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Matthew: Sage Theologian

The Jesus of Matthew

They shall name him Emmanuel,
which means, 'God is with us'...

And remember, I am with you always,
to the end of the age.
Mt 1:23; 28:30

good news brings strife. This is due to rejection of the good news. Family dissension emerges again: a dramatic presentation of the divisions he occasions. It echoes Micah 7:6. The theme of suffering re-emerges (v 38). Jesus did not shrink from the cross; the faithful disciple will be ready to shoulder it. 'Life' (*psyché*) means both 'life' and 'self'. The meaning of the paradoxical saying (v 39) is that one who, through fear of losing one's (earthly) life, denies Jesus and thus thinks to save oneself, in reality loses one's eschatological life ('eternal life', Jn 12:25) in God. It is the paradox of the cross.

Recompense 10:40-42

It is a rabbinical principle that 'the representative of a person is as the person.' Jesus, as the 'one sent', is the Father's representative; the disciples, sent by him, are his representatives. V 42 gives the assurance that the smallest act of kindness shown to a disciple on the ground of one's being a disciple of Christ will not fail to have its reward. What is presupposed is a gracious God who will not overlook the slightest deed of generosity. 'Reward' is not something we earn: it is always free gift of a generous God. In vv 40-42 it is arguable that Matthew has established an order which may reflect the structure of his community. We get: apostles ('you'), prophets, the righteous person (a prominent member), little ones (the 'simple faithful'). Matthew closes the discourse with his customary transitional formula (11:1).

CHAPTER 6

The Hidden Kingdom 11-13

Let anyone with ears listen! (Mt 13: 9)

OPPOSITION AND DIVISION CHS 11-12

Who is John the Baptist? 11:2-29 The mission of the Baptist (3:1-17) had inaugurated the ministry of Jesus. As Jesus resumes his mission after his instruction of the Twelve the Baptist is reintroduced. Matthew compares John and Jesus and stresses the rejection of both by their people. The relationship between Jesus and John is illustrated in question and answer (11:2-6), in Jesus' assessment of John (vv 7-1) and in the rejection of both John and Jesus (vv 16-19).

John the Baptist, in prison (see 4:12), has a problem (11:2-3). His question was prompted by the fact that, in his eyes, the coming Messiah was an awesome judge of he end-time (3:12); Jesus' approach was so different from anything he had expected. John himself was a prophet of doom who warned that the axe was laid to the root of the trees; hence, 'every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire' (3:10). Furthermore, he is convinced that the Coming One would follow his line: 'His winnowing fork is in his hand... the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire' (3:12). In point of fact, Jesus proclaimed that 'the kingdom of God is at hand' (Mk 1:15). Where John prophesied the judgment of God, Jesus prophesied the salvation of God. Hearing, in prison, of the activity of Jesus, a perplexed John sent two of his disciples to enquire: 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' (Mt 11:2). And the answer was: 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them' (11:4-5). In effect, the answer is

that, while Jesus does not fit the unsparing role the Baptist envisaged, he is attuned to another prophetical tradition. Jesus reminds John (through John's disciples) that he had not come to condemn but to save and that healing forgiveness and redemption are the hallmark of God's judgment. John is a prophet of doom, in the line of Amos, Jesus is a prophet of love and forgiveness, spokesman of the Spouse and Father (Mother) in the manner of Hosea (see Hos 1-3; 11).

How is one to evaluate the Baptist? One is not likely to improve on Jesus' assessment (11:7-19). Jesus' testimony firmly relates John to God's plan of salvation. The rhetorical questions ('What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?', 11:7, 8, 9) serve to define – in terms of what John was not – the role of the Baptist. John is no reed bending to every breeze but a granite figure; he is no flaccid courtier but a prisoner of conscience in Herod's dungeon. He is indeed a prophet, a spokesman of God. For that matter, he is 'more than a prophet' because as *Elijah redivivus* (v 14) he is precursor of Jesus and because no other, not even one of the prophets of old, is greater than he. The further statement – 'yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater then he' (v 28) – does not cancel the unique status of John. Rather, the contrast is between the age of promise and the age of fulfilment.

We can picture the little scene that Jesus describes in 11:16. The children, *sitting* in the marketplace – the boys playing the flute and the girls chanting a funeral dirge – form part of a game. The remaining boys are expected to dance (the round dance at weddings was performed by men) and the rest of the girls ought to have formed a funeral procession. Since they have failed to do so, the others loudly complain that they are spoilsports. The point of the parable, then, is the frivolous captiousness of these children and the thrust of it is obvious: the conduct of the scribes and Pharisees is no better. At the moment of crisis, when the last messengers of God had appeared, they hearkened neither to the preaching of repentance nor to the proclamation of the Good News, but criticised and sulked. This was the experience of Matthew and his community in respect of their fellow Jewish adversaries.

