

**JESUS INSTRUCTS HIS DISCIPLES
CONCERNING THEIR MISSION**

Matthew 9:36 - 11:1

Introduction: Jesus, the shepherd of Israel

³⁶ **When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.**

³⁷ **Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few;**

³⁸ **therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.'**

Rarely does Matthew comment on Jesus' feelings. We have been contemplating Jesus as he brings comfort, healing and release to the 'harassed and helpless'. Here, for the first time, Matthew speaks of Jesus' compassion. Jesus' heart is moved by the suffering of body and mind that surrounds him. It wounds him, and he feels their pain in the depths of his own psyche.

Jesus' compassion is mentioned again by Matthew (14:14; 15:32; 20:34), and Jesus himself speaks of compassion in one of his parables (18:27). God's compassion (Jeremiah 31:20; Isaiah 54:7) is being revealed in God's beloved Son.

Lest the people be 'like sheep without a shepherd' (Numbers 27:17), Moses pleaded with God to give him someone to carry on his work. So here with Jesus.

Lamenting the failure of the religious leaders to nourish God's flock, Ezekiel speaks of God's determination to see that they are properly shepherded:

Thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness ... I will feed them with good pasture ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.'

– Ezekiel 34:11-16

To do this, Jesus needs the help of his disciples. Having presented Jesus for the contemplation of his community, Matthew now invites them to listen, once again, as Jesus speaks, this time about mission.

verse 36
compare Mark 6:34
verses 37-38
compare Luke 10:2

Jesus' Mission Discourse (Matthew 10:1 - 11:1)

A comparison with Luke indicates that this discourse, like the first one (Matthew 5-7) is a composition of the author. Matthew has collected various sayings of Jesus concerning aspects of the missionary dimension of being a disciple. Comparison with Luke's text also indicates that in places Matthew and Luke have translated differently into Greek the one original Aramaic saying. It is possible that this Aramaic source is the collection of Sayings attributed by Papias to the apostle Matthew (see the chapter Introducing Matthew).

Jesus invests the twelve disciples with his authority

Matthew shows no interest at this stage in the missionary work of the twelve. At the end of this discourse, it is Jesus, and not the disciples, who goes on to teach and to proclaim the gospel (11:1). The actual sending out of the twelve must await their experience of his death and resurrection (28:18-20). Here Matthew is interested in the twelve as disciples (10:1; 11:1) who are being prepared to carry on Jesus' mission. We have been watching Jesus speak (5-7) and act (8-9) with authority. His compassion for the people (9:36) causes him to share this same authority with his disciples. Before they are ready to carry out their apostolic commission, however, they still have much to learn from their Master (10:25).

Matthew is highlighting an indispensable dimension of discipleship: to be a disciple is to be a missionary, an 'apostle' (10:2 - the only time the word occurs in Matthew). Jesus cast out unclean spirits (4:24; 8:16; 8:32). He gives his disciples the power to do the same. He cured 'every disease and every sickness' (4:23; 8:16; 9:35); so must they.

The number twelve has a symbolic reference to the twelve sons of Jacob (Genesis 35:22), and so to the tribes of Israel (Genesis 49:28). The number derives from the zodiac, and is used in the cult (Exodus 24:4)

The religious leaders have shown themselves to be stubborn in their rejection of Jesus (9:34). They have left the people 'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (9:36). Jesus is instructing his disciples that they are to be the authentic Israel, sharing his universal (hence 'twelve') mission, as labourers of the 'Lord of the harvest' (9:38).

¹ Then Jesus summoned his twelve *disciples* and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.

² These are the names of the twelve apostles: *first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John;*

³ *Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector;*

James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus;
⁴ *Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.*

⁵ *These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions:*

compare Mark 3:13-19 and Luke 6:12-16

verse 1 compare Mark 6:7 and Luke 9:1

The disciples' mission of peace to Israel and God's judgment of those who reject them.

