

Snapshots from the Life of Christ as revealed by St Matthew

Faith Foundations from the Gospel

Who exactly is this for?

This brief course is intended for those who:
may not have a lot of time for study at present
but who want study that is solidly based
upon which further study can be built when possible

So we hope to convey:

- An outline of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ based mostly on Matthew's Gospel
- A sound method of interpreting and applying the teaching of the Gospels to our own situation

Method

The method used is basically the same as that used in *ICES* modules:

A text with which the student interacts:
responds to questions and receives feedback
and discusses with a peer group (with leader)

Unlike a regular *ICES* module

It *does not require* homework: you work through each section together
and it *does* provide colour pictures from the world of art
to stimulate further creative thinking and reflection

We also include:

- A quiz – which will indicate to you how much you have learnt - and possibly reveal some gaps?
- Suggested reading with explanatory notes and questions for discussion.

Throughout this process we'll lay emphasis on both imaginative creativity and critical discernment. So good luck to all of us, right?

Contents


It offers:

- Short introductory study (leaving time for introductions, explanation, etc.)
- Seven main studies

It aims to give general coverage of the main themes and subject areas in Matthew, plus more detailed study of selected passages and topics.

Our philosophy is that you will learn best when you are taking control of your own learning; thinking through your own opinions and convictions; putting your own thoughts into words and bouncing them off each other.

So we do offer (but we *only* offer) *some* feedback on *some* of the questions we suggest. (This is a handy policy because we often don't know what the answer should

be.) Feedback is indicated by a raven icon . Some of you may recognize it from the cover of the ICES module *Historical Books of the Old Testament* which depicts Elijah receiving food from a raven. No pun was intended – honest – but it seems appropriate anyway.

This is the first edition of the Course. We are offering it

FREE OF CHARGE ONLINE

Why? Because ICES only exists to serve the Church and we believe that this is a good way of getting into study mode.

We can send you a *hard copy* of the course for **£4-50 each plus p&p**.

This would be an A5 display folder including the pictures in full colour.

Each student will need their own copy (unless they are extremely friendly).

Note that, due to copyright regulations, the pictures cannot be sent electronically but the links (URLs) are given so that you can obtain them from the internet. Other links are also possible – for those who like to experiment.

Plan of the Course

Week	Topic/Title	Passages for study	Picture
Short Introduction	Service and Brief Introduction to the course	Mt 6:1-6, 16-21 [Joel 2:1f., 12-17 Isa 58:1-12 Psalm 51:1-18 2 Cor 5:20b – 6:10]	Andrea Mantegna, <i>The Agony in the Garden</i> .
1	The birth of Jesus	Mt 1:18-25	Pieter Bruegel, <i>The Adoration of the Kings</i>
2	Jesus's Public Ministry begins: Baptism and Temptation	Mt 4:1-11 Mt 3:1-17	Stanley Spencer, <i>Driven by the Spirit into the wilderness</i>
3	The Kingdom of God is here: Healings, exorcisms, and other signs	Mt 15:21-28 Mark 7:24-30	Peter Bril (Brill), <i>Christ casting out devils</i>
4	The nature of the Kingdom of God: Parables	Mt 13:(1-23), 24-57?	Peter von Cornelius, <i>The Wise and Foolish Virgins</i>
5	Journey to Jerusalem	Mt 21:1-11	El Greco, <i>Christ driving Traders from the Temple</i>
6	From Last Supper to the Promise of the Resurrection	Mt 26:26-29 1 Cor 11:23-25	Annibale Carracci, <i>The Dead Christ Mourned (The Three Maries)</i>
7		Mt 28:1-10, 16-20	Salvador Dali, <i>Christ of St John of the Cross</i>

Session 1: Introductory

This introductory study is shorter than those that follow. It gives a chance to introduce people to one another (if necessary – and it is rare to have everyone in a group with nothing to learn about the others) and to introduce the study so that group members know what will be involved.

If used in Lent this could be used on Ash Wednesday. Some churches, however, will have an Ash Wednesday Service and there will be little or no time for a group meeting. It should be possible to start from Session 2 without losing the thread. Even if you are unable to meet together this week you may be able to find time to read through the material on your own some time.

Note for those using the course during Lent: we go from Ash Wednesday to the Sunday after Easter.

Days in Lent = 46; fast days = 40, i.e. the six Sundays are not fast days.

We offer you for this session:

- a quiz (do one or two out of three);
- notes on selected passages from the Bible plus some questions for reflection;
- a picture together with some notes and some reflective questions.

DIY Quiz: How much do you know already?

Try just one or two of the following quizzes. The first one is the easiest, we think.

Quiz A

Just tick the right box – or *perhaps boxes* - in each case.

1. The four Gospels are, in the order in which they occur in the Bible:
 - a. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
 - b. Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul
 - c. Mark, Matthew, Luke and John
 - d. Matthew, Luke, John and Mark
2. The word 'Gospel' means:
 - a. simply 'message'
 - b. 'God-spell', i.e. something God spells out for us
 - c. good news
 - d. warning

3. The saying, 'Blessed are the peacemakers' occurs in:
 - a. Psalm 23
 - b. The Sermon on the Mount
 - c. 'The Thoughts of Chairman Mao'
 - d. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians (ch. 13)
4. The leader responsible for the death of babies in Bethlehem was:
 - a. The Queen of Sheba
 - b. Pontius Pilate
 - c. Ananias
 - d. King Herod
5. What is the relation between 'Christ' and 'Messiah'?
 - a. They both mean 'anointed' or 'anointed one'.
 - b. 'Christ' is a personal name but 'Messiah' is a title.
 - c. 'Christ' is the Greek for 'Messiah' (which is a Hebrew term).
 - d. 'Christ' was the surname of Joseph and Mary.

The answers are given below, after Quiz B.

Churchgoers have all heard readings from the Bible, especially the Gospels, but how easy is it to tell whether a particular passage comes from Matthew, Mark, Luke, John – or any combination of all four (as they used to say on the radio programme, *Animal, Vegetable and Mineral*)? So here is another type of quiz.

In which Gospels do the following occur?

Quiz B

Answers: 'John' or 'one or more of the others' or 'both'. Underline or **highlight** the answer(s) you think are right.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------|
| a. Turning water into wine | JOHN / OTHER GOSPEL(S) |
| b. Sermon on the Mount | JOHN / OTHER GOSPEL(S) |
| c. 'God so loved the world...' | JOHN / OTHER GOSPEL(S) |
| d. The baptism of Jesus | JOHN / OTHER GOSPEL(S) |
| e. Feeding the five thousand | JOHN / OTHER GOSPEL(S) |
| f. The transfiguration | JOHN / OTHER GOSPEL(S) |
| g. 'In the beginning was the Word...' | JOHN / OTHER GOSPEL(S) |
| h. The crucifixion | JOHN / OTHER GOSPEL(S) |

Would you like the answers to these quizzes before continuing? Here they are:

Quiz A: The answers are 1-a; 2-c; 3-b; 4-d; 5-a and c.

Quiz B: *John:* a, c, g. *Other(s):* b, d, f. *Both:* e, h. I wonder if there were any surprises – or perhaps it was a total surprise. You may like to talk about it when you meet (without embarrassing yourself or others – naturally).

If you have the time and energy to try another one, here it is.

Quiz C

Answers are ‘Matthew’ and/or ‘Mark’ and/or ‘Luke’: so underline or highlight the gospel in which these occur. (Answers are at the end of today’s session.)

- | | |
|---|-----------------------|
| 1. The baptism of Jesus | Matthew / Mark / Luke |
| 2. The visit of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem | Matthew / Mark / Luke |
| 3. Shepherds visit the infant Jesus | Matthew / Mark / Luke |
| 4. The temptation of Jesus | Matthew / Mark / Luke |
| 5. The Sermon on the Mount | Matthew / Mark / Luke |
| 6. The transfiguration | Matthew / Mark / Luke |
| 7. ‘Upon this rock I will build my Church’ | Matthew / Mark / Luke |
| 8. Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem | Matthew / Mark / Luke |
| 9. ‘Father forgive them for they know not what they do’ | Matthew / Mark / Luke |
| 10. The ascension of Jesus into heaven | Matthew / Mark / Luke |

Readings and Notes: Suggested plan

1. Read through one of the passages below. They are the set readings for Ash Wednesday in many churches and introduce us to the idea of fasting as found in the Bible.
2. Consider the question(s) asked in twos or threes. You may not need to do this if the group is very small.
3. Pool your ideas in the group as a whole.
4. Repeat this for one or more of the other readings. Tackle at least one Old Testament and one New Testament passage.
5. Consider the picture given below: Mantegna, *The Agony in the Garden*. Reflect on it and share your thoughts together.
6. Informal worship and prayer.

The Readings, Notes and Questions

Select the passages that you would like to focus on

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Joel prophesied at the time of a huge disaster: locusts had invaded the land and consumed vast amounts of the people's crops. The prophet interprets the meaning of this event: it is a judgment from God and it is a reminder and warning of a greater judgment to come. Both the present and the future judgments are referred to as 'the Day of Yahweh' or 'the Day of the Lord'. Joel calls the leaders to gather the people together to cry out to the Lord to have mercy (2:12-17) and the book goes on to report that the Lord did (2:18f.). There follows a prophecy of blessing which leads into the promise of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (2:28-32), which Peter said was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

Question:

What is the value of *public* fasting and prayer for God's deliverance? In what ways might we learn from this and put it into practice today?

Isa 58:1-12

Isa 58 is a challenging chapter to those who make a show of fasting but do not take care to live according to God's laws. The particular divine requirements emphasized here are concerned with showing compassion for those who are poor and vulnerable (vv. 6f., 9b-10).

Question:

What is actually wrong with this fasting? Does this reflect on the value of all kinds of fasting?

Psalms 51:1-19

This is the most obviously penitential Psalm in whole of the Psalms. The title relates it to David's sin with Bathsheba and Nathan's prophecy accusing him of adultery and murder (2 Sam 12). Millions of Jews and Christians down the ages have found these words a powerful vehicle for expressing their own sinfulness and repentance.

Question:

Lent is traditionally a time for repentance. Who are the people who need to repent today? How relevant is it for us – as (presumably) people of faith and good character? Are our standards in line with those of Jesus?

2 Cor 5:20b – 6:10

Paul speaks of the amazing truth that the sinless Christ was 'made sin' for our sake. So we may be 'in him' (united with him; one with Christ) and thus a 'new creation' (5:17) and 'the righteousness of God'. Knowing this in our experience we are able to follow the example of Paul himself, and be ambassadors for Christ, bringers of reconciliation.

Questions:

How evident is it that ‘born again’ Christians are ‘a new creation’? Do you agree that we don’t do nearly as well as we ought to? What signs are there that Christians are active in bringing reconciliation: privately and corporately?

Mt 6:1-6, 16-21

A well-known passage from the Sermon on the Mount which has resonances with Isa 58. Prayer, almsgiving and fasting are to be done quietly, and without public display. Notice that v. 16 says, ‘whenever you fast’ and not ‘if ever you fast’. Jesus seems to expect his followers to fast sometimes.

Questions:

What are the dangers of ‘public’ fasting, prayer and almsgiving? Does it matter if you drop hints that you are fasting? What is the positive value today of this discipline and how might we make sure we fast, pray and give in a way that ‘glorifies our Father in heaven’?

Overall Question:

Jesus prepared himself for his public ministry by a prolonged period of fasting and prayer. To what extent can we and should we follow his example?

Picture of the Week:

Andrea Mantegna, *The Agony in the Garden*

<http://www.bridgemanartondemand.com/index.cfm?event=catalogue.qsearch&newSearch=1&searchstring=Andrea+Mantegna%2C+The+Agony+in+the+Garden&colour=>

Note that it is the picture, c. 1460, not the altarpiece that is meant.

From a chronological point of view this picture belongs near the end of Jesus’ life. However, it is a powerful portrayal of the ordeal that Jesus would face, the enormous cost that Jesus would pay in order to secure our salvation.

You may find it more helpful to look at the picture for yourself *before* referring to the notes below.

Most of the notes on the paintings have been provided by either Revd Dr Joan Crossley or Dr Alan Storkey. For this week we have notes from both of them and offer them to you separately.

[*Alan Storkey* writes] Mantegna was one of the forming artists of the Renaissance. He drew on classical sources, worked with perspective, and reinterpreted biblical scenes in new and dramatic ways. First, he was an artist of drawing and line, and often his colour was quite muted.

This picture is a powerful study. The mountains exaggerate the hills of Florence and are even more dramatic than the Dolomites, but above all this picture is a conception.

Jerusalem looks like a Roman city, but the hills swirl down, interlocking and conveying some of the cosmic drama of the occasion. The disciples have gone to sleep. Jesus is comforted by angels as he prays facing the cross, held by the angel, and the crowds led by the traitorous Judas come to arrest Jesus. A fallen beam mimics the cross on the ground, and the bird waits for the death that even he can feel coming. Even the steps on the left of the painting signify the climb to this point of sacrifice.

It is possible that the territory where Christ is, where people can meet with God, is cut off from everywhere else by the stream which can only be visually bridged at the point where the cross-like beam is found.

[From a course presented by Dr *Joan Crossley* (used with permission)]: Conveying inward states of mind is a real challenge for an artist. How can you depict a prayer, or a conversation with God, or even a vision? Mantegna has come up with a device for showing that Jesus knew what his destiny was to be. Five rather stern angels are shown floating on a cloud, bearing the instruments of the Crucifixion, the Cross, the spear, the nails etc.

The artist hasn't chosen a real looking landscape but a psychological one which reflects Jesus' mind. The Lord was at a crucial moment when he could have rejected his destiny as our Saviour and saved himself. Instead he, Jesus, chose the hard and rocky path to death and suffering. His inward sense of isolation is portrayed in the physical loneliness of his figure as he [?fearlessly] confronts the Cross.

This is Jesus at his most fully human. He did not want to suffer. He was not some mad masochist who welcomed torture and suffering. Like us, Jesus could experience pain, and like us, he shrank from it. In his private prayer, he asked God that his death might not be necessary, but submitted himself to whatever God willed.

It is very comforting to know that, through Jesus, God really knows about human suffering. Our view of human suffering is that, although life can be hard, though there is disease suffering and loss, God enters into these dark places with us.

The gospel reading gives us Jesus' words when he returned and found his friends sleeping, oblivious to the internal struggle that he had been confronting. 'Watch and pray that you might not enter into temptation, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak'. As a last message it is a powerful one: we know what we should do, and what God expects, but we fall so far short of God's hopes for us.

Individual Exercise.

Imagine that you are one of the disciples in the barren Mount of Olives, with Jesus. Imagine that Jesus has drawn away to pray and that you are dozing. As he comes back, you awake. What do you most fear that he will say to you? Or to put it another way, what are you most ashamed of in yourself: a sharp tongue? a judgemental nature? Are you selfish? Thoughtless? Lazy? What would Jesus say that you should most guard against in yourself? Jesus was not a miserable killjoy, but he does want you to draw closer to him. Sins hold us back from God. Why not own to yourself and Jesus what is

holding you back from him? Know that Jesus is on his way to meet you, but can't properly embrace you until you repent and hold out your arms to him.