Revelation of Father and Son 11:25-30

Mention of Jesus at prayer is relatively frequent in the gospels but only rarely, in the synoptics, are we given any words of his prayer. Matthew and Luke have preserved this lovely prayer of his (Mt 11:25-26; Lk 10:21). It is prayer which brings consolation to all the 'little ones' who feel that they have done nothing more than believe. If they have indeed listened they have already done a 'good work.' Their achievement may seem, in their eyes, a small thing. Because it is gift of the Father, it is of priceless worth. Both evangelists go on, in strangely Johannine terms, to stress the unique relationship of Father and Son, and to explain why Jesus had joyfully thanked the Father for his gracious gift to the little ones (Mt 11:27; Lk 10:22). Equality of Father and Son underlines the unique sonship of Jesus. That Son now invites his disciples to a share in his sonship – there is a comforting glow to his gracious invitation (Mt 11:28-30). There is an echo of Old Testament personified Wisdom (see Prov 8-9; Sir 51:23-27). A two-fold invitation is matched by a two-fold promise. Or, rather, the invitation is 'come... and take' and the promise is 'rest'. Jewish rabbis spoke of the 'yoke of the Torah' – a yoke which, because of the unwieldy 'tradition of men' raised on the law of Moses (see Mk 7:6-8), had become an intolerable burden (Acts 15:10). The 'yoke' of Jesus is the demand for love of God and neighbour (Mt 22:34-40) – and 'his commandments are not burdensome' (1 Jn 5:3). His yoke is easy and his burden is light because of who he is – one 'gentle and humble in heart.' He is no taskmaster but a Master who is a Friend (Jn 15:14-15). He finds his 'meat', his fulfilment, in doing the will of the Father (Jn 4:34). In that will is the disciple of the Son to find rest.

> The spiritual rest Jesus gives (cf Jer 6:16) comes not from practicing 613 commandments, but from assimilating and living Jesus' attitudes, indeed, his very person. In Jesus the Wisdom of God, the teacher and the subject taught are one and the same. Adherence to his person is the sum-total of the law, a yoke that proves most light to the true disciple.[15]

Chapter 12

Most of Matthew 12 is drawn from the conflict stories of Mark 2:1-3:6. In Matthew, however, there is bitter controversy as Jesus hits

back. In Mt 12:1-8 the clash between Jesus and the Pharisees is over one's image of God. Is God a legalist who goes by the book, or a God of liberating mercy? The Hosea-like prophet Jesus quotes Hosea: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' In Mt 12:9 Jesus entered *their* synagogue: Matthew's community had broken with Judaism. The message of vv 10-13 is that mercy is lawful on the sabbath – a touch of irony. Aware of a plot to get rid of him, Jesus withdrew – yet carried on his healing mission. This occasions Matthew's longest fulfilment citation (12:18-21; see Is 42:1-4). The meek and merciful servant, Jesus, is responding to the divine will.

The intransigence of the Pharisees surfaces in 12:24 when they purport to see the hand of Beelzebub in Jesus' exorcisms. In vv 33-37 Jesus sternly denounces them. They are bad trees bearing the evil fruit of malicious words. They will be held to account. In vv 38-42 Jesus rejects the request for a sign. The resurrection of Jesus, typified by Jonah, will be the only sign God will grant. The pagan Ninevites repented at the summons of an insignificant Jewish prophet (Jonah 3:4-10); the Pharisees will not listen to a far greater prophet. The queen of the South undertook a long journey to hear the wisdom of Solomon; the Pharisees have turned a deaf ear to the greater than Solomon among them.

Jesus had freed people of 'unclean spirits'. The 'house' of the healed person is now 'swept, and put in order.' It should not remain empty but become a dwelling of God in the Spirit (see Eph 2:22). Otherwise there is the danger of a disastrous re-possession. Jesus has broken Satan's hold over Israel. If Israel does not acknowledge its messianic deliverer, its state will be worse than ever. For Matthew, the destruction of Jerusalem was a measure of that disaster.

SERMON IN PARABLES CH 13

Chapter 13 is pivotal in Matthews's gospel. What we find is that just as Jesus used parables to meet the demands of his own situation, so does Matthew use them to meet the needs of his community. He has put the parables of ch 13 at the service of his own age and of his own theology. The parable passage forms the second part of the whole section 11:2-13:53. Part one (chs 11-12) records the mounting opposition to Jesus and the rejection of him by the leaders of the

people. This is underlined by the words of thanksgiving for the revelation to 'infants' of what remains hidden to 'the wise and the intelligent' (11:25-26), and culminates in the passage about the 'true relatives' of Jesus, those who do the will of the Father (12:46-50). Then, in 13:1-15, Jesus addresses the 'crowds' as representing the whole of unbelieving Judaism – those who are blind, deaf, lacking understanding (13:10-13). Matthew is saying that the first half of Jesus' parable discourse is an apologia; it is his reaction to his having been rejected by the Jews. But the second half of the discourse (13:36-52) marks a sudden shift to the *disciples* (13:36). They are such as do God's will (13:49-50). Jesus instructs them as to what doing God's will really means.

