time comes for us to die, we will be brought back to this life. It is, however, meant to demonstrate the power of God to reach beyond death and to take us from death into the life-beyond-death. Matthew is encouraging his community, in the midst of persecution, to trust that the risen Christ will be there on the other side of death, and that he will take them by the hand and raise them to share his risen life. He shares the faith of Paul:

Christ must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

– 1 Corinthians 15:25-26

Death has been swallowed up in victory.

'Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?'

– 1 Corinthians 15:54-55

The invitation to us is to share in the father's faith and to plead for life for those we love; and, like the woman, to believe that his love can put a stop to years of waste, and give us the power, now, to begin to live to the full. We must choose to be disciples. It is not enough to belong to the crowd, enthusiastically caught up in admiring the wonderful things Jesus is doing (8:1; 9:8,33). It is not enough that we bring our sick to him (8:16; 9:2,32). If we refuse to be his disciples, we will find ourselves 'outside' when the dead are raised to life. Nothing can substitute for our personal commitment to follow Jesus.

When we speak of the ‘spiritual’ life, we are not speaking of experiences that are unrelated to our bodies. God’s Spirit touches us, as it touched Jesus, in every part of our human condition, gracing and transforming our minds and our hearts, but also our affections and our senses. Like the woman in the scene before us, we need to touch and we need to feel that we are healed. Like the little girl we find ourselves lying there, unable to move, longing for his touch to bring us life.

We are here at the heart of the mystery of Jesus. It is not enough to have fine thoughts and high ideals. We are human and we need to put a face on God. We need to feel the warmth of God’s affection. We need God’s touch.

It is this that Jesus’ disciples found in him, and Matthew wrote his gospel that others might come to know Jesus and share in this experience. Let us take time to be that woman, to experience our need for healing and to seek him out to touch him in whatever way we can. Let us be that little girl. Let us not give up hope, but wait on his touch, knowing that he has come that we might live and live to the full (John 10:10).

A story is told of some soldiers who were advancing against a retreating army. They came upon a church which had been shelled and found a large broken statue of Christ in the rubble. As an act of devotion they attempted to reassemble the parts, but were unable to find the hands. Since they had to move on, one of them took a board and scribbled on it: ‘I have no hands but yours’. He propped the board up against the statue and left.

‘I have no hands but yours!’ If the risen Christ is to touch me, it will have to be through your hands. If he is going to touch you it will have to be through someone who is graced by him to touch you. Let us, then, take to heart Jesus’ request at the last supper:

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

– John 13:34

house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, ²⁴ **he said, ‘Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.’ And they laughed at him.** ²⁵ **But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up.** ²⁶ *And the report of this spread throughout that district.*

compare Mark 5:35-43
Luke 8:49-56

Jesus gives light

27 As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, 'Have mercy on us, Son of David!'

28 When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?'

They said to him, 'Yes, Lord.'

29 Then he touched their eyes and said, 'According to your faith let it be done to you.'

30 And their eyes were opened. Then Jesus sternly ordered them, 'See that no one knows of this.'

31 But they went away and spread the news about him throughout that district.

There are two blind men. Compare the two demoniacs of 8:28, and the two blind men in the doublet of this scene (20:30). It is not just as individuals that we are blind: we are blind as communities. Does Matthew want us to see here the darkness of Judaism and the Gentile world without Jesus?

They recognise Jesus first as the Davidic Messiah (see 1:1), and they cry to him for mercy. Then they 'entered the house', possibly a symbol for Matthew of the Christian community (2:11; 8:14; 9:10). When, within the church, they accept Jesus in faith they become disciples and so can address him as 'Lord'. It is in the community of the church, and because of their faith, that they receive enlightenment.

As regards Jesus' injunction of silence, we refer the reader to the commentary on Matthew 8:4. Is Matthew, perhaps, thinking of the way in which Christianity is misunderstood by both Jews and Gentiles? Is he pleading here that Jesus' disciples not 'give what is holy to dogs' and not 'throw pearls before swine' (7:6)? Many things can be seen only with eyes enlightened by faith and only from inside the community of Jesus' disciples.

Jesus enables us to speak

This passage, like the previous one, is echoed later in Matthew (12:22-24). The deaf and dumb man healed by Jesus is a symbol of the newly baptised. Enlightened in baptism, his ears are open to hear the word of God, and his lips to proclaim the gospel. Evil has been overcome by Jesus, and those who were once enslaved by it are enabled to become ministers of the word.

The Pharisees, who should have known better, are unable to hear the gospel, even when it is having such dramatic and liberating effects. The resistance already noted in the scene with the paralysed man (9:3), and when Jesus is eating with sinners (9:11), has hardened into outright rejection.

Those who prided themselves on their meticulous obedience could see only evil in something that demanded that they forgo their position of power and find life, enlightenment and a renewed freedom to proclaim the wonders of the Lord.

Matthew's warning is addressed to his own community. We, too, must choose. Do we hold on to positions of power, and seek refuge and support in them, rather than admit that life is haemorrhaging from us (9:20), that we cannot experience life unless he takes us by the hand and raises us up (9:25), that we are blind (9:27), that we cannot hear his word, and have nothing to say (9:32), unless he heals us, enlightens us and fills us with his Spirit?

PART F : Conclusion

Matthew uses a very similar summary just before his first discourse (see 4:23). We have heard Jesus' words, spoken with 'authority' (7:29). We have watched Jesus' 'deeds of power' (7:22). Matthew is now ready to present Jesus sharing this authority and this power with his disciples who are to carry on his mission.

³² *After they had gone away, a demoniac who was mute [deaf and dumb] was brought to him.*

³³ *And when the demon had been cast out, the one who had been mute spoke; and the crowds were amazed and said, 'Never has anything like this been seen in Israel.'*

³⁴ *But the Pharisees said, 'By the ruler of the demons he casts out the demons.'*

verse 34
compare Mark 3:22

³⁵ *Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.*

compare Matthew 4:23