Questions for Group discussion:

1. What do you imagine to have been Jesus' thoughts when he saw that his friends had been sleeping?
2. How do you think God feels about human failure? Do you think that there might be a difference in the way God contemplates individual and collective weaknesses?



Answers to Quiz C:

All: nos 1, 4 (though Mark is very brief), 6, 8;

Mt + Lk: 2 (but Mt only by implication);

Matthew only: 5 and 7;

Luke only: 3, 9, 10.

Session 2: The Birth and Childhood of Jesus

Some groups will have studied the introductory material and some won't. If you haven't, it would probably be useful to look back at this some time, but we can start from here quite well. We shall be looking at the Life of Christ as told mostly by St Matthew and attempting to do four things:

- grasp the overall plan of Matthew's Gospel;
- study a few particular passages in more depth;
- discern those things that Matthew particularly wants to emphasize; and
- improve our ability to apply passages from the Bible to our own situation.

Throughout this mini-course you will find questions asked and space to write down an answer. This is intended for you to make notes *for your own benefit* and so it is up to you whether you write anything or not. Hopefully, however, it will be useful to be able to look back at some point and recall some of the ideas that you had.

So we do recommend that, when you come to a question or a suggestion about jotting down your own thoughts, you take a moment in the group to do this before you compare and discuss your ideas.

Suggestions concerning possible answers – sometimes even 'the correct answers' -

are given *at the end of the numbered sections* under the heading  **Feedback**.

So go on to the first numbered section, which we shall refer to as 'Frame 1' – as *ICES* students will already know.

1. What do we know about the birth and childhood of Jesus?

The Gospels are very different in what they tell us about the early life of Jesus. I wonder if you can match the following descriptions to the Gospels? Write in 'Mt' and/or 'Mk' and/or 'Lk' and/or 'Jn'.

You might like to do this as a group exercise in which each person has the Bible open at the beginning of one of the Gospels. Make sure each of the Gospels is covered by at least one group member.

_____ Says nothing about the circumstances of the birth but concentrates on the eternal Word becoming flesh. It is read as the climax to many Christmas services.

_____ After a very brief introduction the narrative goes straight into the account of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist.

_____ Gives us a genealogy from Abraham to Jesus the Messiah (Jesus Christ); the virgin birth linked to Isa 7:14; the visit of the 'wise

men' (magi or kings?) and the slaughter of children by Herod; Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt.

Annunciation and birth of John the Baptist; annunciation and birth of Jesus in Bethlehem in a stable (or place where there was a manger); visit of the shepherds; prophecies of Simeon and Anna in the temple; Jesus as a boy gets involved in discussions with teachers in the temple.

2. There are at least two ways of developing our study from this point.

The piecing together method. We could treat the four gospel writers as witnesses and try to harmonize their accounts with each other, using the different pieces of information to build up our own *more complete account of what actually happened*. This is the sort of thing that is done in law courts and it has a long and (mostly) respectable history in the Christian Church.

The listening to individual witnesses method. We could concentrate on listening carefully to one of the gospel writers to see if we can understand his own conception of who Jesus was and why he was significant.

I wonder if one of these appeals to you more than the other. What do you feel about either or both? Share your immediate thoughts with one or two neighbours and/or jot down your thoughts here and be prepared to discuss them with the whole group.

3. I hope you will be pleased – or at least not too disappointed - to learn that we are going to concentrate *primarily* on the second approach but we *will* look from time to time at what parallel passages in the other Gospels have to say.

The positive reasons for this choice include the following:

We will get to know one Gospel more thoroughly and this might help us in finding our way round the Gospels generally. For example if we want to find 'that passage about', say, 'Woe to you scribes and Pharisees' we might know whether to look in Mt or to avoid doing so. Do you happen to know where this passage is? _____

4. More importantly we should be able to discern the particular emphases of the Gospel of Matthew. This should be made easier when we compare the way that

Matthew writes up a particular incident or conversation with the way that Mark or Luke does it.

Although we shall concentrate on Matthew there are at least two good reasons for having a look at other Gospels alongside it. One relates to ‘Approach 1’ above and one relates to what I have mentioned immediately above. Perhaps you can put these two reasons in your own words.

Comparison is helpful because _____

5. So let’s have a look at the start of Jesus’s earthly life. You probably know that the ninth lesson at the service of lessons and carols is almost always John 1:1-14: ‘St John reveals the mystery of the incarnation’. This begins with the eternal existence of Jesus the Word of God but says nothing about the physical circumstances of his birth.

St Mark says nothing about either: ‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ (i.e. Jesus Messiah), the Son of God:…’ The exact nature of the sonship is left open.

Matthew and Luke have different details as follows:

Matthew	Luke
Genealogy from Abraham to Jesus (different from Luke)	Promise of John the Baptist’s birth Promise of Jesus’ birth Mary visits Elizabeth Birth of John the Baptist
Jesus is born to a virgin as in Isa 7:14	Birth of Jesus Visit of the shepherds
Visit of the magi (wise men? kings?) at Bethlehem (as Micah 5:2)	Circumcision of Jesus: Prophecies of Simeon and Anna
Flight into Egypt: Herod’s slaughter of children Weeping (as Jer 31:15)	Jesus, aged 12, in the temple Genealogy from Jesus back to Adam (different from Matthew)

Can you discern (or guess) anything from this table alone about Matthew’s special interests?

6. Now read Mt 1:18-25. We suggest you read it aloud and try and get a clear idea of what is being described.

Now see if you can imagine what it might have been like to be one of the characters, either Mary or Joseph.

Share your immediate ideas with others in the group - possibly just in twos or threes then have a look at the notes and questions in the next frame.

7. The facts as presented by Matthew seem to be clear. Here is an outline with some *questions*.

- Mary got betrothed to Joseph. It was then discovered that she was pregnant.
- Joseph, knew that the baby wasn't his. *How did he feel about this?*
- Mary knew that it wasn't due to any other man either. *How did Mary feel? What does Luke (1:26-38) tell us that might give us the answer – or at least a clue?*
- Joseph had a dream in which the angel of the Lord told him the child was 'conceived by the Holy Spirit'. *How is it that Luke only mentions Mary's angelic visit and Matthew only mentions Joseph's? Answer: we don't know – but could it give us a clue about Matthew's and Luke's special interests?*
- Both Mary and Joseph now know why she is pregnant and continue as a happily betrothed couple. *But what did the neighbours think? Did they think some premature hanky-panky had gone on? (Note the possible allusion in Jn 8:41 to rumours that Jesus was born illegitimately.) What did Joseph and Mary say to anyone?*

If you can persuade two or more people to take on the character of a person in the narrative and describe to the rest of the group how they experienced these events, I'm sure you'll find it illuminating. There always seems to be resistance to this but it's not as difficult as you might think. Jot down any insights or ideas that come from this exercise.

8. Here are some notes on questions that people sometimes ask. What exactly is meant by 'betrothed'? And why does it say that Joseph resolved to *divorce* her? Is it the same as our 'engaged' or 'married'? Not quite: it was more binding than being engaged: even more binding than in the days when someone could be accused of 'breach of promise' (only officially ended in 1970!). Someone betrothed could be divorced or widowed or punished for adultery. But the marriage usually took place a year after the betrothal. At this

point the woman passed from being under her father's power to that of her husband (J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, SCM, 1969, pp. 367f.).

Why does Matthew quote Isa 7:14, '...you shall call his name Emmanuel' and then report that they called his name 'Jesus'? We may assume (I hope) that Matthew is not a twit and knows what he is doing. Presumably, therefore, 'Emmanuel' is not thought of in the same way as 'Jesus' but rather as a name which expresses something highly significant about him. Possibly compare Jer 20:3, where Jeremiah gives Pashhur the priest a new name: 'Terror-all-round' (which was almost certainly not used by Pashhur or his friends – though possibly by those who looked back on his achievements.)

How can some people say that Mary remained a virgin all her life when v. 25 only says that Joseph 'knew her not until she had borne a son'? The usual Roman Catholic explanation is that it simply means there was no sexual intercourse before Jesus was born: this confirms that Joseph was not the father of Jesus but implies nothing about what happened or did not happen afterwards.

Any further thoughts or questions? _____

9. Lastly, ask yourself what you might draw from this that is relevant to your own life. The method we suggest is as follows:

1. Get as clear a picture as you can of the narrative and what it is describing in its own terms. This is what we have been trying to do. Sometimes this is described as 'distancing yourself from the text', in other words not letting your own applications influence how you picture the scene. For example, betrothal and ancient customs and attitudes are likely to have been quite different from ours. Perhaps we might say, 'enter the world of the text (and leave your own world behind) – as far as possible'. To do this you'll have to question the text – and we've been doing that as well.
2. Think about your own situation, considering aspects suggested by the text. For example, perhaps the following words and concepts might stimulate ideas: obedience, misunderstanding, revealing confidences, not being believed, supernatural intervention, special tasks, etc., etc., etc. At this point don't try and draw conclusions for action (though it may be difficult to avoid doing so!)
3. Bring together the Bible and your own situation. Consider the similarities and the differences. Remember that God is the same now as then. You are very different from Joseph and Mary but there are also similarities. To what extent should you be/act/respond like one or other?

So have a go at going through these two additional steps. See what comes out of it as you discuss together.

Pray together. You can do this in different ways:

Silently

Individuals praying extempore

Using set prayers prepared beforehand or read from a book of prayers

Simply mentioning subjects, names, topics and praying as above

Suggested Prayers and other items for Worship

Readings from Luke 2:

33 And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed - and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

48 When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' 49 He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' 50 But they did not understand what he said to them. 51 Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

Prayer

Teach us, O God, so to use these times of study and sharing [or this season of Lent] that we may be drawn closer to our Lord,

and in fellowship with him may learn to hate sin,

to overcome temptation,

and to grow in holiness,

that our lives may be strengthened for your service

and used for your glory.

We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

[Frank Colquhoun]

For Further Reflection:

How helpful is it to issue invitations such as: 'Let us go to Bethlehem to worship the Christ Child'?

Consider this: you throw a party for a close friend, Kevin. Then you get out the photo album with pictures of Kevin as a baby and you drool over them. You ignore the real Kevin who's in the room with you. Do we ever do that at Christmas time?

One carol which some might know is, ‘O sleep thou heaven-born treasure’ by Karl Leuner. It presents Jesus as a baby but looks forward to the suffering ahead, even as we do. The arrangement by Charles Macpherson (*Carols for Choirs 2*, Oxford, 1970) is particularly poignant.

Some may be able to learn and sing the following carol by Timothy Dudley-Smith from *Carol Praise* (Marshall Pickering, 1987). The tune given here is by Norman Warren, who has composed a great deal of attractive music. If you would prefer a well-known tune you need to find one with an 8.8.8.7 metre.

[Note that the carol is also in *Beneath a Travelling Star*, Canterbury Press, 2001, along with 29 other contemporary carol and hymn for Christmas by Timothy Dudley-Smith. The tune ‘Ewhurst’ is used in that book. Highly recommended.]

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[Carol omitted due to copyright restrictions]

Picture of the Week

We recommend that you look at the picture for yourself first of all *before* referring to the notes. You then have more chance of seeing things that the experts may have missed, and, in any case, what they have said will keep until you have done your own reflecting.

From the group point of view it is probably good to spend time separately looking and reflecting and then compare notes together. However, this whole course is offered as something for you to use and adapt in the way that seems more useful.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Adoration of the Kings*

<http://www.bridgemanartondemand.com/index.cfm?event=catalogue.qsearch&newSearch=1&searchstring=Pieter+Bruegel+the+Elder%2C+The+Adoration+of+the+Kings&colour=>

He is referred to as Pieter Bruegel the Elder [or Brueghel - later in life he dropped the 'h' from his name] because his son had the same name and was also a painter. The painting is in the National Gallery in London. It shows all sorts of people, coming along with the Kings to see Jesus, and may remind us of Isaiah 60:1-7, a passage that is not actually quoted in the New Testament (though some of it is in Handel's *Messiah!*):

1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. 3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. 4 Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. ... 6 A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

So the kings are not just three isolated special individuals but represent the manifestation (epiphany) of Christ to the non-Jewish nations, the Gentiles.

[Joan Crossley writes:] Bruegel's image of the visit of the magi to the Holy Family shows all the participants in contemporary dress. We are shown a wide variety of facial types, ages and social classes. None of the figures have the beauty and ideal quality which a contemporary Italian artist might have thought suitable for such a holy subject. In making these choices about costume and facial types, the artist was trying to say something to the viewer: about the ordinariness and humanity of the players in the drama. As was becoming traditional, Bruegel showed the magi as three very different types, with one as an exotically dressed black man. The differing ages and races of the three wise men represent the manifestation (epiphany) of Christ to the non-Jewish nations, the Gentiles.

Questions for Further Reflection.

If a modern painting were made of this scene, what sorts of people could be included to represent diversity of social types? Are we ready to invite, for example, drug-addicts, racist bullies, criminals to share our faith? Would we want them in the picture?

We noted the ordinariness of the scene: even Joseph and Mary are portrayed as 'normal' – no haloes or great beauty. Does this work for you – or would you prefer a halo or two? Personally I can see the point of haloes and lights etc. but this speaks to me more forcibly.



Feedback

1. *The order was John, Mark, Matthew, Luke*
2. *Your answer. Discuss it together.*
3. *It is actually in Mt 23.*
4. *Your words, e.g. it fills in gaps in Matthew's narrative; and it helps us to appreciate the distinctiveness of Matthew's Gospel.*
5. *Your answer. I expected you spotted the interest in the fulfilment of the (Jewish) scriptures.*
6. *Your ideas.*

Session 3: The Beginning of Jesus' Public Ministry: Baptism, Temptation, and the Calling of Disciples

Introduction

Chapters 3 and 4 of Matthew's Gospel deal with some important preparations for Jesus's ministry. We shall focus primarily on the temptation narrative but try and see it in its own context.

So let's first of all try and get the overall picture: just how did Jesus get himself ready to begin the work for which he had been born? Whether or not you have read through these chapters previously have a go at the following quiz.

Grasping the context: Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan.

Q1 Where was John the Baptist living during the time that he was baptizing people?

- a. In Jerusalem. b. In the wilderness. c. Near Nazareth.

Q2 How did he describe himself in terms of his calling?

- a. A baptizer of sinners. b. A voice in the wilderness.
c. An example and a reproach.

Q3 Who* did he call a 'brood of vipers'? [*or 'Whom' if you are an English teacher.]

- a. Pharisees and Sadducees. b. Roman soldiers. c. All the people of Judah.

Q4 How did John describe himself in relation to Jesus?

- a. He was his cousin. b. Not worthy to untie his laces.
c. A miserable sinner.

Q5 What contrast did he make between the baptism that Jesus carried out and his own baptism?

- a. Jesus' baptism was more powerful. b. They were the same.
c. Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire rather than merely water.

Hopefully, you were more or less OK with that. If not, then read through Mt 3 before continuing. (The answers were: 1b, 2b, 3a, 4b, 5c, in case you need to check.)