Parables

At least in his chapter 13, Matthew's use of *parable* seems to conform to that of Mark in two respects. Matthew regards the parable as an enigmatic form of speech directed primarily at outsiders. He distinguishes between a time when Jesus addressed the Jews openly and a time when he begins to address them in parables. In particular, he suggests that Jesus' reply to his rejection by the Jews was distinctively parabolic in form. Jesus had come to the Jews, preaching and teaching, but was rejected by them. He reacted by addressing his apologia to them, but in parables, that is, in riddle, in speech for outsiders. By this fact he proclaims that the Jews are no longer the privileged people of God but, rather, stand under judgment for having spurned their Messiah. This factor (Jesus' turning from the Jews and towards his disciples) is the great turning-point of the gospel; Matthew uses his parable chapter to mark the turning-point. But, for him, this is not a matter of past history: it has immediate relevance for the church to which he belongs. It reflects the relationship, one of virulent animosity, between his Jewish Christian community and contemporary Pharisaic Judaism. While the evangelist does consider the leaders of Judaism to be incorrigible, radically closed to the saving message of Jesus, the same does not hold true for the Jewish people as such. The people of the Jews may still be evangelised and the gospel is addressed to them.

In chapter 13, Matthew called attention to the great turning-point in several ways. For one thing, he studiously avoids designating

Jesus' speech in parables to the Jews as teaching (*didaskein*) or preaching (*keryssein*); instead, he describes it as *lalein*, that is, a 'speaking.' Furthermore, Matthew consistently refers to the Jewish crowds in 13:1-35 as 'them' (*autois*); he thereby depicts the (unbelieving) Jews as a people that stands outside the circle of those to whom God imparts his revelation and promises his end-time kingdom. He introduced the term *parabolé* for the first time in chapter 13 and then distinguishes between a time when Jesus spoke openly to the Jews and a time when he began to speak to them enigmatically. Finally, he gathered eight parabolic units (and two explanations), provided a framework for them, and so drafted a parable speech in two parts.[16]

The Sower 13:3-9, 18-23

The parable of the sower (13:3-9) might, just as well, be called the parable of the soils because, throughout, the emphasis is not really on sower or seed but on the different kinds of soil on which the seed falls. As a parable this is not, as might seem, an agricultural vignette. And the situation depicted is not typically Palestinian as has frequently been urged. Instead one should take the peculiar actions of the sower as part of the deliberately unusual dimension of the story.

The early church's explanation of the parable (vv 18-23) takes it to be concerned with 'the word of the kingdom'. This word is sown in the hearers. Four categories of hearers are distinguished in terms of the place where the seed has fallen: 'on the path', 'on rocky ground', 'among thorns', and 'on good soil'. The fate of the word differs in each case. The evil one comes and snatches the word as it is preached (v 19). Initial joy at the hearing of the word will not compensate for lack of root. Here is a person of the moment who will not persevere in the face of tribulation and persecution (vv 20-21). The description of the third person (v 22) is the analysis of a moralist who leans in great part on explicit teaching of Jesus. The fourth person (v 23) suggests that it is enough to be good soil, to be receptive, in order to bring forth fruit. The application is not unfaithful to the parable, for it only takes the subjective aspect of the proclamation and applies it to the hearers. They are shown that the story of the sower does concern them.

The explanation came about because Christians had discovered to their shock and sorrow that few really believed Jesus' message. They asked the burning question: how could it be that there was such a gulf between themselves and those who could not or would not see? They found an answer in the words of the parable. Think what happens when the sower scatters his seed. Much is lost, for one reason or another. Similarly, many are like the person on the pathway: the word cannot reach them, it is swiped away. Or many prove to be shallow – ready enough to receive, but the readiness did not persist. Many are like seed under thorns: they hear, but the word fights a losing battle against cares and distractions. The shallow mind, the wayward heart, worldly preoccupations, persecution – all these are the obstacles which frustrate the growth of faith. The explanation offers a warning and an encouragement (the harvest) to Christians in such conditions.

Seed Parables 13:24-35

The parable of the weeds among the wheat (13:24-30, 36- 43) – whatever its original intent in the preaching of Jesus – is intended by Matthew as a description of the church, as a reminder that it is not a community of the elect and eternally secure, but a mixed body of righteous and unrighteous, all of whom stand under the mercy of God. It is a parable of the 'kingdom of heaven'. The kingdom is not primarily a state or place but rather the dynamic event of God coming in power to rule his people Israel in the end-time. It should however, and can, become a reality here and now. God's rule becomes real when it finds expression in human life.[17] In its present form is not yet ready for the harvest. Nor has the harvest time arrived. For the present there are good and bad within the kingdom itself. It is only at the judgment that the separation between the two kinds will take place (13:30, 49-50). Emphasis is on the coexistence of good and bad within the kingdom. Because the parable is intended as a repudiation of any elitist or purist view of the kingdom it contains a message of hope. As long as the kingdom is growing, it remains possible to change from 'weed' into 'wheat'. For that matter, part of the message of the parable is to exhort the 'weeds' to change.

Between the parable of the weeds and its explanation, Matthew presents two parables with the same message: the contrast between

the small, unpromising beginnings of the kingdom (the preaching of Jesus) and a glorious result (the Kingdom of God). These parables (vv 31-32, 33) would have been the answer of Jesus to an objection, latent or expressed: could the kingdom really come from such inauspicious beginnings? His reply is that the little cell of disciples will indeed become a kingdom. And in the last analysis, if the kingdom does reach its full dimension, it is not due to anything in the men and women who are the seed of the kingdom; the growth is due solely to the power of God (see 1 Cor 3:6-7) This is why Jesus can speak with utter confidence of the final stage of the kingdom. And that is why these parables are a call to patience.

