



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Exploring Matthew: Greater than peace?

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20 July 2014

Matthew 10:34-42

34 "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. **35** For I have come to turn " 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law **36** your enemies will be the members of your own household.' **37** "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves a son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. **38** Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. **39** Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. **40** "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. **41** Whoever welcomes someone known to be a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes someone known to be righteous will receive a righteous person's reward. **42** And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is known to be my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly be rewarded."

This evening I begin a short winter series of four addresses which dip into a mid-section of Matthew's Gospel. Each of the four addresses will stand on their own, but will build on each other as we gain clarity about the writer and style of what has been called 'a great missionary gospel'.

The Gospel of Matthew features in most church lectionaries across the world at this time and there are some distinctive features that are worth referring to by way of introduction.

It is generally accepted that Mark was the first gospel and precursor of Matthew and Luke. In fact if we examine Matthew and Luke, we see a great deal of material that is found initially in Mark. I offer you five recurring themes in Matthew which cannot be ignored, if we are to understand his message.

Ernest Renan, the remarkable but often criticised French thinker, called Matthew the most important book ever written. It is, of course, a sweeping statement, difficult to prove, but it does invite us to consider the persistent influence of this opening gospel of the New Testament.

- **Jesus is clearly shown as the Messiah**

Matthew shows us that Jesus is the Messiah foretold in the Old Testament. There are copious quotes from the Old Testament itself and, from the outset, we have a genealogy that underscores the link to the Old Testament. However, we must not jump to the conclusion that Matthew portrays Jesus as unconcerned about Gentiles. It is worthy of note that Matthew is the gospel writer who brings us the words of the Great Commission as the climax of his writing, emphasising that the gospel is for all the world.

- **Jesus is portrayed as a great teacher**

If Mark's Gospel gives us insight into what Jesus did, then Matthew offers us a carefully-constructed understanding of what Jesus taught. In Matthew we have the Sermon on the Mount (5-7) and five more chapters of Jesus' parables and teaching. Most Matthean scholars refer to the Jewish background and how Jesus is seen as a new Moses leading his people into the Promised Land, and the Beatitudes are a type of counterpart to the Ten Commandments of Moses.

- **Matthew is concerned about 'end times'**

More than any other gospel, Matthew refers to those great themes that we are often reluctant to talk about, namely the judgement, the final coming of Christ and the like. Matthew alone records the parables of the talents, the wise and foolish maidens and the sheep and goats, all gathered together in Chapter 25.

- **Matthew's Gospel is a gospel for the church**

We come to this conclusion on the evidence that it is only Matthew's Gospel that even contains the word 'church' (ekklesia). In Matthew we have Peter's confession as the foundation of the church (16:13-23); and Matthew contains instructions on settling disputes in the church (18:17).

- **Matthew's Gospel is about the kingdom of God**

From the outset and throughout the gospel, Jesus is 'painted royal purple', as one writer put it. In Matthew magi come to visit him, and it closes with Jesus receiving all authority from the Father. Everything confirms his kingly authority and his people are given a kingdom to embrace.

These themes are like threads which run throughout the gospel and are never very far from the surface. We see them emerge and re-emerge as we journey through Matthew.

Rarely would we be as astonished by a verse as we are by the text that I share with you this evening:

"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword." (10:34)

Before we close our Bibles because we don't know how to handle such a difficult text, or seek to explain it away, let me say that I understand the struggle people have with this verse. After all, didn't Isaiah call Jesus the Prince of Peace? Didn't the Hebrew prophets foretell that Jesus would usher in an era and reign of peace?

Jesus uses strong and purposely exaggerated language on a number of occasions. We would say he employs hyperbole to make a powerful spiritual point.

There is something greater than peace—and that is truth. The implications of truth are not only that he sets us free (John 8:32 and 36) but it also brings division as some accept his claim and others don't. This was true when the gospel was first presented and is certainly true today.