What Matthew presents to us is:

1. The baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist.
The Spirit comes upon Jesus and then leads him out into the wilderness or desert
2. Jesus is tested and/or tempted in the desert. He passes the test.
3. Jesus begins his ministry. He calls some disciples (Simon Peter, Andrew,

James and John) and continues his ministry of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom (i.e. the kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven) and healing. Great crowds follow him (Mt 4:18-25).

We shall focus on the first two of these, and especially the second.

Study and Questions for Discussion

1. Now the baptism of John the Baptist was a baptism signifying repentance and the resolve to lead a righteous life. If, as Christians believe, Jesus was without sin, why does he ask for John's baptism? Jesus himself gives an answer in Mt 3:13-17 (which, incidentally, is not given in Mark or Luke). What exactly is this answer? Is it clear or does it need further elaboration?

2. In Mt 3:11 we find that Jesus 'will baptize you with the Holy Spirit **and with fire**. Luke also has 'and with fire' but Mark does not. The significance of this seems clear: purification was described as by *fire* in the prophets' preaching (e.g. Isa 4:4; Zc 13:9 Mal 3:2) and this is what Mt 3:12 portrays. John's Gospel puts great emphasis on John the Baptist, but does not relate Jesus receiving baptism from him. In Jn 1:29-34, however, John refers to events which, according to the other three Gospels, occurred when Jesus was baptized? Can you see what they were?

Since the gospel writer seems to know about Jesus' being baptized, can you think why he didn't mention it?

3. One of the questions that confronts us in many walks of life, as well as when we are thinking about what the Bible does and does not tell us, is this: how is it possible to tell a story that is accurate when it is absolutely impossible to tell everything that happened? In other words, we *have* to abbreviate our re-telling: when does omission become distortion? We *have* to tell stories from our own point of view: when does a personal testimony become 'spinning a tale' (political pun intended!)? Take a couple of minutes to think about this and jot down your ideas below. Be prepared to share with others.

4. The Temptation of Jesus in the Desert

Our next – and main – task is to get a clear idea of what Matthew is telling us about the temptation of Jesus. So here is a suggestion for reading the passage, Mt 4:1-11.

One person reads through the whole passage while the others listen, without looking at their own Bibles.

Another person reads it again while other members of the group follow it whether in another translation of the same passage or Lk 4:1-13.

Read Mk 1:12-13.

Members of the group share their observations and ideas. Consider the following questions:

- a. Why do Matthew and Luke have the temptations in a different order? Does this mean that the order is not very important – or has one of the evangelists made a deliberate change to emphasize a particular point? Or what?
- b. Do the following differences tell us anything about the writers' viewpoints, or the emphasis that either Matthew or Luke wants us to notice particularly?

Vs Matthew	Equivalent in Mark	Equivalent in Luke
1 <i>led up</i> by the Spirit tempted by <i>the devil</i>	Spirit <i>drove</i> him tempted by <i>Satan</i>	<i>led</i> by the Spirit as Matthew
2 <i>fasted</i> (40 days ...) wild beasts omitted	fasting not mentioned with the <i>wild beasts</i>	as Matthew as Matthew
3 <i>the tempter</i>	[-]	The devil
5 <i>the holy city</i>	[-]	<i>Jerusalem</i>
10 'Be gone, <i>Satan</i> , ...'	[-]	[-]
11 devil left him	[not mentioned]	devil departed until an opportune time [not mentioned]
angels ministered to him	as Matthew	[not mentioned]

In everyday life we pick up hints from the way that people express themselves. Characteristic or favourite phrases don't usually prove very much but they *can* give us hints that will direct us to genuine insights.

We've picked up a few hints about Matthew:

Emphasis on *righteousness*

Mentions concepts etc. of interest to and known by Jewish readers.

e.g. fulfilment of scriptural prophecy

Keep an eye open for confirmatory or counter-confirmatory signs as you read further.

5. Let's look at the actual temptations themselves: How would you summarize the actual force of each temptation in your own words?

Stones to bread: _____

Jump! _____

World domination for worshipping Satan: _____

6. First of all, note that Jesus answers the temptations with passages from the Old Testament, the Jewish Scriptures of the time. The obvious question that arises for us is: are we supposed to be able to do the same? Would you go along with one of the following responses? (Tick your own and then share your choices).
- Yes, definitely. If the OT was authoritative for Jesus it is so for us.
 - Yes, in theory, but how do we know we are using it properly? The devil also uses scripture (v. 6)
 - Not sure. The Old Testament has now been superseded by the New.
 - Hmmm! These examples look dodgy and may be due to Matthew.
 - Other. _____

7. There are at least two tricky questions here:
 Interpreting scripture properly: can we see a difference between the devil's method and that of Jesus? What exactly is Jesus doing?
 Temptation: what is it? is it the same as 'testing'? How can we deal with it?
 how is it possible to be tempted without thinking sinful thoughts?
 You *may* like to *choose one or the other* if time or energy is lacking!

8. **Interpreting scripture properly**

One matter can probably be cleared up fairly quickly:

the devil quotes misleadingly: Ps 91:11-12 says 'to guard you in all your ways': it does not issue an invitation to do stupid things just so that God can rescue you.

But what about 'one does not live by bread alone'? The natural retort is, 'No, I want bread plus other things.' It is a bit easier to grasp if you realize that 'bread' means 'food' rather than specifically bread. But let's look at the original context, from which Jesus takes this quotation, namely Deuteronomy 8. We'll try and understand the train of thought and the logic of the argument.

v. 1 obedience will mean blessing: you will live and multiply; you will possess the land (two of the promises made to Abraham in Gn 12:1-3)

v. 2 remember... (and learn from this remembering): 'the LORD led you in the desert to humble you, testing you ... keep his commandments'

v. 3 Actions and purpose:

humbled you ... let you hunger ... fed you with manna;

in order that you might know that ... not by bread alone but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.

So here is a suggestion as to the meaning: **True life is to be gained by taking in everything that comes from God and this includes his instructions – not *just* bread (physical provision).**

How does this apply to the temptation of Jesus? Note these features:

Context couldn't be more appropriate:

Jesus = God's son: tested in the desert at the beginning of his public ministry

Israel = God's son: tested in the desert at the beginning of their life as a nation

At that point in time the necessary thing was not to take the initiative and satisfy physical hunger with food, but to wait upon God and obey his word.

Does this make sense to you. Jot down any thoughts or further questions and share with others.

9. Temptation and Testing

Oscar Wilde apparently said, 'The best way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it'. At best this provides only temporary relief and we trust that Jesus will be able to help us rather more than this.

There are some confusing tensions in the Bible with respect to this subject. One of them arises from the fact that the words for 'test' and 'tempt' in both Hebrew and Greek (i.e. in the Old Testament and the New Testament) are ambiguous. The context must decide whether there is acceptable or unacceptable testing. Have a look at the following references (no need to look at them all if you are short of time) and choose OK or NOT OK as appropriate.

- a. Psalm 17:3 If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you **test** me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress. *OK / NOT OK*
- b. Isaiah 7:12 But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not **put** the LORD **to the test**. 13 Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. ...' *OK / NOT OK*
- c. Ps 95:8 Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, 9 when your ancestors **tested me**, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. 10 For forty years I loathed ... *OK / NOT OK*

- d. Malachi 3:10 Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus *put me to the test*, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. *OK / NOT OK*
- e. Matthew 16:1 The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to *test* Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. 2 He answered them, ‘When it is evening, you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.” 3 And in the morning, “It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.” You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. 4 An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.’ *OK / NOT OK*
- f. Matthew 22:18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you *putting me to the test*, you hypocrites?’ *OK / NOT OK*
- g. Jas 1:13 No one, when *tempted*, should say, ‘I am being *tempted* by God’; for God cannot be *tempted* by evil and he himself *tempts* no one. *OK / NOT OK*

Which of these mean ‘test’ in a good sense? _____

Which of these mean ‘test’ in a bad sense? _____

How would you answer the question, ‘In what way is it OK to test God?’

- 10.** Read through the account of Jesus’ temptation once more and then ask yourself and discuss [as you feel safe to do so] any or all of the following questions.
- What sort of temptations have you faced?
 - How did you deal with them?
 - In what way does the example of Jesus help – or fail to help?
 - Does the Bible come to your aid? If not why not?
 - Are there ways in which you could be better prepared and equipped to deal with temptation?
 - Have you undergone a holy testing by God, do you think? What was the result?

Suggestions for a brief act of worship

Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested [NIV tempted] as we are, yet without sin.

A prayer of Thomas à Kempis

Write your blessed Name, O Lord, upon my heart,
there to remain so indelibly engraved,
that no prosperity, no adversity, will ever move me from your love.
Be to me a strong tower of defence,
a comforter in tribulation, a deliverer in distress,
a very present help in trouble,
and a guide to heaven through the many temptations and dangers of this life,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A brief time of silent or extempore prayer

A prayer of St Paul from Ephesians 3

13 I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory. 14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16 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, 17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 18 I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. 20 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, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Picture of the Week

Finally, if you choose to do this, have a look at the picture below. Does it bring to mind any other thoughts? What would you draw from it?

Decide whether to read the notes before or after thinking for yourself.

Stanley Spencer, Driven by the Spirit into the Wilderness, 1942

The series of 'Christ in the wilderness' paintings are on show in the Western Australia Art Gallery. For an image plus brief notes for each painting, see www.artgallery.wa.gov.au/collections/documents/spencer_conv.pdf. The notes on this painting tell us: 'In 1916, Spencer served with the Field Ambulances in Macedonia. This experience had a profound effect on the artist, the memories of war infiltrated his spirit - the massive figure strides through a bleak and desolate land with the promise of

resurrection in the figure of Christ.’

Richard Harries (former Bishop of Oxford), who has made a special study of Spencer’s work, writes: ‘In their account of the Temptation Matthew and Luke say that Jesus was led into the wilderness. Mark however writes: “And immediately the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness.” These strong words were picked up by Stanley Spencer. But how does he depict this driving force? Wind would be one way and we are reminded that the Hebrew word *ruach* means both spirit and wind. But in this picture the trees are still. Neither Christ’s hair nor his cloak are blown about. Yet he reaches out to hold on to a branch to steady himself, as though feeling a great force. There is an inner gale. His eyes look up and ahead towards a distant horizon. When blown by a great wind we grab anything, even brittle twigs as Christ does here. And we plant our feet firmly on the ground legs apart as here. Yet the landscape remains still. Christ is driven by an inner force.’

Questions: What extra ideas does the picture suggest? What about ‘driveth/drives’, ‘wilderness/desert’, ‘preparation for a testing future’, ‘violence and peace’?



Feedback

1. *‘To fulfil all righteousness’ – note that ‘righteousness’ is a very important concept in Matthew’s Gospel.*

The answer has not been clear to most commentators! Here is an extract from the excellent commentary of D.A. Carson: ‘... the Servant’s first mark is obeying God: he “fulfils all righteousness” since he suffers and dies to accomplish redemption in obedience to the will of God. By his baptism Jesus affirms his determination to do his assigned work. Thus the “now” may be significant: Jesus is saying that John’s objection (Mt 3:14) is in principle valid. Yet he must “now,” at this point in salvation history, baptize Jesus; for at this point Jesus must demonstrate his willingness to take on his servant role, ...’.

2. *Your answer. Discuss it when you meet together.*
5. *My suggestions: priority to own needs : wanting proof instead of trusting : putting God’s unique glory in a lower place than something else. [There are more of you than of me, so you might well do better than this.]*
6. *Your answer. Mine would be a., BUT there is some point to all the others too.*
8. *Your answer. Mine is that this is along the right lines although a lot more could be said about it. The brief commentary on Matthew by R.T. France is very helpful.*
9. *a., b., d. : all the rest : Your answer. I should say it’s the attitude that counts: compare the difference between ‘I won’t believe unless you prove yourself to me’ and ‘Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.’ Or we might say: ‘Refusing to trust God unless you get a sign’ and ‘trusting God and expecting to receive confirmation.’*

Session 4: The Kingdom of God is here

Healings, Exorcisms and Other Signs

1. Quiz: Recap and introduction to the next stage

We have looked at the first four chapters of St Matthew's Gospel. So here's our quiz for the week (one question only): which of these occur(s) in Matthew?

Genealogy going back to Abraham

The virgin birth (with a reference to 'Immanuel' from Isa 7:14)

The visit of the Magi/Wise men and subsequent massacre of children by Herod

Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness/desert

Calling of two pairs of brothers (Simon and Andrew; James and John)

2. I'm sure that if I asked you in which Gospel we find the annunciations (to Mary and Elizabeth), the birth of John the Baptist, the visit of the shepherds, the prophecies of Anna and Simeon, and the visit of the child Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem, you would know that the answer was 'Luke's'. Even if you didn't, you do now.

But let's move on with the Gospel as presented by Matthew. At the end of chapter 4, we find a summary report of how Jesus began his public ministry. There are two main activities mentioned. Read Mt 4:23-25 now and then say what they are. _____ and _____

3. You'll probably have noticed that nearly all the material we have read in chapters 1-4 has been *narrative* or a biographical account of what happened. There has certainly been teaching along with the action but the framework for this has been the storyline.

Now we come to a large block of *teaching* which is given only the briefest of introductions (5:1-2). The teaching I mean is, of course, Mt 5 – 7, one of the best known parts of the Gospel and usually referred to as:

4. This material is not found in any of the other gospels, although *parts* of it do occur elsewhere. We are going to have to be highly selective in what we study together - the alternative is to give something so superficial as to be of little value. So what we shall do is:

- a. note the overall focus of Jesus' teaching and where it occurs in Matthew;
- b. study a passage which shows Jesus' power and authority (a healing/exorcism).


First of all, then, note that in Mt 3:2 and 5:3, 10, both John the Baptist and Jesus refer to a central feature of Jesus' teaching. It is _____

The same concept is expressed in Mk 1:15 as _____

5. These expressions mean the same, but probably Matthew uses the term 'heaven' instead of 'God' because the Jews of his time were reluctant to pronounce the word 'God'. They certainly would never pronounce the name 'Yahweh' and the same is true of Jews today. Hence we have the regular expression in the Old Testament 'the LORD' (where the capital letters signify that the divine name is used in the Hebrew text).

Put simply it means the rule of God has come near; it is more evident; it is closer to being established visibly on earth. Much of what Jesus taught relates directly to describing *how life under God's rule is or will be*. Both the teaching that Jesus gave and the signs that he did point to aspects of 'life in God's kingdom'.

Try and keep this in mind as we turn to our selected passage, Mt 15:21-28.

 *Go on to the next frame.*

6. **The Syrophenician woman and her daughter**

Read aloud the passage from Matthew and try and imagine the scene as vividly as you can.

Ask people in the group to take one character from the story: the woman, a disciple, Jesus. Try and get all of these characters covered.

Read the story again.

See if you can relate your experience as if you were that character.

If the group is large enough for duplications then it may well be useful to ask those who have taken the same person to discuss their ideas before coming together as a whole group.

Take your time over this exercise. Try to avoid looking at the next section until you have completed this.

See if you can answer the following questions if they have not been covered during the previous time of sharing:

1. What was Jesus trying to do in going to the region of Tyre and Sidon (Phoenicia)?
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2. Did he have a real reluctance to help the woman or was he trying to test her faith – or something like that? Why do you think as you do?
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3. Does Matthew have anything significantly different from Mark’s account of the encounter? If so, what can we learn from the difference? There is a parallel text below for your convenience!
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Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.’ 23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’ 24 He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ 26 He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ 27 She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ 28 Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.