Besides, Matthew has an apologetic intent. Contrary to Jewish belief, Jesus declares that the kingdom *has* come in his person, though, because of its humble beginnings, not as they had expected it. He sounds a paraenetic note: the Lord fortifies the Christians of Matthew's church in the conviction that they *are* the eschatological community. The words on Jesus' use of parables (vv 34-35) conclude the first half of Matthew's parable discourse. It anchors Jesus' use of parables in salvation history: the sermon in parables is fulfilment of prophecy. Jesus thereby testifies to his messiahship and the claim of his church in his regard is vindicated.

For the Disciples 13:36-52

'Then he left the crowds and went into the house' (13:36). It is a major change of setting. The second half of the parable discourse is directed solely to the disciples. Therefore, Matthew chooses for Jesus the privacy of a house. The explanation of the parable of the weeds (vv 36-43) is manifestly later than the parable and, very likely, is Matthew's creation. The Lord exhorts the Christians of Matthew's community to be children of the kingdom who do God's will. Here Matthew's ethical concern is bolstered by apocalyptic imagery. This shows how the evangelist regards eschatology as bound up with ethics. That is to say, the coming Age exerts a pressure which works itself out in the practical life of Christians. So, the old-style mission hell-fire sermon was meant to have a salutary effect on the daily lives of the hearers. That the effect was salutary is questionable.

The parables of the treasure and the pearl (vv 44, 45-46), closely related and proper to Matthew, are linked by the formula 'the kingdom of heaven is like.' The key to them is found in the phrase 'in his joy' (v 44). A poor farm-labourer had profited from the fate of some wealthy man who, in a moment of crisis, had hidden his valuables but (most likely) had lost his life. The finder does not hesitate. He has to sell everything he has – but he *must* have that treasure. The pearl merchant has found what he had dreamt of: the *perfect* pearl. Gladly he sells his caravan or his ship (depending on whether he was a merchant on land or sea) to get that pearl. To an outsider, the conduct of peasant and merchant must seem crazy. But *they* know that their course of action is the only one that makes sense. They had discovered the treasure of the kingdom and had realised that it is worth any price. What seems crazy to others is, to them, the only sensible way to act. Note: there is no stress here on sacrifice. Both men gladly give their all because they *know* that they have found so much more.

The parable of the dragnet (vv 47-50) conveys basically the same message as that of the wheat and the weeds (13:24-30, 36-41): the kingdom at the present time contains both 'good' and 'bad'; it is only at the end that a separation will be made. By placing his emphasis on judgment, Matthew sounds a note of warning.

THE CONCLUSION

At the end of the discourse (vv 51-53) the readers are drawn into a parable, one that has to do with understanding. Matthew considers understanding to be essential to the making of a disciple. In Mark the disciples are devoid of understanding until the resurrection of Jesus; in Matthew they, true children of the kingdom, understand and accept the message of the kingdom. One who has become a disciple of the kingdom knows and understands both the old (the Old Testament) and the new (the Good News) and is in a position to see God's promises in the Old Testament fulfilled in Christ (which is what Matthew does in his gospel). Matthew, at the close, presents his description of a Christian of his community who treasures the old (the Jewish heritage) and the new (the good news of and from Jesus). It may, consciously or not, be a self-portrait.

CHAPTER 7

The Kingdom Develops 14-18

Unless you change and become like children (Mt 18:3)

FORMATION OF DISCIPLES 13:53-17-27

After the Sermon in parables (ch 13) Jesus' ministry in Galilee resumes (13:54-58). From this point on, Matthew follows closely the sequence of Mark. Coming to his hometown, Nazareth, Jesus entered 'their' synagogue. At first his teaching caught his townsfolk's surprised attention. Quickly they concluded that he was nothing more than one of themselves. Matthew then (14:1-12) gives a much abbreviated version of Mark's dramatic narrative of the death of the Baptist (Mk 6:14-29).

Feeding of Five Thousand 14:13-21

This miracle of 'the loves and fishes' should be seen as a sign. Our preoccupation with miracle as a happening beyond the laws of nature and (for a gospel miracle) as an event which 'proves' that Jesus was God's envoy – or, worse, that he is Son of God – would seem incredibly naive to the New Testament writers. The miracle stories of the gospels are addressed to people who know that Jesus was God's envoy, who *worship* the risen Lord. The miracle stories are meant to strengthen and elucidate the faith of the readers and hearers.

The sign of 'the loaves and fishes' reveals that Jesus is a new, messianic Moses who nourishes God's people in the desert. The setting is explicit: the 'lonely place' of v 13 is a *desert* place, and recalls the manna (Ex 16:12-35). 'You give them something to eat': the disciples had some provisions; the loaves were likely of barley (see Jn 6:9) and the fish cured. There is a striking parallel in 2 Kgs 4:42-44. Elisha, confident that the Lord will take care, proposes to feed a

hundred men with twenty barley loaves. One might see Jesus, too, as the good shepherd of Ezekiel 34 who feeds his sheep.