It is not the intention of Jesus to bring division; but it is a by-product of loyalty to Christ and holding to the truth. In this passage, we read that the disciples must be willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel (38-39).

Craig S Keener draws our attention to this matter: “The demands of the kingdom are so offensive to a world already convinced of its rightness that they provoke the world’s hostility.”

David Hill points to the fact that “losing one’s life could mean to die a violent death”. We must be careful not to soften the implications of losing our life for Christ ... as though such imagery is merely a matter of language. Floyd Filson called it “an active costly loyalty to Jesus”.

In verses 40-42, we have the conclusion of a longer discourse around the theme of travelling missionaries. This begins earlier in the chapter and contains some sharpness as it focuses on Jesus’ strong instructions to his disciples regarding what they should be willing to do without, if they are to follow him.

These words have a resonance with the way John wrote his gospel. This may well be because it was an idea that was already very familiar in Judaism—that a person’s emissary or agent was like the person themselves. So there is a link between the rejection of the disciples and the rejection of Jesus.

Let us draw some help from this passage with regard to our own lives and particularly in relation to our witness. I want to suggest three conclusions that I have reached which, in turn, may be positive for you:

WHEN HOLDING TRUE TO THE GOSPEL, WE MUST NOT BE SURPRISED IF WE ARE REJECTED BY SOME

This aspect is one that has proven to be the case in so many people’s experience. I can testify that I have seen it in every setting of ministry in just short of 35 years. We must keep in mind:

- It is not something we would want to encourage
- Our rejection must not be because of ourselves, but because of the truth of Christ
- God’s anointed Son would be rejected by many

The promise of verse 39 is that those who choose to remain faithful to the Lord, whatever the cost, will enter into the life of the age to come. These words to the disciples can certainly be applied to their experience, but they extend into the lives of all those who follow in the way of Christian discipleship.

In his studies on New Testament mission, Michael Green makes much of the fact that the disciples were not sent out on their own. They were delivered an incentive to go out as a group. He refers to the fact that this is encouraging and also that gifts that were never dreamed of emerge in such an enterprise.

He writes of “mutual support leading one into a new dimension of fellowship”. Burnout and leadership exhaustion more often occur in people and in the context of “solo ministry and solo leadership”. To return to Green, “Jesus never envisaged such a thing. Leadership in the New Testament is always plural.”

Living out our mission is the way that helps us to:

- Stand firm when the going gets tough
- Encourage each other when we could easily give up

- Discern opportunities for the common good.

When we are together, we can deal with the reality of rejection far better. I have found that to be enormously beneficial in difficult times arising because of the gospel.

Matthew 13 is a chapter that we shall look at in greater depth in the coming weeks. It contains some of the most wonderful teaching in the ministry of Jesus. At the conclusion of that chapter of parables, we discover:

- Jesus went to his “own home town”
- This is deliberately ambivalent ... his home town could be either Nazareth or his own people, the Jews
- The theme of rejection is clear

We read, “But Jesus said to them, ‘Only in their own towns and in their own homes are prophets without honour.’ And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.” (13:57-58)

We cannot hear those words without making a thoughtful link to the Prologue of St John’s Gospel, “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.” (John 1:11)

The rejection of Jesus at Nazareth is not only a powerful message about him, but also for all of us who seek to serve him. When Jesus went to the synagogue and taught, he went to a place that one might expect of someone who had something significant to say.

- He engaged the leaders of the community
- They were confronted by his wisdom
- They took offence at One they recalled as a boy
- The Messiah had come but they did not recognise him.

The Jewish and Christian tradition of hospitality is in stark contrast to much modern thought. We live in a culture that has placed great emphasis upon our homes being comfortable and inviting, but the surge in ‘home improvement’ has done more for the bottom line of Freedom and Ikea than it has for actual hospitality. How many homes have a splendid guest room that is never used? The way we talk about the outsider and the interloper says much about us.