Mark 7:24-30

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, 25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

27 He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ 28 But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ 29 Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go - the demon has left your daughter.’ 30 So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

7. Let's now focus on the relevance and application of this event for our own situation. Now that various questions have been addressed (and some of them sorted out) it may be useful to read through the narrative once more. Make a note of the things which strike you (e.g. concepts, qualities, surprises ... anything at all that strikes you). My own suggestions are given in the feedback.
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8. Now see if there are specific lessons to draw from this. You will need to consider both similarities and differences between then and now. For example:

Similarities: e.g. we are quite similar to the disciples in many ways – human, weak, limited understanding, the woman was loud and irritating - at least to start with, we can't deal with certain problems and want them to go away (or God to take them away?), etc.

Differences: e.g. Jesus there in person; special disciples; Gentiles now included; never (well hardly ever) meet this particular problem; we don't have the faith or power to deal with this type of thing, etc.

Here are some thoughts on just one aspect of the narrative. Ignore them if you'd rather just get on with your own application. There are some notes from Don Carson's commentary on Matthew at the end of this frame.

Finding faith in unusual places: What opportunities has this woman had to learn about the Jewish religion? How did she know that this man was the 'Son of David' and what that implied (the Messiah)? How well did she understand what she was asking and claiming? We don't know but she'd certainly had a lot fewer opportunities than the disciples. She comes with a desperate love, willing to do anything, to make a spectacle of herself, to bear rejection and insults, to humble herself and to beg: anything for the sake of her daughter. And somehow she believes that Jesus can do it: 'Woman, great is your faith'.

She reminds us of other examples of faith outside Israel: Ruth the Moabitess, the sailors that Jonah brought into jeopardy and the Ninevites that he so unlovingly preached to; the Roman centurion. She reminds me of people I have come across who have shown that God has been at work in their lives long before anyone shared the Gospel with them; of people who, when they hear a faltering presentation of the Gospel, respond to it with enthusiasm; of people who seem to be beyond hope whose lives are changed beyond recognition.

Who are the people we come across who might respond similarly? How will we find out?

You might like to discuss this further or else consider some other aspect.

Selected Notes from *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*

Carson, D.A. "7. More healings (15:21-31)" In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 8*, pp. 353-356. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984.

The Canaanite woman (15:21-28)

This section 'not only records Jesus' withdrawal from the opposition of the Pharisees and teachers of the law (cf. Mt 14:13) but contrasts their approach to the Messiah with that of this woman. They belong to the covenant people but take offence at the conduct of Jesus' disciples, challenge his authority, and are so defective in understanding the Scriptures that they show themselves not to be plants the heavenly Father has planted. But this woman is a pagan, a descendant of ancient enemies, and with no claim on the God of the covenant. Yet in the end she approaches the Jewish Messiah and with great faith asks only for grace; and her request is granted (cf. 8:5-13)'.

v. 21 Jesus 'withdraws' (as in 2:12, 22; 4:12; 12:15; 14:13) to the region of Tyre and Sidon, cities on the Mediterranean coast lying about thirty and fifty miles respectively from Galilee.

v. 22 Mark (Mk 7:26) calls the woman 'a Greek [i.e., a non-Jewess; NIV has 'Gentile', not a literal translation but a correct interpretation!], born in Syrian Phoenicia.' Matthew's use of the old term 'Canaanite' shows that he cannot forget her ancestry: now a descendant of Israel's ancient enemies comes to the Jewish Messiah for blessing. Her calling Jesus 'Son of David' shows some recognition of Jesus as the Messiah who would heal the people (see discussion at 9:27; 12:23);

vv. 23-24 That these verses are peculiar to Matthew is not surprising. Matthew's Jewish readers would be intensely interested in Jesus' doing a miracle to aid a Gentile, on Gentile territory. Mark's Gentile readers would, however, have needed much explanation had this saying been included in his Gospel. Jesus had healed Gentiles before (4:24-25; 8:5-13), but always in Jewish territory.

Jesus' silence does not quiet the woman; so his disciples beg him to stop her persistent cries (v. 23). If they mean 'Send her away without helping her,' either they suppose she is annoying him or they themselves are being annoyed. But their words could also be taken to mean 'Send her away with her request granted' (so Meyer, Benoit). Indeed only this interpretation makes sense, because v. 24 gives a reason for Jesus' not helping her rather than for not sending her away.

Either 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' means 'the lost sheep *among* the house of Israel'—i.e., some in the house of Israel are not lost—or 'the lost sheep *who are* the house of Israel'—i.e., all Israel, regarded as lost sheep. The latter is correct, for in the identical expression at 10:6 the contrast is, not between these lost sheep and others in Israel who are not lost, but between these lost sheep and Gentiles or Samaritans.

26 Still Jesus made certain that she grasped the historic distinction between Jew and Gentile. Jesus' short aphorism supposes that the 'children' are the people of Israel and the 'dogs' are Gentiles. The 'crumbs' (v. 27) do not designate the quantity of blessing

bestowed; and still less does the table refer to the Eucharist (rightly Bonnard). The question is one of precedence: the children get fed *first*.

27 The woman's answer is masterly. 'Yes, Lord,' she agrees, '*for* even [not '*but* even,' NIV] the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Those two words 'for even' reveal immense wisdom and faith. She does not phrase her answer as a counterstroke but as a profound acquiescence with the further implications of 'dogs.' She does not argue that her needs make her an exception, or that she has a right to Israel's covenanted mercies, or that the mysterious ways of divine election and justice are unfair. She abandons mention of Jesus as 'Son of David' and simply asks for help; 'and she is confident that even if she is not entitled to sit down as a guest at Messiah's table, Gentile 'dog' that she is, yet at least she may be allowed to receive a crumb of the uncovenanted mercies of God' (Tasker; cf. Schlatter).

v. 28 The faith that simply seeks mercy is honoured. Again Jesus speaks, this time with emotion (cf. Notes); and the woman's daughter is healed 'from that very hour' (cf. 8:13; 9:22).

Suggestions for an act of worship

It is usually a good idea to involve as many people as possible. One obvious way is to assign a different reading to each of those willing to read a section.

Opening sentence

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever.

Brief time of silence

introduced by the words: 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening'

Readings

Matthew 8:23 And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. 24 A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. 25 And they went and woke him up, saying, 'Lord, save us! We are perishing!' 26 And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. 27 They were amazed, saying, 'What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?'

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.

Matthew 9:32 After they had gone away, a demoniac who was mute 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.'

Matthew 10:5 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: '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. 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.

Matthew 12:22 Then they brought to him a demoniac who was blind and mute; and he cured him, so that the one who had been mute could speak and see. 23 All the crowds were amazed and said, 'Can this be the Son of David?' 24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, 'It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons.' 25 He knew what they were thinking and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.

Matthew 17:14 When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him, 15 and said, 'Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water. 16 And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.' ...

18 And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. 19 Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, 'Why could we not cast it out?' 20 He said to them, 'Because of your little faith.

[21* But this kind does not come out except by prayer and fasting.]

** Omitted from the most important manuscripts.*

Prayer

Christ you are the King
to whom all authority has been given in heaven and on earth.
We own you as our Lord.
We yield to you our obedience.
We dedicate our lives to serving you.
Come, Lord Christ, and reign in us,
and make us the agents of your kingdom in the world,
for your name's sake. Amen.

Picture of the week:

There do not seem to be many pictures of exorcisms, though you may like to explore what's on the internet. You'll find several portrayals of the Gerasene (or Gadarene) swine (Mt 8:28-34). Here is one that sets that incident in such a broad context that you might not even immediately notice the pigs. As mentioned previously, it will *probably* be best if you form your own impressions of the picture before looking at the following notes.

Paul Brill: *Christ casting out devils*

For the picture follow the link below. Large prints are available from this site.

<http://www.bridgemanartondemand.com/index.cfm?event=catalogue.product&productID=175510¤cy=GBP>

Brill (also spelt 'Bril'; 1554-1626) was an artist from Antwerp which remained Catholic when the Netherlands was born at the beginning of the 17th century. He enjoyed dramatic and fantastic landscapes, and became a painter patronized by the Pope.

Alan Storkey writes: 'This is a picture of an imagined landscape. The painter had not been to Galilee, but he was determined to be there in spirit and try to record what the event might have been like – no haloes or gold backgrounds here. The narrative is conveyed by the boat, fanciful town, pigs and drama of the movements. The rather exotic mountainous landscape might have been in contrast to Brill's own home flatlands. The scene by the lake shows Christ in the act of casting out demons. The demons are visibly departing and the pigs are ready to go berserk. The crowds from the local town gather aware that this situation is a little beyond them. Throughout there is an understanding that evil is real, but very much under the command of Christ, and that this has some kind of cosmic significance.'

It is the smallness the human figures in comparison with the clouds and sky which struck me most forcibly. It speaks of the fact that apparently insignificant 'human' actions on earth are not necessarily just human and may have enormous eternal significance. It reminds me of 2 Kings 6:17, Elisha said, 'Open his eyes so that he may see' - not 'so that he may have a vision of what is not really there'.

What else? The inclusion of earth, sky and sea; and the wind all present signs of energy, agitation, struggle on a cosmic scale. The contrast between the turmoil of the man and the calm authority of Christ. What are the figures doing? Mildly interested? Some watching, some talking among themselves. Not realizing the significance and scale of what is happening? How would we fit into the picture?



Feedback

1. *All of them.*
2. *proclaiming (or preaching etc.) and healing (or curing (NRSV) etc.)*
3. *the sermon on the mount*
4. *the kingdom of heaven : the kingdom of God*
6. *Your answers. Here are mine, in case you are interested, but your own are more important. 1. to try and get some peace and time for energy renewal : 2. I believe the second. The first suggestion, which is often made, is too far out of kilter with what we read about Jesus elsewhere. Moreover, we know that he did challenge people quite strongly at times. : 3. Mt 15:24 has an explicit reference to Jesus' mission to the Jews first of all. Confirms our view that Matthew was writing primarily for a Jewish readership.*
7. *The things that strike me are: foreign land; outsiders; irritation (shouting); faith; unexpected example; illness; external evil; testing; misunderstanding; perseverance; apparent refusal or rebuff; humility; not taking offence; amazement. You may well have come up with different ideas.*

Session 5: The Nature of the Kingdom of God

Jesus' Parables

Introduction

We have seen that the central message of Jesus as he started his ministry was that the Kingdom of God had drawn near. We have also noted that Jesus' miracles: healings, exorcisms, power over nature, showed something of the nature of the kingdom of God. In other words they showed what life was like and would be like under God's direct rule. The essence of it was the banishment of all evil and suffering.

The parables of Jesus tell us something more about the kingly rule of God. In Matthew's Gospel these parables are found in the *teaching blocks* of material which occur as follows:

Chapters	Subject matter (oversimplified)
5-7	The New Law (the Sermon on the Mount)
10	Christian Discipleship
13	The meaning of the kingdom and life in the kingdom
18	Life under God's rule: humility and forgiveness
23-25	Disputes and teaching about 'the End'

In this brief study we shall have a look at two particular items:

- a. the parables of the Kingdom as found in Mt 13, and one parable in more detail (e.g. the tares in the wheat)
- b. the painting by Peter von Cornelius of 'The Wise and Foolish Virgins' (found only in Matthew, in ch. 25)

Parables of the Kingdom: Matthew 13

1. First skim through the chapter and check that you can identify seven separate parables (in verses 1-50).

2. In order to get an overall picture of the teaching of these parables, may I suggest that you allot a section of the chapter to individuals or groups of individuals. Each one should then read through the parable(s) and be prepared to summarize both the parable and its interpretation for the benefit of the rest of the group. If anyone is too shy to do this .. well, 'warm encouragement but not force' is the rule.

Here is a rough guide, which you may like to vary according to the make-up of your group.

A. no. 1; B. no. 2; C. nos 3 and 4; D. nos 5 and 6; E. no. 7

See the feedback for the verse numbers if necessary.

Having done that see if, between you, you can describe the characteristics of the kingdom of heaven (= kingdom of God) as taught by Jesus in this chapter. Perhaps jot down your conclusions below and compare them with the feedback.

3. Some questions to sort out

You will have noticed that two of the seven parables have a detailed interpretation with them. The parable of the sower – or, as scholars often call it, the parable of the soils has the following interpretation:

path: people don't understand; devil takes away the seed
rocky ground: people respond quickly but don't endure
thorns: cares of the world crowd out the word
good soil: it produces up to 100 times the original sowing.

I wonder if you can decide what your interpretation would be if you didn't know about this explanation. Where would you put the emphasis? For example, which of the following seems the *more* reasonable?

- Jesus wants to explain the different types of problem that arise in proclaiming God's message.
- Jesus wants to emphasize that despite all opposition God's kingdom will prevail mightily.

What do you think and why? Or would you like to modify the explanation yourself.

- Many scholars believe that this detailed explanation was added after the time of Jesus. You know how enthusiastic preachers elaborate on a biblical text sometimes? Well, something like that. Many also have difficulty with the explanation of parables given in vv. 13-15, since it seems that Jesus spoke in parables to make it difficult for people to understand. The passage in Isa 6 seems to confirm this view. The Hebrew version makes this impression stronger:

Isa 6:10 Make the mind of this people dull
and stop their ears, and shut their eyes,
so that they may not ... turn and be healed.

So here are two basic opposing views. Which seems *more* reasonable to you? You don't have to accept either view in its entirety.

- a. Isaiah 6 should not be understood in this way: actually Isaiah preached very clearly indeed. It was simply that the people refused to hear and in so doing became more incapable of hearing and being healed. Similarly, those who did not give careful attention to Jesus' message were not able to understand it.
- b. The parables were simple and straightforward, e.g. the kingdom of God will prosper whatever the opposition. A keen disciple or group of disciples meditated on the parables and tried to answer the question: 'Why didn't more people respond to Jesus' preaching?' They came up with the idea that the teaching was only revealed to particular people.

There are some notes on why Jesus used parables at the end of frame 8.

5. Applying the teaching to our own situation

Are there any immediate lessons to draw from what we have been studying so far? Jot down a note for yourself if there are.

Perhaps it will be helpful to press this question a little further by considering the following sub-headings:

If the kingdom of heaven means basically 'God's kingly rule', what does it mean to be under God's rule?

For nations? smaller communities? the Church? individuals? Do we see any signs of the fact that God's rule 'has drawn near'? If so, what are they? If not, why not?

6. Finally, choose one of the parables in this chapter and focus on it in more detail. If you want to work on a given example, see frame 7. Otherwise simply do your own reflection. As previously:

- ask what is happening in the picture that Jesus presents;
- think about your own situation and those aspects that the parable calls to mind;
- consider the similarities and differences between the parable and your situation and ask what lessons you should draw (asking further questions as necessary).

You could do this as an individual exercise before sharing together if you like.

7. A worked example: the tares and the wheat

The situation described in the parable is roughly clear even to a non-gardener like me. An enemy sows weeds among the crops in an attempt to foul up the farmer's harvest. But how does it work? You may be interested to know a little background to the parable.