It was customary for a Jewish host, at the start of a meal, to pronounce a blessing over the bread and then to break it and distribute it to his guests. If the number was large, others would help in the distribution. Here the disciples do play an active role: Jesus has shown then how to care for people's needs. 'Taking–blessed–broke–gave' is consciously eucharistic language. The correspondence with 26:26 is unmistakable: 'While they were eating Jesus *took* a loaf of bread and after *blessing* it he *broke* it, *gave* it to the disciples...' This eucharistic concern explains, too, why the 'two fish' (vv 17,19) vanish abruptly. 'He looked up to heaven' (see Mk 6:41) – the origin of the words in the Roman Canon, 'and looking up to heaven' – an indication that the eucharistic reference was recognised. Like Mark, Matthew has a second feeding story (15:32-38).

Walking on the Sea 14:22-33

The first part of this episode (vv 22-27) is very like Mk 6:45-50. The incident of the walking on the waters is closely connected with the feeding of the five thousand in the synoptics and in John. It is nighttime and the boat is beaten by waves. In the Old Testament, Yahweh is the one 'who trampled the waves of the sea' (Job 9:8; see 38:16; Ps 77:19; Sir 24:5). As Matthew relates it, the story is certainly symbolic. The boat represents the church; the disciples are threatened by evil (dark) and death (the waters). Jesus is not with them, physically – but he is praying to the Father (v 23). In their need he comes to them, like Yahweh striding over the waters. But they are of little faith and fearful and they panic (v 26). Comfortingly, he assures them: 'It is I' – the Greek phrase *egó eimi*, in this epiphany context, may have some suggestion of the Johannine 'I am' sayings. In Ex 3:14 'I am' is a title of Yahweh, signifying his saving presence with his people. Jesus, then, does what God does, and speaks as God speaks.

Matthew alone adds the further episode (vv 28-33). Peter, addressing Jesus as 'Lord', seeks to share Jesus' power. He steps out confidently at first but, shaken by storm and stress, he loses heart and sinks. Yet he does still cry to the Lord – and Jesus reaches out his

saving hand. Peter has merited the rebuke of Jesus ('you of little faith'): he had hesitated and panicked. He is, typically, a disciple in this present life, caught between faith and doubt (28:17). The rebuke reaches to all of us who start out courageously, only to lose heart. When Jesus (and Peter) got into the boat 'the wind ceased': his presence brought calm and peace. Those in the boat (the church) bowed down in adoration of their Lord.

Underlying the Peter-story is, very probably, the disciples' experience of the risen Lord who had come to restore their broken faith after the Passion and to bring them comfort. For Matthew, the whole passage manifests the power of faith which flows from the saving presence of Jesus. To eyes of faith, Jesus is not a ghost from the past but Son of God of the here and now. He is presence of God among men and women, sending them out into the world to bring peace and to foster true human community.

Blind Guides 15:1-20

Matthew has taken over most of Mk 7:1-23. He lays greater emphasis on 'the tradition of the elders' and, by his addition of vv 12-14, indicts the Jewish leaders. Jesus accused the Pharisee and scribes of putting their own traditions above the law of God. They had, for instance, invented a clever way of circumventing the plain command: Honour your father and your mother. They are 'hypocrites'. In v 11, the statement 'It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles' is, in its manner, as sweeping as Mk 7:17-19 even though Matthew omits the 'Thus he declared all foods clean' of Mark. Jesus had not only rejected 'the tradition of the elders', he had annulled the concept of ritual purity – a blow at the heart of Judaism. This is why the disciples call Jesus' attention to the Pharisees' scandal at this radical stance. 'Let them alone': Jesus is dismissive – they are blind guides who lead others astray. Matthew's community had broken with the synagogue; the 'blind guides' had nothing to say to them.

The Canaanite Woman 15:21-28

Great faith and wry humour combine to make the Canaanite woman a memorable character. She is not daunted by the Master's

restricted mission to the house of Israel and stays unperturbed by his harsh metaphor of not casting children's food to dogs. Instead, she adroitly changes the image and presses home her request. The Lord's response to her quip is warm and immediate. He praises her faith while granting her prayer.

The context of this incident is significant. In 15:1-20, in the dispute over clean and unclean, Jesus had set aside the elaborate ritual which was a wall of separation between Jew and Gentile. Now the faith of a Gentile woman in the Jewish Messiah stands in contrast to the inhibiting inflexibility of Jewish legalism. The question of the Pharisees, 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders' (15:2) has a wider import than the immediate issue of ritual washings. Is Jesus departing from Israel's tradition by allowing certain attitudes in his followers (obviously a question of Matthew's own day)? The story of the Canaanite woman, in many respects, answers this question. Jesus did not step on pagan soil; the woman came from it. She comes to Israel for healing. Jesus first refuses her request on the ground that he has been sent to Israel and not to the Gentiles (v 24). There seems to be no way of softening his further saying (v 26) in reply to her repeated request; the label 'dog' was in common use among Jews as a term of contempt applied to Gentiles. Yet the story ends on a different note. The woman does not question the truth of his statement but simply points out that when the 'children' have been fed then, indeed, the 'dogs' can hope to receive their share too. She acknowledges the divinely ordained separation. If Jesus had yielded to this cry of faith even while the division between Jew and Gentile still stood, how much more, Matthew seems to be saying, must the Christian Church do so now that Jesus had broke down the barrier between the two peoples (Eph 2:14)

By coming to Jesus the woman is seeking a share in the blessings promised to the nations who recognise God's works for his people of which nothing is greater than the presence of his Son. And the evangelist knows that, on the other side of death and resurrection, the exalted Son of Man will send his disciples on a universal mission (28:16-20).