⁵ 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶ but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Why this exclusive focus on the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel'? When, at the end of the gospel, the disciples are actually sent to begin their mission, its universal scope is clear: they are to 'make disciples of all nations' (28:19). Matthew's interest in the mission to the Gentiles has been obvious from the beginning of the gospel. In the prologue, it is the 'wise men from the East' (2:1) who follow the star and pay homage to the 'king of the Jews' (2:2,11).

Jesus' ministry is placed deliberately in 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (4:15). Jesus reputation spreads 'throughout all Syria' (4:24), and he attracts crowds from the 'Decapolis' (4:25). We have seen his ministry extending to the centurion (8:5-13), and to the Gadarene demoniacs (8:28-34). In the next passage, Jesus will speak about 'testimony to the Gentiles' (10:18). So why the exclusive focus here on Israel?

In fact, the good news of the kingdom was proclaimed, by Jesus himself (15:24), and by his disciples, primarily to Jews. Paul writes:

Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs.

– Romans 15:8

It is also a fact that the majority of Jews (the 'house of Israel') rejected Jesus. This is one of the major sufferings of Matthew and his community. We have already had a foretaste of this with the Pharisees persisting in their stubborn refusal to heed Jesus (9:34). In the following two chapters (11-12), Matthew is going to examine this rejection. His insistence here on the mission to Israel is consistent with his desire to highlight the privileged opportunity that Israel refused to take.

This is the only time the Samaritans are mentioned in Matthew. They were not considered by the Jews to be faithful adherents to the 'house of Israel' (see Sirach 50:25-26; Luke 10:29-37; John 4:9). Part of the reason for this was the erection by the people of Samaria of a rival temple on Mount Gerizim (destroyed in 128BC by John Hyrcanus). The Samaritans had no loyalty to the tribe of Judah or the Davidic dynasty, and they accepted as Scripture only the Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy).

Jesus instructs his disciples to proclaim the same message as was proclaimed by John the Baptist (3:2) and by himself (4:17): ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near’. People do not have to wait for God to enter into their lives; he is present in Jesus, ready to draw them away from all that is holding them back from communion.

Jesus cured the sick (4:23; 8:16; 9:35), so will his disciples. He raised the dead (9:25), so will they. He cleansed lepers (8:3), so will they. He cast out demons (4:24; 8:16; 8:32; 9:33), so will they. He acted as an instrument of the gracious God; so must they. Like him, their reliance is not to be in their own resources: they are to place their trust in the providence of God (6:25-34). The food they need is the bread they were told to pray for (6:11), the manna which God gives from heaven (4:4).

The gift that they bring from God is the gift of ‘peace’, the gift best described in the beatitudes (5:2-10): that harmony and fullness of personal, communal life that comes from union with God.:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns’

– Isaiah 52:7

The disciples have already been warned to expect to be rejected because of their association with Jesus (5:11). Those who refuse to welcome him (9:3-4,11,34) will refuse to welcome his disciples too. They are to make clear to those who reject them what this rejection means by shaking the dust from their feet. This was a Jewish custom when leaving pagan territory, so as not to pollute the Holy Land of Israel. In other words, those who reject the good news of the kingdom are rejecting the promise. They will be outside the community of the true Israel.

Sodom and Gomorrah, long since lost under the salt of the Dead Sea, were symbols in the sacred Scriptures of what happens to a people who stubbornly refuse to heed God’s word (Genesis 19:24; Deuteronomy 29:23; Isaiah 1:9-10; 13:19; Jeremiah 23:14; Amos 4:11; Zephaniah 2:9). What will be the destruction that comes to those who reject the word that is the fulfilment of all God’s words, the definitive call to salvation!

7 As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.”

8 Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

9 Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, ¹⁰ no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for labourers deserve their food.

11 Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave.

12 As you enter the house, greet it. ¹³ If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.

14 If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.

15 Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

compare Mark 6:10-11
Luke 9:4-5 and 10:4-12

The disciples will be persecuted, but the Father will look after them.