Dick France writes (in *Matthew (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries)*, IVP, 1985, pp. 225f., 228): 'The weeds are probably darnel, a poisonous plant related to wheat and virtually indistinguishable from it until the ears form. To sow darnel among wheat as an act of revenge was punishable in Roman law, which suggests that the parable depicts a real-life situation (*New Bible Dictionary*, p. 948). A light infestation of darnel could be tackled by careful weeding, but mistakes would easily be made. In the case of a heavy infestation the stronger roots of the darnel would be tangled with those of the wheat, making selective weeding impossible'.

The parables together speak of the certainty of God's victory despite opposition, setbacks of various sorts; despite appearances (the apparent prosperity of the wicked and the absence of judgment), and despite the fact that progress is very hard to discern and seems unbearably slow sometimes.

Is there anything else you think is particularly important about the parable as originally told? Are there questions you'd like to ask in order to get a still clearer picture? Jot them down below, if you like, and see if you can answer them together.

-
-
- 8.** Finally, consider your own situation. Do any of the words mentioned above in connection with the parable resonate with your own experience or with what you know about the world today? For example, the apparent success of those people who have no regard for God? loss of confidence/hope/etc.? patience/impatience? mercy delaying judgment (for our benefit too)? difficulty of discerning good and bad? who intervenes in what – and when?

Jot down your conclusions below – either before or after discussion – or both.

Suggestions for a brief act of worship

Opening prayer

O God, Lord of the universe,
Your purposes cannot be thwarted or overthrown,
Your patience is unending, your determination is infinite.
Give us strength when the task before us overwhelms us,
Renew our hope and confidence in your sure victory,
Give us new energy and zeal in our work for your kingdom,
And, as we look forward to the final harvest, give us joy,
The joy of knowing that we are your friends and ambassadors,
Charged with a mission that cannot fail,
Longing and ready for your appearing to judge the living and the dead.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Reading with meditation

Look at the picture of Peter con Cornelius, 'The wise and foolish virgins' as one of the group reads Matthew 25:1-13

Sharing and prayer

You may like to keep silence for a while and then share any thoughts you have about the picture. Read through the notes after you have thought for yourself.
Pray together for personal concerns.

Closing prayer

Eternal Lord Christ, we praise you that since the beginning of history,
you have worked unrecognized as the wisdom and light of all people.
We praise you that your name became known in a human life,
in the humility of Bethlehem, the love of Calvary, and the glory of your resurrection.
Help us to see you still at work in everything that is holy, true and good;
and grant that we for our part may delight to work humbly and unrecognized,
desiring only that your loving purpose shall go forward,
until all come to see you as the hidden heart of all things.
For your name's sake. Amen.

[*New Every Morning*, BBC, 1973, p. 133]

Suggested hymns

God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.
Thy kingdom come O God, Thy rule O Christ begin.
The King is among us.

Supplementary Material: Why did Jesus use parables?

**Extract from Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew*, IVP, 2000, pp. 152-155.
*Mt 13:1-58***

The third discourse: the parables of the kingdom

Chapter 13 brings the first half of Matthew's Gospel to an end. The person of Jesus has been brought very clearly before us, together with a variety of responses to him. And those responses have been sharpening in intensity. At the end of this section on accepting or rejecting him (11:2 - 12:49), Matthew brings together seven parables to form the third great teaching block of the Gospel. They reinforce the need to decide about Jesus, which is, of course, the burden of the previous two chapters. Fittingly, this, the middle teaching block of the five contained in the Gospel, is all about response to Jesus, and skilfully brings to an end this whole section about commitment which began in chapter 11.

Matthew has clearly grouped these parables together in one remarkable chapter. We shall need to examine them with some care, but Jesus' very use of parables prompts three initial questions.

1. *What is a parable?* It is the comparison of two subjects for the purpose of teaching. It proceeds from the known to the unknown. It is an everyday story with a spiritual meaning. It is not an allegory, as if every detail in the story had deep spiritual significance. There is generally (but not universally) one salient point. It is, as the Hebrews put it, a *mashal*, 'a riddle'. The Greek word gives another nuance: it is a *parabole*, a comparison (literally 'a throwing together' - maybe for similarity, maybe for contrast, maybe for sheer surprise). The parable form is flexible. It can mean anything from a riddle like 'Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet'- to an advanced comparison such as the parable of the sower.

2. *Why did Jesus teach in parables?* That question was asked - and answered - in 13:10-17, 34-35. There are at least three good reasons.

First, look at verse 1. The move from the synagogue to the seashore is significant. As the leaders of establishment religion turn increasingly against him, we find Jesus moving more and more out into the open air, where the common people hear him gladly. So the teaching in parables comes after widespread rejection of his message and his person by the rulers. Its use enables him to continue to hold and intrigue the hearers at a time of great opposition. It enables him to fascinate without alienating.

Secondly, Jesus valued parables because they were an instrument of revelation (35), but only for those to whom it is given to see (11, 16-17). The parable revealed truth to those who were hungry, and concealed it from those who were too lazy to look for it, or too blinded by hatred and prejudice to discern it. The law of atrophy is at work. *'Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him'* (12).

The third reason Jesus taught in parables was that they were a spur towards decision. The kingdom cannot be understood from outside. ... To be a historical contemporary of Jesus did you no good without the eye of faith. Likewise, hearing the parable gave you no insight without that 'click' which enables you to cry, 'I see!' And that is *given* to those who are ready to receive it. ...T.F. Torrance has some wise words of explanation: 'Jesus deliberately concealed the Word in parable, lest men against their will should be forced to acknowledge the Kingdom, and yet he allowed them enough light to convict and convince them.' Or as Professor C.F.D. Moule once put it to me, 'You can't teach by spoon-feeding. You must let people puzzle it out for themselves.' That is part of why Jesus taught in parables.

Picture of the Week:

Peter von Cornelius, The Wise and Foolish virgins

<http://www.bridgemanartondemand.com/index.cfm?event=catalogue.qsearch&newSearch=1&searchstring=Peter+von+Cornelius%2C+The+Wise+and+Foolish+virgins&colour=>

Peter Cornelius was part of a group of German artists who gathered together in Rome to form a quasi-monastic artistic brotherhood, the Nazarenes. Their combination of artistic fellowship and reforming zeal inspired the English Pre-Raphaelitism Brotherhood. Cornelius eventually settled in Munich, but in his earlier visit to Rome learned much of the great Italian styles of the renaissance and Counter-Reformation. He undertook great murals and initiated a great revival in church murals conveying and teaching the Christian faith.

[Joan Crossley writes:] In this painting, influenced by High Renaissance Italian artists, Cornelius has imagined Jesus as playing a part in the story, rather than it being a parable. [Jesus referred to himself as 'the bridegroom' in Mt 9:15, cf. Rev 19:7; 21:9]. In order to convey Jesus' spiritual rather than actual presence, the Lord is shown wearing grey/white almost as though he was a ghost. Only Jesus' gold hair contradicts this impression of his being detached from the human state. The main focus in the picture is the pious and blessed state of the wise virgins. The careless ones are shown scrabbling to gain admittance. The "fallen" state of humanity is indicated in the carving on the panel of the door where there is a relief showing the creation of Eve from Adam.

[Alan Storkey writes:] The wise maidens gather at the front, while the foolish ones are off in the dark trying to get their lamps sorted out by the light of a thin crescent moon. Though originally the parable was a story told *by* Christ, here it becomes focussed *on* Christ and the Church. The maidens are being welcomed by Christ, who is the object of their adoration and prayer. The glory of Christ outshines their own meagre lamps, though by their clothes, hair and the flow of their garments are a dramatic focus of the painting.

Moreover, they are being welcomed into the Church. The figure of Peter, clasping his key, has opened the door of the Church with its vast bronze reliefs, so that the virgins can be welcomed by other members of the Church into the place of glory and the route to heaven. Christ and the other figures seem to be walking on clouds rather than the earth of the darkened world to the right. This interpretation of Jesus' parable thus portrays a combination of both the earthly and the heavenly'.



Feedback

1. *They are the parables of:*
 1. *the sower (vv. 3-23; note that this includes an extended interpretation, not only of this parable but of the reason for parables generally. See also vv. 34-35.)*
 2. *the tares in the wheat (vv. 24-30; interpretation vv. 36-43)*
 3. *the mustard seed (vv. 31f.)*
 4. *the leaven (v. 33)*
 5. *treasure hidden in a field (v. 44)*
 6. *the pearl of great price (vv. 45f.)*
 7. *the dragnet (vv. 47-50)*

[We might also add:

 8. *householder cf. scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven (vv. 51-53). Not quite the same as the others, as you can see.]*
2. *You may have thought of the following. Discuss any unexpected points and/or possible disagreements in the group.*

Despite much opposition and many drawbacks the kingdom of heaven prospers and grows; from very small beginnings it grows secretly until it affects the whole of creation; it is impossible to separate out good and bad completely until the final judgment; it is worth more than all our other possessions put together.
3. *Personally I would say that b. is the most important, but a. should not be discounted entirely.*
4. *Your answer. Whatever our answer to this, the fact is that, on the one hand, the parables of Jesus seem to have a clear and simple message, and on the other hand, they have made people think and reflect deeply for the past two thousand years.*
5. *Your answer. The main thing that occurs to me is that we live in conscious awareness of the reality of God, who expects certain behaviour – and knows whether we live up to it or not. On the other hand he is not 'Big Brother': he is our loving Father, who gave his Son to die for us and freely forgives us all our sins. We strive to show our gratitude for this by serving him and other people. Sometimes we see remarkable signs that this is happening – and sometimes, unfortunately, we don't. There may well be specific examples to share.*

Session 6: The Journey to Jerusalem

1. Introduction

We have looked at the first part of Jesus' ministry: his overall message concerning the kingdom of heaven (= kingdom of God). Most of it is set in Galilee, i.e. the north of the country, and Jesus demonstrates what this means in practice in two main ways:

- by teaching (largely in parables);
- by performing mighty works, especially healings, exorcisms, and nature miracles.

Jesus' focus now changes as he sets his face to go to Jerusalem. We will try to trace the course of this journey from its beginnings to its end when Jesus entered Jerusalem.

Have a look at Mt 16:21-23. Can you see how Matthew marks the change?

What was the event that seems to have been significant in indicating that it is now time to proceed to Jerusalem?

Some have felt that the journey actually begins long before this, e.g. Mt 2:1-12 or 3:13-17 or John 1:1-5. Can you see why they might say this? What do *you* think of the suggestion?

2. Journeying

We have come across a few journeys in what we have studied and you probably know quite a lot about others. See if you can jot down about four or five (from any source). You could refresh your memory by looking at Mt 2:1f., 19f., 21-23; Luke 2:21-24, 39f., 41-52.

3. There are quite a lot, aren't there? And the journeys are of different sorts: some are escapes from something dangerous or difficult and some are moves towards

an attractive goal. What associations does the concept of 'journey' have for you? Is it linked in any way to the idea of 'journaling', i.e. keeping a (spiritual) journal? Jot down some ideas if you like and be prepared to share them with others.

4. You can probably think of passages in the Bible, Christian hymns and songs, poems, etc. which make use of the metaphor of 'journeying' (or 'travelling' etc.). Do they have any special relevance or significance for you?

5. **Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey**

The so called 'triumphal entry' into Jerusalem is recorded in all four Gospels. To get an idea of the differences between them, note the words in bold italic and write down the differences found in the other gospels as indicated below.

Before you look at the table, however, you may like to get someone to read Mt 21:1-11 aloud. It may also be useful for other members of the group to follow one of the other gospel accounts of Christ's entry into Jerusalem.

Note: there is a complete table of the four parallel Gospel accounts in the Supplementary Material (pp. 51-53).

Matthew 21

1 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find ***a donkey tied, and a colt with her***; untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately. ' 4 This took place ***to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet***, saying, 5 'Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.' 6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7 they ***brought the donkey and the colt, and put***

[Note vv. 1-3 are similar in Mt, Mk and Lk but are not found in John.]

v. 2. Mk, Lk and Jn differ in that: _____

Mk and Lk: _____

John: _____

[Note that some scholars have assumed that Matthew portrays Jesus as sitting astride two animals 'sat on

their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna *to the Son of David!* Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’ 10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ 11 The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’

them’. Others say Matthew was not so silly and it means ‘sat on *the clothes*’.]

Mt only: _____

Lk adds: _____

Jn adds: _____

6. You can probably see that we have a little further evidence of Matthew’s concern to present his gospel in terms specially suitable for Jewish readers. He quotes in full the Old Testament passage that predicts the coming of the king on a donkey and he uses the explicit title ‘son of David’ (Mark mentions David but less directly).

Treating Mark as the first gospel to be written and the one that at least Matthew and Luke made use of, can you discern anything else that any of the gospel writers wants his readers to pay special attention to?

7. What event immediately follows the entry into Jerusalem? _____

Why do you think it occurs here? Do any of the following suggestions appeal?

- a. It signified that Jesus had come to judge the people of God.
- b. It sets the tone for the opposition that follows.
- c. Jesus knew he would be persecuted and put to death so he wished to hasten this.
- d. On a religious mission it was natural to go first to the temple and what was needed there was cleansing.
- e. It just happened here, that’s all. OK?

8. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem in such a way that no newspaper or TV station could have ignored it. The crowds have welcomed him ecstatically and everyone was asking about him (Mt 21:10). A ‘normal hero’ might have been gratified to have so many people expressing their support. Something was in the air but what exactly?

The previous hero entries into Jerusalem of the past were all political and presented a united Israel in the face of their enemies. Jesus, however, seems to go out of his way to alienate some influential people by ‘cleansing the temple’.

The merchants and money changers had a legitimate function: to provide animals that were acceptable for sacrifice (for those who could not bring the animals with them) and to change Gentile money into Jewish money that could be paid to the temple authorities. So why was Jesus apparently so angry at what he saw that he drove these people out and overturned the money changers’ tables?

You might like to consider the following factors:

The words of Jesus come from two Old Testament passages:

Isa 56:7 God’s aim is that the temple should become ‘a place of prayer for all the peoples’; and

Jer 7:11 ‘has this house which is called by my name become a den of robbers?’ (literally, ‘violent ones’).

Outside the Bible the Greek word translated ‘robber’ *can* mean ‘mercenary’ but the bad sense is predominant.

In Josephus the word is constantly used for ‘zealots’, i.e. those who wanted to liberate Judah from Roman rule by fighting.

Does that help you to decide why Jesus was so angry that he carried out this violent action? Do any of the following explanations seem plausible?

- a. People’s motives and focus were quite wrong: they cared more about profit than about worship and prayer (R.T. France, etc.).
 - b. It was a ‘prophetic action’ to signify that God was coming to cleanse the nation of its sin.
 - c. Jesus lost sight of the fact that these people were performing a useful service and overreacted.
 - d. Jesus wanted to take over the Temple by force.
 - e. The word for ‘robber’ often signifies ‘nationalist’ or ‘revolutionary’ so Jesus was objecting to these people’s trying to take the law into their own hands (cf. D.A. Carson; N.T. Wright).
-

9. A further note on the Temple in Jesus' time

You may be interested to read what Joachim Jeremias writes about how the Temple operated in those days – if not, simply skip to frame 10.