Who do you say that I am? 16:13-20

At Caesarea Philippi, the northern-most limit of historical Israel, Jesus put a leading question to his disciples: 'Who do the run of humankind take me to be' For a belief in the return of Elijah see Malachi 3:1; 4:5. As Elijah was thought to have reappeared in John the Baptist, some felt that John had returned to life in his successor, Jesus. Jeremiah and 'one of the prophets' simply means that Jesus was regarded as a prophetic figure. Jesus brushes these views aside and puts the blunt question to the disciples – and to every believer – 'But who do you say that I am.' Peter's answer is, in reality, a Christian confessional formula: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' It goes beyond Mk 8:29 in stressing that Jesus is Son of God in a transcendent sense. The response of Jesus asserts that a mortal could never, unaided, understand or communicate the divine mystery of sonship. Peter has received a revelation.

In a passage proper to Matthew (vv 18-19) Jesus, who had received titles from Peter, now, in his turn, confers a title on Peter: he is 'the Rock'. And on the solid foundation of this rock Jesus' church will be built. The community of salvation will be preserved from the destructive power of death ('the gates of Hades'): it will last beyond this world. The image of keys (taken from Is 22:15-25) invests Peter with the power of vicegerent. He will have authority to decide, according to the teaching of Jesus, what is permissible and what is not, and the authority – always of course on truly Christian principles – to admit members to the community or, if needs be, to exclude.

Since the Sermon in parables (ch 13) Matthew has been concerned with the delineation of the kingdom of heaven. It is a mysterious, divine reality, its beginnings are humble indeed compared with its future glory. Nonetheless, the kingdom has concrete expression in the world. People are nourished within it; they embrace it in the hope of healing and divine protection The question arises, What is the kingdom? Here that question is rephrased, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' The evangelist tells us that it is not 'What is the kingdom? but '*Who* is the kingdom?' that is important. When we ask the question about Jesus aright then we can get the kingdom right. Jesus embodies the kingdom; everything about it refers to

himself. All power in the kingdom is invested in Christ. All its authentic movements, energy, position flow from him. Once the faith of Peter has opened the apostle's heart to Jesus and so brought one into the kingdom, the kingdom's power can flow into one and, from Jesus' own lips, it flows into one in a special manner. Equally clearly, Jesus' promise to Peter is not about privilege to possess as much as duty to perform. Jesus had transformed *exousia*, authority, into *diakonia*, service. If *service* is not recognisably the pattern of authority in the church, at every level, then authority loses credibility.

If the text Mt 16:18-19 be highlighted in isolation from counterbalancing features of New Testament ecclesiology – on brother/sisterhood, mutual service, humility, diversity of charisms and so on – it results in distortion which diminishes personal dignity within the church. Besides, the New Testament is not at one as to the foundation of the church. According to 1 Cor 3:11 'No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.' According to Eph 2:20 the household of God is 'built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.' And there is the declaration of the seer of Revelation: 'The wall of the city [the new Jerusalem] has twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb' (Rev 21:14) – the 'city' is a people living in the presence of God.

Suffering Discipleship 16:21-27

The opening words suggest that Jesus' prophecies of his suffering to come were ongoing. He did begin to make it clear immediately after he had elicited the first explicit expression of the disciples' faith (voiced by Peter). The evangelist's suggestion of a time-lag helps to temper the sharpness of the rebuke to Peter as well as to enhance the teaching on the true meaning of discipleship, the following of a crucified Lord

Now that Jesus and the faith of his disciples have centred the reality of the kingdom on his own person, the fate of his person is crucial for the existence of the kingdom, and will in turn deeply touch the fate of his followers. Like the other evangelists, Matthew is concerned in this passage with discipleship rather than with the fore-

sight of Jesus. The argument is less insistent on the final fate, since Jesus is 'to be raised up on the third day,' than on the fact that this is but the *path* to the resurrection. Peter's refusal to accept this path at once withdraws him from his God-given faith; he stands across the way to the cross and thus embodies the adversary of God. The only way that Peter's faith may gain its power is for the apostle to fall in behind and tread the same path.

'And Peter took him aside' (v 22). We can picture him, in his earnestness, taking hold of Jesus and 'rebuking' him. The idea of a suffering Messiah was altogether foreign to Peter. He realises too that his own position will be affected: disciple of a suffering Messiah is not a role that would appeal to him. 'Get behind me, Satan' – the temptation in the wilderness (4:1- 11) aimed at getting Jesus himself to conform to the popularly acknowledged messianic pattern, to become a political messiah. It was an attempt to undermine his full acceptance of the will of God and here Peter plays Satan's role. Ironically, the 'Rock' (v 18) has become a 'stumbling-block' (v 23).

Matthew (vv 24-28) has the Lord broaden out a particular occurrence to apply to all true discipleship of Christ. This following after, through suffering, to the resurrection is not optional – it is a matter of life and death. To accept is to be endowed with the faith of Peter; to refuse is to obstruct God's path as Peter tries to do. To believe is to fall in behind the Lord. To live for God is to trace in one's own life the life of Christ. The cross is actual and symbolic: actual because it stood on Calvary, symbolic because it represents the sufferings, persecutions, martyrdoms, indifference, moral struggles, lovelessness which every follower of Christ is bound to meet. Jeremiah is not alone in feeling the oppression and constraint of God's call. Every disciple of Christ has in one's own way to face it.