¹⁶ *'See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*

The mission of the disciples, like that of Jesus himself, will of necessity involve them in a struggle against evil. We are to remain as 'innocent as doves'. In the previous discourse we were told that we are to be 'pure in heart' (5:8). We are not to resist evil with evil (5:29). We are not to be distracted or corrupted so as to become like those who oppose us. We are to love our enemies (5:44) and be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect (5:48). In every circumstance we are called to keep our heart fixed on God (6:21) and 'strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness' (6:33). This is something of what it means to remain as innocent as doves in a world corrupted by evil. Paul expects this of Jesus' disciples:

I want you to be wise in what is good and guileless in what is evil.

– Romans 16:19

Be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

– Philippians 2:15

At the same time, Jesus calls us to be 'as wise as serpents'. When reflecting on what it means to be 'poor in spirit' (5:3), we noted that both the Hebrew Scriptures (Psalm 131), and Jesus himself (18:4) present a child as a model. The poor in spirit share Jesus' experience of having God as their 'Father-Mother' and, knowing their complete dependence on God, they look to God in peaceful trust.

This quality of a child must remain basic in a disciple's life. But this has nothing to do with an adult Christian failing to grow beyond the naïveté expected of a child. We are not children. We have to learn to discern. We have to face and come to understand the realities of the human condition as they are manifested in ourselves and in those around us. Jesus recognised hypocrisy (6:2,5,16; 7:5); so must his disciples. We must know when we are being led to sin, and know what to do about it (5:29-30). We are not to pass judgment on people (7:1-5), but we must be discerning and not 'give what is holy to dogs', nor 'throw pearls before swine' (7:6). We must be able to recognise false prophets (7:15-20).

Jesus goes on to warn his disciples of the kind of persecution they should expect — something that was a key element of the beatitudes (5:10-12). Matthew's community knew how right Jesus had been.

compare Luke 10:3

The persecution of which Jesus is speaking is one that is directed at them because of their connection with Jesus himself. To sustain them, Jesus assures them of three things. Firstly, they will experience the presence of the ‘Spirit of your Father speaking through you’. Secondly, ‘the one who endures to the end will be saved’. And thirdly, the Son of Man is coming soon.

The Spirit of whom Jesus is speaking is the same Holy Spirit who brought about Jesus’ conception (1:18,20), who descended from heaven and alighted upon him at his baptism (3:16), and who led him into the wilderness to be tested (4:1). It is the same Holy Spirit whom Jesus shares with his disciples, as promised by the Baptist (3:11). Because of this, his Father has become their Father. Jesus promises them that when they are brought to trial because of their allegiance to him, their Father’s Spirit, his Spirit, will strengthen and inspire them. Peter writes:

If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

– 1Peter 4:14

‘The one who endures to the end will be saved’ is a promise repeated by Jesus later in the gospel (24:13). Jesus was given his name as a sign that he was to be the one who would ‘save his people from their sins’ (1:21). In the scene depicting the storm at sea, the disciples cry out ‘Lord, save us! We are perishing!’ (8:25). Through Jesus, God is already saving his people (9:22). Following Jesus does not protect the disciples against persecution, but they should rejoice and be glad’ (5:12), for their ultimate salvation is assured. To persevere in commitment to the truth is to be in communion with God. This is its own reward, a reward that will be fully manifest when we, like Jesus, are raised from death (5:12). Paul and James have the same message:

If we endure, we will also reign with him.

– 2Timothy 2:12

We call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

– James 5:11

¹⁷ ‘Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; ¹⁸ and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles.

¹⁹ When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; ²⁰ for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

²¹ Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death;

²² and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

²³ When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

compare Mark 13:9-13

Luke 21:12-19

verses 19-20 compare

Luke 12:11-12

The Coming of the Son of Man

Finally, what might Jesus mean here by the coming of the Son of Man? When examining the expression 'Son of Man' earlier (see the commentary on 8:20), we saw that it alludes to the passage in Daniel which concerns God's judgment. The 'coming' of the Son of Man is a way of speaking of God's vindication of the oppressed. The New Testament also speaks of 'the Day of the Lord'. Because of their understanding of the experience of the Exodus, the people of Israel believed in God as a liberator. Whatever their actual experience, they held to a firm conviction that good would ultimately triumph over evil, because of who God has revealed himself to be. In the Hebrew Bible, then, the expression 'the Day of the Lord' refers to the day of God's ultimate victory over evil and vindication of the good. It has the same meaning in the New Testament (1Thessalonians 5:2; 2Thessalonians 2:2; 2 Corinthians 1:14; 2Peter 3:10). This is sometimes referred to as the 'Day of Christ'. Writing to the community in Philippi, probably in the late 50's, Paul expresses his confidence that:

the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of
Jesus Christ.