‘There is a rabbinic tradition [i.e. in the writings of the Jewish Rabbis] which indicates the sale of cattle in the Temple area ... a contemporary of Herod the Great had three thousand head of small livestock brought to the Temple hill to be sold for whole burnt-offerings and peace-offerings. There were shops ... [which] apparently belonged to the high-priestly family.’

He also tells us that, according to the ancient historian Josephus (AD 37 – 100+), Ananias the high priest was called the ‘great procurer of money’ and that the temple was going to rack and ruin because of avarice and mutual hatred. ‘So we are forced to conclude that in the Court of the Gentiles, in spite of the sanctity of the Temple area, there could have been a flourishing trade in animals for sacrifice, perhaps supported by the powerful high-priestly family of Annas.’

- 10.** Going into certain cathedrals, one might come to the conclusion that there is rather too great a concern to relieve visitors of their money. There is a well-stocked shop and there are prominent notices about how much it costs to keep the place going. Is there anything wrong with this? What would *you* do if you were in charge of the overall policy of the cathedral? The same might be asked, of course, of church building managers.

- 11.** Many passages in the Bible speak of God or Christ ‘coming to his people’. When he comes to us, is it as judge? or deliverer? or comforter? or encourager? or what...? _____

Why do you think as you do?

Suggestions for a brief act of worship

[As always, make use of whatever seems appropriate in the material offered, plus anything else that you think would be helpful.]

Prayer

Lord God in majesty,
true king of heaven and earth,
it is in human hearts that you wish to reign.
Help us to give ourselves without reserve
to the one who entered Jerusalem on a donkey
and received a crown of thorns;
for he is now seated with you in glory,
to reign with you to the end of time. Amen.

[Roger Pickering, in Frank Colquhoun (ed.),
Contemporary Parish Prayers, H&S, 1975, p. 40.]

Reading: Malachi 3:1-4 + 4:1-3

Hymn or song

You might like to select one from the examples given below.

Not quite a meditation

‘Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem’. He knew what awaited him: rejection of his message, rough treatment, false accusations, abandonment by friends, and finally an agonizing death. No wonder he had to ‘set his face to go’.

That was Jesus. What about me?

I don’t have to face anything remotely comparable to that, but some plans and initiatives make me nervous. I might have to stand against evil people. I might make a fool of myself and then everyone would be embarrassed. Embarrassment is the Room 101 of fears.

And suppose my good and noble idea isn’t the right one? A wrong journey?

But could it be worse than standing still like a garden gnome (or a pillar of the church)? Or going round in circles like a merry-go-round horse?

Boats going in the wrong direction can be re-directed. So can people.

People anchored to the spot are really stuck.

So where am I? On a journey? Or stuck in a transport café?

‘Be steadfast, immovable’? No – read further. Get it in context:

‘... ***always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain***’ (1 Cor 15:58)

Supplementary Material: Hymns about Journeying or pilgrimage

Here are a few random examples in well-known hymns.

A. Brother let me be your servant ...

Let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace
To let you be my servant, too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,
We are brothers on the road;
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load.

C. Guide me, o thou great Jehovah,

Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but Thou art mighty,
Hold me with Thy powerful hand:
Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven,
Feed me now and ever more,
Feed me now and ever more,

Open Thou the crystal fountain
Whence the healing stream doth flow;
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through:
Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer,
Be Thou still my strength and shield,
Be Thou still my strength and shield.

B. He who would valiant be

'Gainst all disaster,
Let him in constancy
Follow the Master.
There's no discouragement
Shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent
To be a pilgrim.

When I tread the verge of Jordan
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death, and hell's destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side:
Songs of praises, songs of praises,
I will ever give to Thee,
I will ever give to Thee.

D. Forever with the Lord ...

And nightly pitch my moving tent
A day's march nearer home.

The Four Gospel Accounts of the Entry into Jerusalem (for reference)**Matthew 21**

1 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples,
2 saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead

Mark 11

11 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 2 and said to them, 'Go into the

Luke 19

28 After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. 29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, 30

John 12

12 The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.
13 So they took

of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately.' 4 **This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 5 'Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'** 6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7 they brought the donkey **and the colt**, and put their cloaks on **them**, and he sat on them. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in

village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. 3 If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" 4 They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, 5 some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' 6 They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

7 Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. 8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.

9 Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

saying, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 31 If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" 32 So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. 33 As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?' 34 They said, 'The Lord needs it.'

35 Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. 36 As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. 37 As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, 38 saying, 'Blessed is the king who comes in the

branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord - the King of Israel!'

14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; **as it is written: 15 'Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!'** 16 His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

17 So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. 18 It was also because they heard

<p>the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’ 10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ 11 The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’</p>	<p>10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’ 11 Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple;</p>	<p>name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’</p>	<p>that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. 19 The Pharisees then said to one another, ‘You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!’</p>
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Painting of the Week:

El Greco, *Christ driving traders from the temple*

<http://www.bridgemanartondemand.com/index.cfm?event=catalogue.qsearch&newSearch=1&searchstring=El+Greco%2C+Christ+driving+traders+from+the+temple&colour=>

The third of at least four versions that El Greco did of the story of Christ cleansing the temple, at four stages in his development as an artist. All four contrast the Old Law with the New. In all of them, El Greco ranges the apostles to the right of Christ, representing the New Law. To the left we always see an old man, associated with the Law in Paul’s writings.

[Joan Crossley writes:] The expulsion of the traders from the Temple occurred just after Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Jesus had been hailed and applauded by the crowd, his popularity was at its peak. Yet the next day he made an attack on the very heart of the Jewish faith and its practices, by staging an assault on traders in the Temple precincts.

On the left Adam and Eve are being expelled from Eden. This is symbolic of the Fall of humanity which Jesus is to redeem. On the right panel the scene depicted is Abraham preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac: this was to alert the reader to the sacrifice of God’s chosen Son which was about to be made.

El Greco has not been old-fashioned enough to paint a halo around Jesus’ head to point up his holiness. Instead he has placed Jesus against the bright townscape seen through the arch. Jesus has entered the Temple through the open archway, bringing the freshness and brightness of the Spring light with Him into the darkness of the Temple. This symbolizes the new spiritual order which Jesus will bring to the decadent

tradition of the Temple. Up to this point Jesus had merely been a disturbing teacher and healer. Now he is setting himself against the order of the State and the local religious leaders. The figure gazing up at Jesus is absorbing this fact with horror and admiration. Perhaps he stands in for us, as we are invited to contemplate the scene and its consequences.

Meditation.

Although the story of Jesus driving the money-changers out of the Temple is a very familiar one, it isn't very common as a subject for pictures. Perhaps rich people who buy art are not fond of owning pictures which remind us that Jesus had strong views on wealth and faith?

I think that El Greco's picture offers us a useful guide to how we might interpret the scene in the Temple. The Temple can be seen as representing all large institutions, perhaps even our modern Church. It is beautiful, and venerable, but has become confused and corrupted, filled up with accrued traditions which need reassessing and cleansing from time to time. Here Jesus is resolute, determined to do what is right, even at the financial and emotional cost of some. This is the Jesus who demands that we take a stand against injustice, the Jesus who has inspired women and men to fight against slavery, against apartheid, against all injustice, suffering and disease. Unless the people of faith harness Jesus' righteous anger against what is wrong with the world, ours will become a dead religion, observant of ritual but not of human need.

Questions

Are we uncomfortable with an angry Jesus ?

Is Jesus still challenging those who believe in Him?

What do we think might make Jesus furious in the twenty-first century?



Feedback

1. *My answers: The words 'From that time' indicate a new phase. : Peter's insight or rather, God's revelation to Peter, that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah (Mt 16:13-20). : The main idea is that Jesus actually came into the world to give his life so that everything points forward to the last week in Jerusalem.*
2. *You might have thought of the following and many more: Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, (+ Jesus) to Egypt, to Nazareth, to Jerusalem; also Abra(ha)m's journeys; Jacob to Laban; Joseph; Jacob and family to Egypt; the people from Egypt; from the desert into Canaan; Naomi and family to Moab coming back with only Ruth; etc., etc., etc.*
3. *Your answer. Both 'journey' and 'journal' are connected with the word 'jour' = 'day' and both are to do with 'progress', geographical or otherwise.*
4. *Your answer. Discuss it in when you meet together. See the end for some examples. You might like to look at the 'topic' section of your church hymn/song book. Complete Anglican Hymns Old and New has a section called 'The Journey of Life' as well as 'The Pilgrim Community'.*
5. *There are many small variations but probably the main ones are these: only Matthew mentions two animals (and some think he has misunderstood Zc 9:9) : Mk and Lk don't quote Zc 9:9 but John does. : Matthew alone uses the (Jewish) title 'Son of David'. : Luke adds a bit about the people praising God; John adds something about the disciples' delayed understanding and the reaction of the Pharisees.*
6. *Perhaps Luke's emphasis on joyful praise (also that he singles out 'the disciples' as the ones who praised God; John's focus on the reaction of both disciples and enemies of Jesus (testifying; vainly trying to stop him).*
7. *Cleansing the temple [followed by the cursing of the fig tree, another sign of judgment] : Your answer. Discuss it with the others.*
8. *Your answer. I would go for a. and b. Despite the support for e. from two such eminent scholars, I can't see it. The word translated 'robber' does not always have nationalist overtones (e.g. Jn 10:1, 8; 2 Cor 11:26) and there is no other hint of this in what Jesus says.*

Session 7: The Passion of Our Lord

This study contains:

An outline of the events leading up to the crucifixion and resurrection

A study of the Last Supper and preliminary thoughts about implications for today

A picture for reflection plus notes

From Supper to the Cross

Introduction

In our study of the life of Christ we have now reached the final confrontation in Jerusalem. Jesus has entered the city in style and made a further splash by two apparently out-of-character actions: driving traders out of the temple with the help of a whip and then cursing a fruitless fig tree.

Let's give a summary of the way that Matthew presents this final phase of Jesus' earthly ministry before going on to look at a couple of passages in more detail. We suggest that you look through this without haste and check that you have a reasonably clear idea of the sequence of events. If some of the notes don't convey very much because the events are unfamiliar then ask others in the group.

Whether these events are very familiar or not, it is a Good Thing to read through the whole story during the course of Holy Week, i.e. the week leading up to Easter Sunday, or indeed, any time.

Opening Quiz

See if you can put these events in the right order (nos 1-8) and add a word of explanation for each.

Order	Event catchword	Word of explanation
_____	Aggressive questions	_____
_____	Gethsemane	_____
_____	Entry on a donkey	_____
_____	Barabbas freed	_____
_____	Last Supper	_____
_____	'My God, my God..'	_____
_____	Trial before Caiaphas	_____
_____	Cleansing the temple	_____

Here is the full rundown of the events of the last period of Jesus' life:

Chapter	Events
21	Entry into Jerusalem; cleansing temple, cursing fig tree Disputes about authority (cf. John the Baptist) Parables: two sons (grumpy obedient; pleasant disobedient); Vineyard and tenants (historical parable)
22	Parable of the wedding feast Dealing with aggressive questions: taxes to Caesar; resurrection; greatest commandment; David's son?
23	Woe to scribes and Pharisees. Lament over Jerusalem
24	The destruction of the temple; the 'coming again' of the Son of Man
25	Parables: wise and foolish virgins; use of talents; sheep and goats
26	Plot to arrest Jesus; Jesus' head anointed; Judas's betrayal; the 'Last Supper'; agony in Gethsemane; arrest, 'trial', Peter's failure
27	Judas returns the silver and hangs himself; Jesus and Pilate; Barabbas is freed; Jesus is crucified between two robbers; darkness; temple curtain torn Joseph of Arimathea takes the body for burial; a guard is placed
28	The resurrection; Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary' see an angel and then Jesus; the guards are bribed Jesus' final commission to the eleven disciples

- As you can see, quite a bit happened and it's related in these final chapters of Matthew. We shall concentrate on just two passages: the Last Supper, and the Crucifixion itself.

Before we do that, perhaps you would find it helpful (I do, anyway) to summarize the overall movement of this last section of Matthew's Gospel. See if you can do it in about eight words. I've put a couple in.

Entry _____
Cross _____

2. The Last Supper

It may seem rather foolish to choose a topic that has engendered some of the fiercest argument in the whole area of Christian doctrine. However, we have found many times in group study that it is possible to learn from each other – even (and especially) when there are radical differences of opinion. There is a Charlie Brown cartoon which ends with the phrase: 'I had to hit him quick. He was beginning to make sense', and unfortunately many potentially fruitful

conversations seem to be stymied by this sort of fear. Of course, it is not completely groundless: people have been led astray by clever but false arguments. And we are commanded to ‘hold fast to what we believe’. Nevertheless we hope that there will be enough trust in the group to make personal sharing possible - and therefore significant learning.

Recall that this passage comes immediately after two greatly contrasting events:

- an expression of love from an unknown, unnamed woman in anointing Jesus
- betrayal by one of Jesus’ close followers, Judas.

So the next thing to do is to read through at least Mt 26:17-29. As previously, you may like to arrange for people to follow different versions and note the points at which they differ from Matthew. There is a summary of the most noteworthy differences in the next frame.

3. Understanding the Passover

It’s almost impossible to detach ourselves from what we already know about this ‘last supper’ and about how it has come to be interpreted by the church. Nevertheless, let’s have a try. Recall that Jesus has told the disciples that he is going to keep the Passover with them and makes arrangements similar to those made for borrowing a ride for the entry into Jerusalem (Mt 26:18f.). In 26:2 Jesus links the Passover with his crucifixion, though it is doubtful that they were able to take this in until some time after the event.

So Jesus starts off the traditional Passover ritual. It directed the attention of the participants back to the time when Israel was delivered from bondage in Egypt and made their way through the desert to take possession of Canaan, the promised land.

Normally the leader would take the unleavened bread and say the words, ‘This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the wilderness.’ Presumably this is what the disciples expected Jesus to say.

Jesus, however, alters the words in a rather shocking way: ‘This is *my body*.’ What do you think the disciples would make of this? Jot down your ideas below and then share together.

4. For reference, here is the text of Matthew with some differences noted. Have a look at it if you like and then move on to the next frame.

Matthew 26

26 While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing [it] he broke [it], gave [it] to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' 27 Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many **for the forgiveness of sins.** 29 I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'

Variations in Mk, Lk and Jn

'it' is not present in the Greek. Jesus would have blessed **God** not the bread.

Mark: and all of them drank from it.

for the forgiveness of sins not in Mark or Luke

Luke has *an extra cup at the beginning of this section*: 17 Then he **took a cup**, and after giving thanks he said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; 18 for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.'

1 Corinthians 11 has some further variations;

23 For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had **given thanks** [Greek: *eucharistesas*], he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. **Do this, as often as you drink it**, in remembrance of me.'

5. From Last Supper to Lord's Supper

In what follows I shall use the term 'the Lord's Supper' rather than others that could be chosen (e.g. Eucharist, Mass, Holy Communion, Breaking of Bread) for simplicity and because it is a term that St Paul uses in 1 Cor 11:20. You will see that it is complicated trying to sort out exactly what was said and done. We will confine ourselves to those things which are clear.