As Christians, we are called to embrace a much wider perception of welcome than the selective hospitality that we often practise. If we do, we must not be surprised if we receive a similar rejection to the one our Lord experienced.

WE MUST BE WILLING TO BE IDENTIFIED WITH JESUS CHRIST AT ALL TIMES

We are not called to simply ‘play it safe’. The disciples must be willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel; it is love that is greater than peace and will sustain those who follow him.

- We may lose the life we have, but we must hold firm to the promises of Christ
- We never seek a reward, but we will receive one as we remain true to him
- We know our discipleship is fundamentally about Jesus Christ, not ourselves.

Holding to such a way will bring us moments of decision when we are tested and, at those times, we must remain true to what we have found in Jesus Christ our Saviour.

When a person follows Jesus Christ, they relinquish their own life, out of love of God, and at that moment become a representative of Jesus Christ himself.

I understand the struggle that many have with what are some of the hardest words in the New Testament:

“... a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—
your enemies will be the members of your own household.”
(Matthew 10:35)

I thought it might be helpful to say a number of things about this particular verse, found in both Matthew and Luke, but in Matthew it is rounded off with a quote from the Old Testament book of Micah.

F F Bruce, the wonderful New Testament scholar, offered a collection of The Hard Sayings of Jesus. He drew our attention to the fact that:

- Jesus did not advocate conflict
- When Jesus spoke of tension and conflict within a family, he probably spoke from personal experience
- There are indications that members of his own family initially had no sympathy with his ministry—“Even his brothers did not believe in him” (John 7:5)
- We must make a distinction between the effect of his coming and the purpose of his coming

To quote Bruce, “In these words, then, Jesus was warning his followers that their allegiance to him might cause conflict at home, and even expulsion from the family circle. It was well that they should be forewarned, and then they could not say, ‘We never expected that we should have to pay this price for following him!’”

Myron Augsburger reminds us that when people are confronted by Christ, life’s basic issues are at stake. He refers to us as “playing for keeps” and goes on to suggest “People shove God out of their lives because they have their other gods, because He interferes with what they want, yet ultimately it is because the way of Christ is too demanding.”

In this sense, we can say he divides between religion and relationship, transforming the former by the latter; between secular and sacred, sanctifying by the latter; and between the passing and the eternal, enlarging one by the other. Such is the power of the Word of God which is a sword that cuts through so much of our emptiness and frivolous attempt at following him today.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD USHERS IN A NEW WAY OF LIVING

Throughout the gospels, it becomes abundantly clear that the Christian life brings us to a point of decision. In fact, we might more easily say that as we continue in the Christian way, we are constantly met by choices that the way of Jesus Christ offers us all.

In sending out the disciples, Jesus was teaching that receiving or rejecting them and their message was to receive or reject the One who sent them (v.40).

There is a very interesting and endearing illustration that we find in the epistles of Paul, which relates to the ambassadorial aspect of our discipleship.

To receive an ambassador of a country is to receive the leader of that country. The roles and actions of some ambassadors today have caused our use of this language to become more problematical. One writer cynically suggested, "An ambassador is an honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country."

The ambassador analogy was not chosen because it somehow related to the Apostle's authority, but because it was a reality. Kent Hughes wrote, "God really did make his appeal through him."

To welcome the representative is to honour the country or the leader that he or she represents. Paul reminds us that we are ambassadors for Christ and God makes his appeal through us. "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us." (2 Corinthians 5:20)

These verses in Matthew conclude an extended discourse on discipleship and mission. It is interesting how the emphasis shifts from the trials of those sent out (10:16-39) to the responsibilities of those who host them.

There is one more interesting feature of the conclusion to this passage, as Matthew reminds us that Jesus spoke about "a cup of cold water". Here is a very strong word and deed aspect in the passage. It reminds us at Wesley Mission that what we do for others, we do for Jesus Christ.

A cup of cold water is about all that the poorest person could offer, but it may be the most precious gift of all.

Now, that is something greater than earthly peace.