– Philippians 1:6

The 'Day of the Jesus Christ' is another way of speaking of the 'coming of the Son of Man'. A few sentences later, Paul goes on to promise them that 'the Lord is near' (Philippians 4:5). Because of the close connection in the popular mind between resurrection and the end of history, it should not surprise us to find that the early Christians, in the light of the resurrection of Jesus, expected that this ultimate destruction of evil and triumph of good was imminent.

The expression 'the Day of the Lord' also frequently refers to historical events which reveal the power of God and keep alive the promise of ultimate victory. The expression 'the Day of the Lord is near' is a recurring theme in the prophets (Isaiah 13:6; Ezekiel 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7,14). The prophecy of Malachi: 'I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes' (Malachi 4:5) was understood by the gospel writers as fulfilled in John the Baptist and Jesus (11:14). In this sense Jesus' presence among the people is already bringing about the reign of God.

In the present text, the coming of the Son of Man may be referring to God's judgment as indicated in historical events. Perhaps the Resurrection of Jesus interpreted as being God's vindicating of the just man, or the destruction of Jerusalem interpreted as being the result of the city's rejection of Jesus. We are dealing, of course, with an understanding of history based on faith. Alternatively, Matthew may be referring to God's ultimate judgment of history which he imagined to be imminent.

The religious experience of the followers of Jesus has since disentangled faith in God from any historical expectation. Contemplation of Jesus, however, continues to awaken in people the faith that God is a liberating God and that God's grace is always present. We still believe in the power of love and trust that if we open ourselves to this power, we will experience the miracle of communion with God, the source of all life, even if, like the persecuted Jews at the time of Daniel, or like Jesus on the cross, we seem to be overwhelmed by evil.

The disciples are to be like their Teacher

The disciples are to be like their teacher. They are, as we have seen, to go where he goes (10:6), to say what he says (10:7) and to do what he does (10:8). They will be put on trial because of him (10:18) and hated because of him (10:22).

The name 'Beelzebul' refers to the Canaanite god, Baal, probably combined with the word for 'prince'. We find it in a variant form as the name of the god of the Canaanite city of Ekron (2Kings 1:2), and are not surprised to find it used here as a title for the prince of demons, Satan.

The Pharisees have already accused Jesus of working wonders through the power of 'the ruler of the demons' (9:34). Since the disciples belong to Jesus, they must expect to be maligned in the same way.

²⁴ 'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master;

²⁵ it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

compare Luke 6:40

Be not afraid

²⁶ *'So have no fear of them;*

for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.

²⁷ **What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.**

²⁸ **Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.**

²⁹ **Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.**

³⁰ **And even the hairs of your head are all counted.**

³¹ **So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.**

compare Luke 12:2-7

verse 26 compare

Mark 4:22 and Luke 8:17

verse 30 compare Luke 21:18

verse 31 compare Luke 12:24

The disciples are to preach without fear, for the Father will look after them.

Having spoken about persecution, Jesus now tells his disciples not to be afraid of their persecutors, because finally the truth will be revealed. Paul reminds the Corinthians that when the Lord comes he will:

bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

– 1 Corinthians 4:5

What they come to see and hear through their intimate communion with Jesus they are to tell the world, even though, like him, they will experience rejection. He has already said that they are 'the salt of the earth' (5:13) and 'the light of the world' (5:14).