All four gospel writers make it clear that the Last Supper was closely associated with the celebration of the Passover and therefore redemption from slavery by means of a sacrifice.

We have already noted the Passover associations and context and the striking change that Jesus has introduced. There are many resonances also with other parts of Scripture (especially 'poured out his soul' and 'for many' recall Isa 53:10 and 12, which speaks of the voluntary sacrifice of 'the Servant' for the sins of the people).

Is there anything to draw from this that ought to be agreed by *all* Christians? For example, is it clear that Jesus intended this to be the start of a church practice rather than a one-off event?

- a. Yes, because Paul adds, ‘do this as often as you drink it’.
 - b. No, because only Paul adds, ‘Do this as often...’.
 - c. No, because Paul meant every meal to be a remembering of Jesus’ death for us.
 - d. Yes, because virtually all Christians from the earliest days have done it.
 - e. Other. _____
-

6. It seems to me that the greatest contrast between views of the Lord’s Supper arises from whether we put the emphasis on:

- A. This *is* my body; or
- B. Do this in *remembrance* of me.

Is it possible that Jesus meant ‘This is literally my body’? I must say that I don’t think it is. Jesus was there in the flesh and the tradition of saying ‘This is the bread’ heavily weighs against the disciples taking this literally. (You might also like to look at Joshua 4:6 where the question is literally, ‘What are these stones?’ but the answer to be given is in terms of their significance.)

What do you think? Don’t get bogged down in a long discussion at this stage.

7. What about the element of **remembrance**? There have been some fierce discussions about this too. Which of the following positions seems to you to be nearest to the truth?

- a. We do it in remembrance of Christ (his death and resurrection etc.) and he is present with us – as he is always.
- b. Christ is present in a special way when we obey this specific command. It’s got to be more than mere remembrance.
- c. The elements (bread and wine) are changed in some way. Even if we accept that Jesus blessed **God** at the Last Supper, Paul speaks of ‘the cup of blessing which we bless’ in 1 Cor 10:16.
- d. The words ‘make the memorial’ are better because they indicate the intention to re-present (or ‘make present again’) the sacrifice of Christ in the current situation.
- e. Other? _____

Where do you (and your church) stand on this? Can you position yourself somewhere on the line below according to whether A or B is the most important or prominent aspect?

A _____ B

8. Compare notes and be prepared to explain *very briefly* why you chose the position you did. Then read on.

Now see if you can jot down the important points *on which you are agreed*. If you are a group that agrees on just about everything of importance, try and imagine what agreement you might find in churches very different from your own.

9. **Moving towards greater understanding and unity**

We hope that groups studying this little course will be so diverse that it's almost impossible to give advice as to how this might be achieved. But perhaps the following questions might produce some useful ideas.

Is it desirable for us to seek greater unity and understanding? Why? For example, to what extent does it affect the witness of all Christian churches?

What sort of unity might we realistically expect? For example, full inter-communion? Agreement to differ? Non-interference with others' views (even when we think they are seriously astray)?

Are there ways of working together in areas where we do agree?

Would it be possible to undertake a more in-depth study of some of the issues that separate us? If so, would we mind if someone changed their views and their allegiance?

To what extent should loyalty to our own background and tradition affect our openness to examine others' views?

Personally I have gained a great deal from people from whom I fundamentally differ (including atheists!) and hope you will too.

A brief Act of Worship: The Crucifixion

Having dealt with some complicated and contested issues in the first part of today's study, let's concentrate mainly now on listening and meditating. The main aids are: the text of the crucifixion itself and this week's very poignant picture – with some music of your choice.

Opening Prayer

Eternal God, in the cross of Christ
 we see the cost of our sin and the depth of your love:
 in humble hope and fear, may we place at his feet
 all that we have and all that we are, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Reading: Mt 27:27-61

[This is a substantial reading which contains the one and only word from the cross that Matthew reports. Take you time in reading it. It will probably be good to have two or more readers.]

Music and worship

Sing or listen to something appropriate for the group. For example:

Come and see **or** *My Lord, what love is this* (Graham Kendrick)

When I survey the wondrous cross

Ah, holy Jesu, how hast thou offended...?

‘Thy rebuke has broken his heart’ and/or ‘Surely, surely, he has borne our griefs’ and/or ‘All they that see him’ and ‘He trusted in God’ (Handel’s *Messiah*).

Closing prayer

You are worthy, O Lamb, for you were slain,
and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and nation;
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God.

**We adore you O Christ, and we bless you,
because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.**

To him who loves us
and has freed us from our sins by his blood,
and made us a kingdom of priests
to stand and serve before our God:

**To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honour, glory and might,
for ever and ever. Amen.**

Picture of the Week:

Annibale Carracci, *The Dead Christ Mourned (The Three Maries)*

<http://www.bridgemanartondemand.com/index.cfm?event=catalogue.qsearch&newSearch=1&searchstring=Annibale+Carracci%2C+The+Dead+Christ+Mourned&colour=>

The grief of the Maries was a common subject in painting and formed an important strand in catholic spirituality. It focuses on the tragedy that the Son of God, the good and perfect One, should have been murdered by people not so dissimilar to us. Personally I find this particular picture especially moving.

[Alan Storkey writes:] In the 16th century great importance was given to the full biblical narrative of Christ’s death *and* resurrection, for example, in Michelangelo’s great series of drawings. There were also several series of studies of the deposition from the cross which came to a climax in the 17th century in the great works of

Rubens and Rembrandt. But other dramas were also captured, and here it is the drama of the women mourning the crucified Christ.

Carracci was an Italian painter of the high Renaissance from Bologna and there seems to be some tension between the great palace commissions which he took on, which were extremely demanding, and his own personal faith and life. Sometimes he was depressed, and in this painting he clearly knows and understands something of grief. Christ has been taken down from the cross, his body white from loss of blood and death. He has fallen into the lap of Mary his mother, who is experiencing the fulfilment of the prophecy of Simeon at Jesus' birth that a sword would pierce her soul. She is distraught beyond consciousness.

She is supported by one of the other Maries (or Marys), possibly Mary Magdalene or Mary from Bethany. She in turn is outside herself in grief and looking to the darker figure, perhaps Martha of Bethany, whose face is convulsed in grief. The hands of Martha and the final figure, perhaps Mary Magdalene, conveys the grief of soul and face already conveyed in the great sweep of the painting up from the body of Christ.

For further reflection

Now that we know about the resurrection, is it possible to imagine the desolation of those who loved Jesus when he had died and all seemed lost? To what extent does the painting help? Does it bring to mind other situations of distress and hopelessness?

Supplementary Material

Transubstantiation

The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church says this:

‘TRANSUBSTANTIATION. In the theology of the Eucharist, the conversion of the whole substance of the bread and wine into the whole substance of the Body and Blood of Christ, only the accidents (i.e. the appearances of the bread and wine) remaining. The word was in widespread use in the later part of the 12th cent., and at the Lateran Council of 1215 belief in Transubstantiation was defined as *de fide*; but the elaboration of the doctrine was not achieved till after the acceptance of the Aristotelian metaphysics later in the 13th cent. when it found classical formulation in the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas.

‘At the Council of Trent (sess. xiii, cap. 4) the medieval doctrine was reaffirmed, but with a minimum of technical philosophical language. Since the 13th cent the Eastern [Orthodox] Church has used the word *metousiosis* [change of substance/inner reality] to denote an essentially identical doctrine and has given it formal approval, e.g. at the Synod of Jerusalem of 1672. See also Declaration against Transubstantiation.’

If you have read enough at this point skip to the multiple-choice questions below. If you'd like to know more, read on: but do feel free to bail out at any point.

The doctrine of transubstantiation, as originally expounded by St Thomas Aquinas, made use of the philosophy of Aristotle. Aristotle was certainly a genius, but I think it is fair to say that no one today can reasonably accept his account of substance and accidents. It goes like this:

There are two aspects to consider with any object: the substance and the accidents. Thus bread has an essential 'breadness' (the substance) and also the appearance of bread (the accidents). So suppose it could have a substance with the accidents belonging to something else? This is what happens in the Eucharist. Note that it is not the same as flesh being disguised as bread. Consider a fake diamond: its substance is paste (whatever that is) but its accidents are also paste, provided you look closely enough.

Here is an extract from the six-volume Roman Catholic theological dictionary, *Sacramentum Mundi* (edited by Karl Rahner with Cornelius Ernst and Kevin Smyth, Burns and Oates, 1968), volume 6, pp. 293-5.

[p. 294] '...To reach an understanding of the eucharistic presence which will be in accord with the modern era, the hermeneutical principle must be invoked according to which the philosophical context from which the formulation of a truth of faith is derived may be expendable and replaceable. ...

[p. 294] '... In detail, the following difficulties are now felt with regard to the definition of transubstantiation worked out on the basis of Aristotelian and scholastic cosmology

'a) The models used by modern physics give matter an atomic structure. The ultimate particles combine to form atoms which are grouped as molecules of various types. In certain combinations, the molecules form bread and wine as their end-results. Hence it cannot be said that the substance of bread or wine, composed of matter and form, is the ontologically prior reality from which in consequence the chemical properties result. Bread and wine are the last stage of a combination of atoms, molecules and forces. This is why in the twenties theologians had recourse to physics in the explanation of transubstantiation and transposed it to the level of the atom or molecule, which meant that the transubstantiation of a host contained an incalculable number of transubstantiations ... By the sixties, these efforts had to be considered a failure, because discussion of transubstantiation as a physical or cosmological process no longer seemed desirable.

'b) The cosmological approach to transubstantiation presents the further difficulty that the survival of the accidents forms an unthinkable paradox. If one continues to maintain, along the lines suggested by the Councils of Constance and Trent, that the eucharistic accidents exist *sine subjecto* [without a subject], there is extension but nothing that is extended, roundness but nothing that is round, hardness but nothing that is hard, weight without anything heavy, activity with nothing acting, passivity with nothing affected, etc.

'c) The conventional notion of transubstantiation gives a far too impersonal impression. Aristotle took his categories and basic concepts mainly from the realm of the inorganic, which led in scholasticism to an objectified treatment of

transubstantiation. At the present time, when existential philosophy and personalism are the order of the day, an effort is being made to see the eucharistic change in a different perspective. The idea is to emphasize the role of the glorified Lord who gives himself to his own as their spiritual food and desires to be one with them.

‘In view of the philosophical difficulties and the demands of personalism, the *nouvelle théologie* had sought to replace the notion of transubstantiation by that of transfinalization, but without explaining precisely whether a new terminology or a new interpretation was aimed at. If the bread receives a new ordination to an end, an ontological change must have taken place. The question is what is this change.... [Theologians who take this approach] agree in opting for a *transfinalization* or *transignification* of the consecrated bread and wine.

‘3. The more recent approaches suggest the following considerations. One has to remember that the words of institution indicate a change but do not give any guiding line for the interpretation of the actual process. As regards transubstantiation, it may then be said that substance, essence, meaning and purpose of the bread are identical. But the meaning of a thing can be changed without detriment to its matter. A house, for instance, consists of a certain arrangement of materials and has a clearly established nature and a clearly established purpose. If the house is demolished and the materials used for building a bridge, a change of nature or essence has intervened. Something completely different is there. The meaning has been changed, since a house is meant to be lived in and a bridge is used to cross a depression. But there has been no loss of material. In an analogous way, the meaning of the bread has been changed through the consecration. Something which formerly served profane use now becomes the dwelling-place and the symbol of Christ who is present and gives himself to his own. This means that an [p. 295] ontological change has taken place in the bread.

‘In a general way, three classes of symbols may be distinguished. The first type are effects which actually point to their cause, like smoke and fire. The second type have by their very nature a certain potential signification, which needs, however, to be actualized by being determined and expressed, e.g., washing with water as a symbol of purification from sin. The third type of symbol do not by nature designate any given object either actually or potentially. They only become signs through human convention, like the colours of traffic lights. The bread should be included in the second type of symbols, since the fact that it is food makes it naturally apt to symbolize spiritual nourishment and union. But the consecrated bread possesses the further property of signifying that the Lord who offers himself as food is not just at a distance but is present in the bread. By virtue of this concentrated symbolism, the bread becomes the sacramental manifestation of the presence of Christ. Hence transubstantiation means a change of finality and being in the bread and wine, because they are raised to being symbols of Christ who is present there and invites men to spiritual union.’

Traditional Roman Catholic sources still argue for the older interpretation and explanation. See, for example, www.NewAdvent.org, which claims to prove dogmatically the fact of the substantial change here under consideration’.

Multiple-choice Question

Whether you read a little or a lot or even all of the above we'd like to know your opinion. Do any of the following statements ring bells? Be prepared to discuss the issue when you meet, if it seems appropriate.

- a. This sort of thing is typical of people who haven't got their feet in the real world. It's irrelevant to nearly everyone, including Christians.
- b. We need to be able to explain the teachings of the Church to people who want to know more.
- c. We need to be able to defend the Church's teaching from ill-informed and hostile attacks.
- d. I feel sorry for those who are landed with such doctrines and impressed by their attempts to discern what was important in the traditional teaching.
- e. I was glad to read all that and look forward to a better-informed dialogue with friends who disagree with me.
- f. It's great to get into serious philosophical discussion.
- g. Let's just agree to differ and love one another.
- h. This confirms how wrong people are who *accept/reject* this teaching.

Other (your response) _____



Feedback

1. *Your suggestion. How about: [Entry] Disputes Supper Garden Trial Cross Burial Resurrection Commission*
3. *Your ideas. Perhaps something like this: as the Israelites had always looked back to the nation's foundation events, so would followers of Jesus look back to his death for them.*
5. *Your answer. Personally I think a. and d. are strong reasons.*
8. *Your answer. I hope we should all agree that we should obey Christ's command to eat bread and drink wine in remembrance of him; also that he is present among us when we do this rightly.*

Session 8: Christ is Risen! Alleluia!

1. Introduction

Now that you've done a quick tour of Matthew's Gospel, stopping at various significant places en route, and sometimes looking over the fence to see what Mark and the others are doing, here's a little quiz that would probably fool most University Challenge contestants. But *you'll* be OK.

Quiz:

1. Which of the following events occur *only* in Matthew's Gospel? You may well have to guess some of them, but your knowledge of Matthew should be a help.
 - a. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'
 - b. Judas hanged himself
 - c. Earthquake, tearing of the temple curtain and raising up of saints who had died
 - d. The dream that Pilate's wife had and concern to emphasize that Pilate found Jesus innocent
 - e. Guard on the tomb in case of body snatching by the disciples
 - f. Another earthquake when the stone was rolled away
 - g. Disciples worshipping Jesus
 - h. Bribing the soldiers to say the disciples took the body
 - i. 'Let his blood be on us and our children'
 - j. 'Mary Magdalene and [another] Mary visit the tomb'
 - k. 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations'

 2. It is thought that Matthew's readers were largely or wholly from a Jewish background. Can you give two or more reasons why scholars think so?
-
-

2. The Resurrection and Afterwards: what really happened?

Since the resurrection of Jesus Christ is such a fundamental conviction for Christians, it is not surprising that it is to be found in all the Gospels. If, in a normal court of law, we were to cross-examine (no pun intended – but, as puns go, it's not bad) the four gospel writers, we should probably conclude that Jesus really had died on the Friday and the tomb really was empty on Sunday morning.