Peter and the Temple Tax 17:24-27

The passage Mt 17:1-23 follows Mk 9:2-32 closely. For Matthew, the transfiguration (Mt 17:1-13), as an anticipation of resurrection and parousia, may be regarded as a confirmation of Peter's confession of Jesus as Son of God (16:16). He has softened the portrayal of Peter and the disciples. There is no trace of the 'he did not know what to

say, for they were exceedingly afraid' of Mk 9:6. After the healing of the epileptic boy and the second prediction of the passion (Mt 17:14-23) comes an episode proper to Matthew (17:24-27).

The temple tax (a half-shekel) for the upkeep of the temple was levied on all adult Jewish males. After 70 AD the Romans converted it into a tax for the support of the temple of Jupiter in Rome. When asked if Jesus paid the temple tax the impetuous Peter answered with a confident,Yes. As usual, Jesus gently deflated him. He pointed out that, if the children of kings are exempt from the payment of taxes so, a fortiori, the Son of God is surely not obliged to pay towards the upkeep of his Father's house. For that matter, the disciples, also, as children of the kingdom, are exempt. The passage would seem to come from the early days of Matthew's community. If Jesus' disciples were to refuse to pay the temple tax they would no longer be regarded as Jews – not something they wanted. In that case, 'so that we do not give offense to them' (fellow Jews), the tax should be paid. They would not be compromised. After 70 AD payment of the tax avoided trouble with the Romans. Pragmatism – of course. Only fanatics make an issue of the unimportant. In v 27 we seem to have an instance of a parable turning into a miracle story.

SERMON ON THE CHURCH CH 18

True Greatness 18:1-7

Where Mark (9:33-37) sees a lesson on the dignity of service, Matthew sees a lesson on spiritual childlikeness. We are already on the road to ecclesiasticism with a 'hierarchy' and a 'simple faithful'. Matthew omits Mark's lively action parable (Mk 9:36) but makes the same point. There is no place for degrees of greatness among disciples of Jesus: the least disciple of Jesus has greatness. Whoever receives a child for the sake of Jesus receives Jesus and, in turn, receives the God who sent him. The greatness that comes from belonging to Jesus, from being his disciple, can be enjoyed by a child. Jesus is not establishing the authority of his disciples over others but is pointing out the greatness of discipleship – there is no greater dignity. It follows that ecclesiastical office is, above all, a *service*. This is seen more closely in Mk 8:35 – 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' There is no 'first' in the

reign of God. Jesus leaves little space for ambition; he leaves no room for the exercise of power.

'These little ones who believe in me': the humblest members of a christian community. 'Put a stumbling block' – a warning on the grievousness of the sin of those who lead simple Christians astray by callously shaking their faith – and here rightwingers are gravely at fault as they propose a merciless God. 'A great millstone', literally, a 'donkey millstone', that is, a millstone turned by a donkey in contrast to the smaller millstone worked by a woman (see Mt 24:41). Death by drowning was a Roman punishment and was particularly repugnant to Jews. The warning, then, is very sharp.

The two logia (vv 8, 9), linked by the catchword *skandalizó*, treat of scandal, not, however, in terms of those who place a stumbling block before others, but in reference to whatever in oneself can cause one to stumble and fall into sin. There is no question, obviously, of actual mutilation, but the vivid Semitic idiom enjoins, in the starkest terms, the costliest sacrifice. The 'Gehenna (hell) of fire': originally, Gehenna – the valley of the son of Hinnom – was a ravine south of Jerusalem where infants were sacrificed to Moloch (Jer 7:31; 10:5-6; 39:35). It was desecrated by Josiah (2 Kgs 23:20) and was henceforth used as a dump for offal and refuse. Jeremiah warned that there the faithless ones of Israel would be destroyed by fire. As a site of ill-omen, it came to symbolise the place of final punishment (see 4 Ezra 7:36; Enoch 27:2). The 'hell of fire': only crass literalism could have led to the later notion of hell as a place of fiery torment. And to a God who condemns sinners to hell: blasphemy by any decent standard.

The Lost Sheep 18:10-14

In Lk 15:4-7 the parable of the lost sheep is an explicit answer to the murmuring of the Pharisees and scribes: 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' The same parable occurs in Matthew. Here it is no longer addressed to opponents of the Good News but to disciples. The discourse of which it forms part begins: 'It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost' (18:14). Even if the application were no longer clear the context quite clinches the issue for the warning not to despise one of the

least (v 10) and the admonition regarding fraternal/sisterly correction (vv 15-17) leave no doubt about the interpretation of v 14: It is God's will that you go after the erring brother or sister, the weak and helpless one, as earnestly as the shepherd of the parable sought out the lost sheep. It may be that Luke has preserved the original setting of the parable: Jesus' defence of the charge that he was 'friend of sinners'. When one thinks about it, what more appropriate designation of the Son of God, Son of a God who, outrageously, when one reads the Old Testament aright, has a preferential option for sinners. The change of audience in Matthew is readily explained. Early Christians sought in this, as in other parables, a message that met their needs and they took it as applying to themselves. In acting so they had not forced its message. The Lost Sheep was spoken to justify the concern shown by Jesus for sinners and outcasts. The Christian, to be like the Master, should manifest solicitude for the erring brother or sister. There is, simply, a shift of emphasis: an apologetic parable has taken on a hortatory thrust.