People can kill their body, but Jesus reminds them that the only one who has power over their soul (their life) is God. If they are to fear anyone it ought to be God. Confronted with the transcendent and absolute Other on whom we are utterly dependent and who has absolute power over life and death, we are forced to face our own mortality and sinfulness. We cannot ensure our own survival. We are powerless and dependent. Recognising this is an important safeguard against the folly of self-reliance in which if God is considered at all it is as an appendage to the self. Hence the saying that 'the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom' (Psalm 110:11). A Cistercian monk writes:

The point of departure for great mystical ascents is always the intense activity of the gift of fear. People like insisting on the 'filial' character of this fear, but this presupposes a perfectly clear view of everything, which by definition keeps us in an abyss of nothingness below our heavenly Father. Harmless, artificial insults to your self-esteem are not going to make you humble. Humiliation has its compensations in religion: an 'edifying' acceptance of it raises our prestige and ministers to our vanity. But the Holy Spirit will deprive you of self-esteem from inside, by contrasting God's grandeur and your baseness by its light: to the point perhaps of making you cry for mercy in horror of your abjectness: Alas for me, I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews stresses this utter sense of awe that should be ours before the majesty of God:

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God

– Hebrews 10:31

Likewise James:

There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy.

– James 4:12.

God alone has the power to destroy, but God as revealed by Jesus does not act in that way. Jesus' words concerning God's care for the sparrows alerts us to the error in the commonly-held opinion that it is God who punishes sin. 'Hell'(gehenna) witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem when the city failed to heed God's word. History will repeat itself if Jesus' contemporaries fail to listen to his word. They will bring it upon themselves. Hell is defined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church as a 'state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God'(par. 1033; see the commentary on 6:22). It is not God who excludes us; we do it to ourselves by our obstinate refusal to allow God's love to liberate and save us.

God is our 'Father'(the expression occurs fourteen times in the sermon on the mount). God knows everything about us and loves us, much more than any parent. What human parents are so enamoured of their child that they count the hairs on the child's head? Therefore, the fear we are to experience is best spoken of in terms of 'awe'. It is not fear of God perceived as one who threatens punishment. God brought us into existence that we might live to the full. God is constantly gracing us that we may choose life. He wants to save everyone; but we must trust him, turn from sin and obey His will, believing that he calls us to communion of life with him.

Jesus encourages his disciples to place their trust in God their Father and to accept the challenge of the mission that they share with him. If there is no reason to fear God, why are they afraid of their human persecutors? They are to focus their attention on God who knows them and loves them. They are to carry out the mission entrusted to them. They are to 'do the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:13), and place their trust in God's providence.

We are reminded of the words of Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord ... Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine ... For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour ... Do not fear, for I am with you.

– Isaiah 43:1-5

The consequences of accepting or rejecting Jesus

³² **‘Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven;**

³³ **but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.**

³⁴ **Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.**

³⁵ **For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;**

³⁶ **and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.**

Just before this discourse, Matthew portrayed the Pharisees as maintaining their obstinate rejection of Jesus (9:34). He intends exploring this rejection in the following two chapters. Here he has gathered together a number of sayings that focus on the consequences of accepting or rejecting Jesus and so of rejecting the good news which he and his disciples are commissioned to preach.

The first pair of sayings focuses on the personal nature of the relationship with Jesus that is offered by the good news. The words are addressed to the disciple missionaries and to those to whom they are sent. If, in spite of persecution, we remain faithful to our commitment to Jesus, he will be able to declare this fact before God his Father. If, on the other hand, we deny our relationship with him, he cannot pretend that the situation is otherwise.

This is not to contradict his unconditional love. As Paul says of Jesus: ‘if we are faithless, he remains faithful’ (2Timothy 2:13). His love is offered unconditionally, but we must choose to accept or to reject it, to acknowledge him or to deny him. There is no way we can hide from the truth of our response or from its consequences. At the same time, we should note that the only person whom Matthew mentions as in fact denying Jesus is Peter (26:34,75). Peter repented, and the compassion of the heart of Jesus flowed out to him in forgiving love. He is present at the conclusion of the gospel, and Jesus entrusts to him along with the others a mission to the world.

Next comes a saying in which Jesus speaks of bringing not peace, but a sword. It is immediately followed by a quotation from the prophet Micah (Matthew 10:35-36 is from Micah 7:6) which speaks of the divisions that will come even into families because of the different responses made to the word of God.