However, when we look more carefully at the different accounts, it is quite difficult to see how they can all be entirely consistent with each other. It is well known how Frank Morison, an unbelieving lawyer, set himself the task of demonstrating that the Gospels were inconsistent and that they could not be believed. As he enquired carefully into the subject he came to the conclusion that they *were* consistent. He was converted and wrote a very different book, *Who Moved the Stone* (Faber, 1930, 1978; still available). A somewhat more recent examination and presentation of the evidence is in John Wenham's *Easter Enigma* (Paternoster, 1984).

It may well be of interest to some to explore this topic in depth, but, in line with the task we have undertaken, we shall present a brief outline of Matthew's presentation of the resurrection and the appearances of Jesus afterwards, and then concentrate on one particular passage: 'the Great Commission'.

3. **Matthew's Account of the Death and Resurrection of Christ**

You might like to check that you could recall the main events starting with the crucifixion itself. Jesus crucified between two bandits and the soldiers keeping watch and casting lots for his clothes.

One way of doing this is to write the events (see the feedback) on cards and put the cards face down on the floor or table.

As you recall each event turn over the appropriate card (the leader needs to know which card is which). A page with events is given at the end – for the leader to cut up before the meeting.

When you have all the cards face up, put them in the right order.

A variation would be to write the events on post-it stickers and put them on a flip chart or (hosts permitting) on the wall – or anywhere.

Or type them into a laptop and project them to a convenient place. Etc., etc., etc.

4. **The Great Commission**

We shall concentrate finally on what is usually referred to as 'The Great Commission': Jesus makes some far-reaching claims and some commands. How would you summarize them?

Claims

Commands

5. **Carrying out our Commission today**

Let's try and imagine what it must have been like for the first disciples. Jesus had risen from the dead but they hadn't worked out the implications of it all. Notice

that v. 17 says ‘some worshipped’ but ‘some doubted’. Personally I’m not sure which is the more surprising of these two statements: these were Jews who knew that God alone was to be worshipped; on the other hand they had the evidence of Jesus alive before them, having seen for sure that he had been dead and buried. So they are confused and not of one mind and heart.

Jesus says ‘all authority in heaven and earth is given to me’. A stupendous claim. Does it remind you of someone else who made (or implied) a similar claim (falsely)? _____

6. It seems to me to be important to realize how ill-equipped they were to ‘make disciples of all nations’ and yet that was exactly what God made possible through their witness. They hadn’t a clue as to how to go about their task except that they had a message to proclaim and teach, and they knew (v. 20) that Jesus was with them and had the power to heal and cast out demons.

So what is it that stops the Church today from making progress? Or, where the Church *is* making noticeable progress, what are the significant things that make it possible?

Reflect on this together: You might like to focus on particular phrases (see below) and there is some Supplementary Material from a very helpful book by Michael Green.

Note: ‘disciples’ (not just ‘converts’ or ‘church members’); ‘baptizing’ (circumstances and method not specified but a command from Jesus); ‘obey everything’ (concern with a Christian equivalent to the Law? does it include healing and exorcism, etc.?); ‘remember’ (how could they forget? – they could!); ‘with you always’ (cf. Mt 18:20, ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’). Dick France comments on this: ‘not so much a cosy reassurance as a necessary equipment for mission’. But reassuring also!

Jot down your thoughts below and be prepared to share them together.

Supplementary Material

Extracts from Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew (Bible Speaks Today)*, IVP, 2000, pp. 320-323

The Great Commission (28:16-20) [abbreviated; the whole is worth reading]

The book ends on a mountain, just as it had begun (after Jesus' birth and temptation) on a mountain, and just as its mid-point had been another mountain (5:1; 17:1). The mount of the Sermon reveals the lifestyle Jesus requires in the kingdom. The mount of the transfiguration reveals who he really is. And the mount of the Great Commission outlines his worldwide mission. The pattern of the book is skilled, and it is complete. It is the end of the earthly story of Jesus. It is the end of the training of the Twelve. And the emphasis now shifts to them as the Lord undertakes to work with them and empower them. They are now to do the discipling (19), although they still remain disciples.

The *authority* of Jesus is a major theme in this Gospel. Jesus appears on the scene as a teacher who has authority (7:29). The miracles in chapter 8 onwards denote his authority not simply in word but in deed. He even has God's authority to forgive sins (9:6). And in chapter 10 he imparted that authority of his temporarily to his apostles as they went out on their mission, a trial run for all that would await them after his death. Indeed, the authority of Jesus over against the contemporary interpreters of the law has been a major theme of this Gospel. And now his authority is emphasized by his resurrection. He is shown to be Son of Man, King of the Jews, Messiah, Son of God, the glorious risen one. And he imparts his authority to his followers. They are his empowered representatives.

The baton has been passed from the Master to the disciples. The power of the risen Christ is available for those disciples. The commandment of the risen Christ is given for those disciples: they must go and make disciples. And the promise of the risen Christ is their comfort and stay: nothing shall ever rob them of his presence.

The Gospel that began with the assurance that this baby to be born would be Immanuel ('God is with us', 1:23) closes with the assurance that he is with them still, and will be to the end of time. This promise is not merely for the individual, but for the group. Chapter 18 verse 20 assures them as they gather in his name that he is in their midst. Without his presence and empowering they could never even contemplate world mission. When the Lord commands, he enables. And his enabling is his presence.

The Great Commission to the unevangelized nations, who have appeared from time to time in a minor role thus far in the narrative, is now at the top of the agenda of Jesus for his followers. The last command of Jesus is: 'Go and make disciples of all nations.'

The Great Commission is the response to meeting the risen Christ (17). It is not until the disciples have personally met with the risen Lord that they are consumed with a

passion to go and tell others. If evangelism is at a low ebb in parts of the worldwide church (and it is), could it be because many churchgoers have never had a personal, life-changing encounter with Jesus?

And the Great Commission springs from worship (9, 17). It was as the Marys and the disciples fell down in total adoration of Jesus, and were lost in wonder, love and praise, that they were inspired to go on mission. It is still. Evangelism springs from worship. It is no individualistic enterprise. It flows from a Christianity where worship is vital.

The Great Commission is a matter of sheer obedience. Verse 19 picks up the repeated stress to go to Galilee (7, 10, 16). Galilee was of course the region where Jesus met them: there is one Jerusalem appearance and one Galilee appearance in Matthew's balanced account. But it has a deeper meaning, as 4:15 shows. It points to Galilee of the Gentiles, so that 'the people living in darkness may see a great light'. 22 Jesus does not recommend such a mission. He demands it. It is his final charge. How can his church fail to keep it? Yet evangelism is the Cinderella at the Christian ball. We Christians are guilty of flagrant disobedience to our Master, and the coming of his kingdom is delayed.

The Great Commission includes the baptism and careful discipling of new believers. Matthew is not satisfied, Jesus is not satisfied, with any hasty profession of faith, any perfunctory baptism. The apostles are called not to evoke decisions but to make disciples. And that is an altogether tougher assignment.

It is probable that the actual baptismal formula is assumed in Acts, and only the special new factor, Jesus, singled out for emphasis. Certainly those who baptize in the name of 'Jesus only' have no support from the words of Jesus himself in this Gospel. The apostles are to baptize and they are to nurture people in the Christian path so that they in turn can go and make disciples themselves. The Letters show the depth and intensity of that discipling, and show up our modern five-minute sermonettes for the pathetic things they are.

Finally, the Great Commission is always directed outwards, to the unreached. The Christian church must never degenerate into a comfortable club for the like-minded. It is always called to a discipling, teaching evangelism. And Matthew has provided not only for his own church, but for all time, a magnificent, well-organized tool for carrying out that Great Commission with which his Gospel ends.

So ends this Gospel, which has very clearly depicted who Jesus is, what his message contains, how his kingdom comes, and the cost and challenge of discipleship. Jesus, revelling in his Father's company and authority, had come to bring outsiders into the kingdom. And now, at the climax of the Gospel, his disciples are called to follow his lead, and to go and make disciples of all nations. That task will be complete only when he comes again at the end of all history. Such was the glorious hope that nerved Matthew to give his all for his Master. May it inspire us!

For further study

We have noted several features of Matthew's Gospel as we have proceeded on our whistle stop tour. One of the best ways of consolidating the knowledge we have gained – or the ideas we think we have established – is to read through the whole gospel again with particular questions in mind. For example, the proposition 'Matthew was writing for Jewish readers' can be tested. Ask whether there is evidence for or against this hypothesis and note down your conclusions (tentative and otherwise) as you read. It might be useful to have other more specific questions in mind, e.g. what sort of features would a Jewish Christian writer emphasize over against a Gentile convert? You might suggest: interest in the law (Torah); assumption that readers would understand Old Testament (i.e. Jewish Scripture); language and concepts and would not need to explain them (as Mark does sometimes); attitude of Jesus towards the Jewish nation.

The advantage of having a specific theory and set of questions in mind is that your mind is active and you will probably notice all sorts of things that would otherwise have escaped your attention. That, at any rate, is my experience. I recall riding down a familiar road on my bike, looking for a bank that was open and noticing many different kinds of shops and houses that weren't banks on the way.

You might also want to investigate the very specific allegation that Matthew was anti-Semitic.

Suggestions for Worship

Prayer

We pray to Jesus who is present with us to eternity.

Jesus, light of the world,

bring the light and peace of your gospel to the nations ...

Jesus, Lord of life,

in your mercy, hear us.

Jesus, bread of life,

give food to the hungry ...

and nourish us all with your word.

Jesus, Lord of life,

in your mercy, hear us.

Jesus, our way, our truth, our life,

be with us and all who follow you in the way ...

Deepen our appreciation of your truth and fill us with your life.

Jesus, Lord of life,

in your mercy, hear us.

Jesus, Good Shepherd who gave your life for the sheep, recover the straggler,

bind up the injured, strengthen the sick

and lead the healthy and strong to new pastures.

Jesus, Lord of life,

in your mercy, hear us.

Jesus, the resurrection and the life,

we give you thanks for all who have lived and believed in you ...

Raise us with them to eternal life.

Jesus, Lord of life,

in your mercy, hear us.

accept our prayers, and be with us always. Amen.

[Source: *Times and Seasons*, Church House Publishing, 2006, p. 433]

Readings

John 20:26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' 27 Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' 28 Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' 29 Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Luke 24:44 Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' ... 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

Acts 1:6 So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' 7 He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

Luke 24:52 And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; 53 and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Revelation 1:17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.'

Hymn or Song

There are plenty of well-known hymns and songs, e.g.

Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia

The strife is o'er, the battle done

At thy feet we fall, mighty risen Lord
Behold the Lamb
Lord, enthroned in heavenly splendour
Jesus is Lord,
Thine be the glory
Led like a lamb to the slaughter

Closing prayer

Praise to you Lord Jesus:
**Dying you destroyed our death,
rising you restored our life:
Lord Jesus, come in glory. Amen.**

Picture of the Week:

Salvador Dali, *Christ of St John of the Cross*

<http://www.glasgowmuseums.com/venue/page.cfm?venueid=4&itemid=68>

This picture by Salvador Dali has aroused strong, even violent, emotions. When it was purchased for Glasgow Art Galleries for £8,200 there was a storm of protest. It was seriously damaged in 1961 by a ‘mentally disturbed visitor’, who attacked it with a brick. In 2005 the picture was voted Scotland’s favourite painting in a poll conducted by *The Herald* newspaper.

It has been regarded as arrogant: ‘only God can look down on the cross’ and even as anti-Christian: no blood, no nails – a crucifixion denuded of its true significance. William Crozier organized a petition against the purchase of the painting. He said in an interview later (see *YouTube*) You can’t imagine this man saying, ‘This day you will be with me in paradise’ but rather, ‘This day I will be with you in Hollywood’.

It is clear, however, that Dali himself intended it as an expression of his rediscovered Catholic faith. At the bottom of his studies for the Christ, he wrote: ‘In the first place, in 1950, I had a “cosmic dream” in which I saw this image in colour and which in my dream represented the “nucleus of the atom”. This nucleus later took on a metaphysical sense; I considered it “the very unity of the universe”, the Christ! In the second place, when thanks to the instructions of Father Bruno, a Carmelite, I saw the Christ drawn by Saint John of the Cross, I worked out geometrically a triangle and a circle, which “aesthetically” summarized all my previous experiments, and I inscribed my Christ in this triangle.’

The Archbishop of Glasgow, Mario Conti, speaks of the sense of calm that it engenders: suffering has now been overcome by peace. The victory is achieved.

The painting made a huge impact on me when I first saw it and I asked for (and received) a large reproduction of it for my birthday! A friend who once lived in Glasgow said he used to go frequently to look at it. Many people testify to the amazing power of this picture to move them. But what does it do for you?



Feedback

1. *All except a. and j. You couldn't be expected to know all of these unless you'd read through the Gospels very carefully and also had a very good memory, but you may find the list illuminating. Here it is, in biblical order, with references.*

Judas hanging himself (27:3-10; but cf. Acts 1:16-18); the dream that Pilate's wife had and the concern to emphasize that Pilate found Jesus innocent, 27:19-20, 24-25; including the saying 'Let his blood be on us and our children'; earthquake, tearing of the temple curtain and raising up of saints who had died (27:51-53); guard on the tomb in case of body snatching by the disciples (27:62-66); another earthquake when the stone was rolled away (28:2-4); disciples worshipped Jesus (28:9-10); bribing the soldiers (28:11-15); the 'great commission: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...' (28:16-20)

2. *You might have mentioned Matthew's interest in the Law (e.g. Mt 5); frequent reference to the Jewish Scriptures and interest in showing how prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus; emphasis on Jesus' going first of all to the Jews (e.g. 15:21-28);*

3. Here are the events:

***Mocking** [by passers by, priests, scribes and elders, and the bandits]*

***Darkness** [over the land]*

'My God, my God...' [and sour wine on a sponge is offered]

Jesus dies

Earthquake, curtain ripped

Dead saints appear to many

Centurion says: 'Son of God'

Joseph of Arimathea puts Jesus' body in his tomb

Guards posted at the tomb

Mary M + Mary meet angel at the tomb

Disciples meet Jesus

Guards bribed: 'Disciples stole the body'

Galilee: Jesus' last words to the eleven disciples

4. *Claims*

All authority given to Jesus

I am with you always

Commands

Make disciples of all nations

baptize them

teach them

5. *Satan implies this in Mt 4:8*

<p><i>Mocking</i></p>	<p><i>Dead saints appear to many</i></p>	<p><i>Guards posted at the tomb</i></p>
<p><i>Centurion says ... 'Son of God'</i></p>	<p><i>Two Marys meet the angel at the tomb</i></p>	<p><i>Jesus dies</i></p>
<p><i>'My God, my God...'</i></p>	<p><i>Darkness</i></p>	<p><i>Galilee: Jesus' last words to the eleven disciples</i></p>
<p><i>Joseph of Arimathea puts Jesus' body in his tomb</i></p>	<p><i>Guards bribed: 'Disciples stole the body'</i></p>	<p><i>Disciples meet Jesus</i></p>
		<p><i>Earthquake, curtain ripped</i></p>