Correction 18:15-20

This passage has to do with brotherly/sisterly correction. To be properly evaluated it needs to be read in the context of a chapter which declares the greatness of a childlike sense of littleness (vv 1-5), insists on loving care of the weak members of Christian community (vv 6-14), and is certain that the Christian word, first and last, must be forgiveness (vv 21- 35). In this setting the seemingly harsh demand of excommunication (v 17) appears in a *Christian* light.

The 'brother or sister' contemplated in our passage is not the 'little one' of v 6 nor the weak, candid sinner of v 21. It is one who may prove intransigent. What is important is that Matthew outlines a precisely articulated procedure, a procedure inspired by the Old Testament but which takes on a distinctively Christian flavour. Clearly he has Lev 19:17-18 and Deut 19:15 firmly in mind.

The first point Matthew makes is that within a Christian community one does not *start* by 'passing the buck', by planting the problem straight on the leader's desk. The proper procedure is *privately* to approach the erring brother or sister. If the intervention succeeds that is the end of the matter, and one has the joy of winning over a

brother or sister. If another attempt becomes necessary it it still a private matter involving only two or three community members (see Deut 9:15). If this fails, only then is the whole community to take up, formally, the case of an obstinate sinner. From first to last it is a *community* concern. And, if has to come to it, it is the community that excommunicates.

In the Judaism of Jesus' day 'Gentile' was a pagan outsider and 'tax-collector' a traitor. Matthew's largely Jewish-Christian community would have inherited such characterisation but would have gone on to regard 'Gentile' as the non-Christian and 'tax-collector' as one who can no longer be called Christian. The community, vulnerably human as it is (see 1 Cor 5:6), must protect itself against threat from within as well as from without. All the while, a prime concern must be the (eternal) welfare of the sinner. If the sinner repents – and that is the hope – then forgiveness must be warm and without limit or condition (Mt 18:21-22). Each and every Christian, because he or she has encountered a forgiving Father, would be eager to forgive (18:23-25).

In their present context vv 18-20 mean that the verdict of the community (if arrived at a truly Christian way) will be ratified by God. Originally, it is clear that these sayings had to do with *prayer*. And there is the assurance that where Christians (even two or three) gather in Jesus' name, he is with them – he is Emmanuel, God-with-us (see 1:23; 28:20). And surely there is the admonition that the grave matter of discipling a brother or sister is never a question of 'throwing the book' at one. It has to be a *prayerful* decision. Otherwise, while it may stand as a decision, it will not stand as a Christian deed.

Forgiveness 18:21-35

Just as ben Sirach (Sir 28:2-4) regards the forgiveness of our neighbour as crucially important for right human conduct (Sir 28:2-4), so Matthew underlines its significance for the early church. This passage forms the conclusion of his 'community discourse'. Though he had to face the uncomfortable fact that an unrepentant brother or sister might have to be excluded from the community (18:15-20) he wants to ensure that his word on relationships within the community will end on the resounding note of forgiveness.

While Luke (17:4) also gives the first saying about forgiveness, Matthew adds special importance to it in three ways: by putting the question in the mouth of Peter, leader of the Christian community; by increasing the number of times from seven (already the perfect number signifying 'any number of times') to seventy-seven (or seventy times seven) – an unlimited number of times; by adding the parable, as he likes to do at the end of a discourse to drive the point home.

The disparity between the two sums mentioned in the parable is gigantic – ten thousand talents is an unimaginable sum. A debt impossible of repayment is written off, casually, by the king, and the man is not even sacked. It is quite the situation one finds in Lk 15:11-24. Yet, one who had been shown such mercy cannot find it in his heart to remit a paltry debt. Not only that: he will not even give his fellow-servant – his social equal – reasonable time and opportunity to repay. The king who had been moved with 'pity' (v 27) is now 'angry' (v 34).

The parable is a thinly-veiled allegory. The 'servant' is the sinner; his situation is hopeless. The 'king' is a merciful God who freely and lovingly forgives any sin. Luke has painted the warmer picture of prodigal Father and wayward child (15:11-24). The reality is the same in either case. Like the younger son in the Lucan parable this man, too, is forgiven with no strings attached. Faced with a cry of desperation the forgiving God was moved with pity (Mt 18:27). But when the recipient of such forgiveness cannot find it in his heart to be merciful the Master is angry (18:33). Response to God's gracious forgiveness cannot be payment of a debt that is already fully remitted. It is, instead, warm thanksgiving for the blessing of such forgiving love. And the story in Matthew underlines again that sin, as God regards it, is man's inhumanity to man (even more sadly, man's inhumanity to woman) whatever shape that may take. Our abuse of others (and of ourselves) is an affront to the loving Father who counts us as his children. Jesus clearly understood this because he knew his Father. A corollary. Jesus asks us, frail humans, to be forgiving, without limit. He dares to ask the impossible because he knew that his God is an Abba whose forgiveness literally knows no limit.