Of course Jesus came to bring peace. Does he not say ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ (5:9)? Has he not just told his disciples to offer peace to those to whom their mission takes them (10:13)? His peace, however, is not a peace that compromises the truth to avoid disturbance. It is a peace that is a gift from God, given to those who dare to believe the good news, and to allow its purifying fire to cleanse them so that they can live according to God’s righteousness and enjoy its blessedness.

verses 32-33 compare Luke 12:8-9

verse 33 compare Mark 8:38 and Luke 9:26

verses 34-36 compare Luke 12:51-53

It is peace that comes with the two-edged sword that issues from the mouth of Jesus (Revelation 1:16), the ‘sword of the Spirit which is the word of God’ (Ephesians 6:17). As the Letter to the Hebrews says:

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

– Hebrews 4:12-13

Not only will families experience division, but the decision to be a disciple of Jesus must take precedence even over the most intimate family relationships.

Then comes a saying which, for the first time in Matthew’s gospel, mentions the cross. Crucifixion was a common occurrence under Roman occupation, so, quite independently of Jesus’ own manner of dying, ‘taking up the cross’ could indicate what might be in store for anyone who chose to follow Jesus. It took on an extra significance, of course, in the light of Jesus’ own death. Following him could mean giving their lives as he had done. Nothing should dissuade them from this.

There follows perhaps the most well-known of Jesus’ paradoxical sayings: ‘Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life because of me will find it.’ The word translated ‘life’ here is the Greek psyche. It has a wide range of meanings, depending on one’s understanding of psychology. It could be translated ‘self’, in the sense of one’s psychically aware self. It could be translated ‘soul’, in the sense of one’s deepest, most intimate and most mysterious self.

Jesus has the deepest respect for a person’s psyche. He wants it to be found not lost. A person’s self is sacred, for it is the unique individual person who is created by God, sustained in life by God, and loved as a son or daughter by God. But there is another ‘self’ to which we must say no, if we are ever to discover and enjoy our ‘soul’.

³⁷ **‘Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;**

³⁸ **and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.**

³⁹ **Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake [because of me] will find it.**

verses 37-39 compare

Luke 14:26-27

verse 39 compare Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35

Luke 9:24 and 17:33

⁴⁰ ‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

⁴¹ *Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet* [because he or she is a prophet] *will receive a prophet’s reward;*

and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person [because he or she is a righteous person] *will receive the reward of the righteous;*

⁴² **and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple** [because he or she is a disciple] **– truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.’**

verse 40 compare
Mark 9:37,
Luke 9:48 and 10:16
verse 42 compare Mark 9:41

¹ *Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities.*

This other ‘self’ is the one that is focused on itself. It is the ‘self’ that is afraid to let go. It is the ‘self’ that will not give itself away in love, or ‘waste’ itself in giving life to another. It is like a seed that will not submit itself to the earth, that will not break open and ‘lose’ itself, so that life might burst from it. It is the heart that refuses to dare to love, lest it be hurt.

That surface self, that small, fearful, insecure self, must learn to trust itself to Christ, and to follow him. If, because of him, and because they have shared his mission of proclaiming the good news, Jesus’ disciples have to forfeit their lives, he assures them that they, like him, will have their real life preserved for them by God.

Jesus’ missionary discourse concludes with words addressed to those who welcome his missionaries. The disciples whom he is sending out as his apostles, are called ‘prophets’, because they are speaking his word. They are called ‘righteous’ persons, because they are striving to promote the kingdom of God and his righteousness (6:33). They are called ‘little ones’, for they are ‘poor in spirit’ (5:3).

Jesus assures all who receive his apostles that in welcoming them, they are welcoming him, and in welcoming him they are welcoming his Father. They will receive their reward: the bliss of communion with God already promised (5:12).

Conclusion

As noted earlier (see commentary on 10:1-5a), the focus has been on the twelve as ‘disciples’ rather than on the mission which they are to carry out as Jesus’ apostles. That must await Jesus’ death and resurrection (see 28:16-10). With the conclusion of the second discourse, Matthew concentrates again on Jesus, who goes on to teach and to proclaim the good news.