

DISCIPLESHIP AND MISSION: A PERSPECTIVE ON THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

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If someone had asked me 25 years ago what the relevance of the message of Matthew was to Christian mission in my own context I would have pointed directly to Matthew 25:31-46, and not to Matthew 28:19-20. This is because 25 years ago I was living in apartheid South Africa, my home country, where the contrast between rich and poor, and the powerful and powerless, was a stark and challenging reality. The question, "Who is Jesus Christ?" needed an appropriate, credible and relevant answer, and the need to identify the gospel and to live it in the face of a "different gospel" called for discernment, courage, and faithfulness. For South Africans the text which summed up the gospel in a way that made a real difference was, "For as much as you do it unto the least of these...you do it to me."

The incarnation of God in South Africa took the form of the presence of the Christ crucified and risen in the life of those in need of physical, emotional, and psychological liberation. The disciples that Matthew 28:19ff beckons Christians to be and to make are the kind of disciples who relate and respond to Christ present in, and in solidarity with the poor, the needy, and the oppressed. The so-called missionary mandate (Matt. 28:19-20) makes sense only in the context of a Christ already present (Matthew's "Immanuel") in every situation of need. Christian mission is the response of Christians to the presence of God, and their participation in God's action to liberate all people. Mission is solidarity with God and neighbour, and with the God who is with our neighbours, and participation in that divine project quite rightly called the *missio Dei*.

If we are interested in Matthew's context and in his intentions and message for his own time it is only because we believe these have a hermeneutical relevance for us today in our context. When we ask "What is mission?", or "Where is God?" "What is God doing?", and "How do we recognize and respond to the divine presence and activity in the world in which we encounter it, and how do we share in that activity?", we are asking in relation to Matthew: "What pointers do we have in this gospel to that presence and activity, to that invitation to share in it, and to the way we are to share its gift with others?"

Our answer to this question depends on our view of the gospel and how we choose to approach it. The nature of the gospels suggest that tradition and interpretation are so closely knit together that one is forced to the conclusion that the method adopted by the gospel writers was to interpret the traditions

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about Jesus in a way that was appropriate, credible and relevant for their own time.¹ The hermeneutical process began the moment the traditions were taken and interpreted. We ought to feel free to follow this hermeneutical procedure as we deal with the Matthean story because it is a legitimate procedure and because it will help make the message come alive for us, as it did for Matthew and his community.

However, the story, probably written originally in Hellenistic Greek², is a single and complete story and should be read as a whole; conclusions about its message should not be drawn from selected parts of it. The traditions that Matthew gathers into his gospel, whatever their source, are ones that he owns, and he wants his readers also to own them and to draw inspiration and guidance from them for their life of faith and discipleship.³

Scholars have examined this gospel over the years and have made a number of proposals regarding authorship, date, and setting, and have found in it a number of characteristics and themes. They have done this with the help of various methods of biblical critical analysis: source, redaction and form criticism, as well as the more recent methods of narrative, reader-response, and social-scientific criticism.

Source criticism has indicated that the evangelist used at least three sources: Mark, Q, and Special Matthew. Scholarly consensus veers towards a heavy dependence on Mark's gospel, with a minority opting for the priority of Matthew, or the mutual independence of the two works.⁴ It is not possible to establish with any degree of certainty who wrote first and who borrowed from whom. While it may be argued that the theory of Markan priority provides the most reasonable explanation for the relationship between the traditions used by Mark and Matthew, we cannot be absolutely certain of Markan priority. What the theory of Markan priority enables us to do is to establish by comparison, and consequently through the separation of tradition and interpretation, what might be peculiar to Matthew. So it points us to certain characteristics peculiar to this gospel and particular themes which the author develops as he communicates the gospel to people in his own situation and time.⁵ Comparative studies, and the implications drawn from similarities and differences, have produced many debates on a number of issues related to Matthew, with little general agreement.

Theories concerning authorship have produced a range of possibilities, viz. a converted rabbi, a scribe and provincial schoolmaster, a Gentile, a Hellenistic or a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian. None of these suggestions is convincing. Conclusions are drawn from various emphases in the gospel which show the author to have, for example, a definite Jewish interest, an anti-Jewish bias, and a Gentile interest.

The presence of these emphases and themes, and a few references to extra-biblical material (e.g. *Didache*), have led scholars to suggest possible dates and settings for this gospel. Dates range from 70 to 100 AD.,⁶ and, while a variety of settings have been proposed⁷, the most popular suggestion for where the gospel was written is Syria, probably Antioch.⁸ Scholarship is yet to establish

with sufficient accuracy the place of writing to enable us to draw specific and detailed conclusions about the nature of the Matthean community. Even to attempt a general reconstruction of Jewish life in Palestine and Christian life in the Mediterranean from the gospel has its difficulties because of the lack of sufficient evidence, and especially because we lack particulars.⁹ We cannot be certain if the details in the text reflect the social setting of earlier traditions or the evangelists own social setting.¹⁰

The arguments of scholars are based chiefly on internal evidence, and from perceived allusions and tendencies, largely because there is no reliable external evidence concerning the identity of the author, his audience, or the particular circumstances in which the gospel was written.¹¹ The result is a picture of a racially, culturally, and theologically diverse Matthean community, troubled by disputes and tensions, and threatened by inauthentic discipleship and the persecution of the faithful.¹² Whether the Matthean community remained a sect within Judaism or had severed links with it, and whether the central problem for Christian theology then was the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, is a matter of debate.¹³ Neither can we be certain if the source of persecution was external or internal, or a mixture of the two.¹⁴

One would imagine that Matthew's concerns are many: pastoral and catechetical, perhaps even apologetic, but we cannot be certain about his intentions. It is more fruitful to look at some of the general themes thrown up by studies of this gospel and to see how these relate to us today.

What is generally agreed is that there are different strands that feed into the Matthean story and that it addresses a range of circumstances and concerns. Studies have shown that there are many factors in the context in which the evangelist is writing, many issues alive in his community, and that Christians in his time were struggling to live faithfully in the face of diversity and difference, as well as hostility, and persecution. This is the background against which I attempt to engage the text of the gospel, using Matthew 25:31-46 as a hermeneutical key.

I suggest that the central message of Matthew's story is bound up with the theme "Jesus, kingdom and discipleship». In Matthew 25:31-46 these three aspects come together, offer us a way into the heart of the gospel, and lay bare a message which ever remains appropriate, credible and relevant.

An interpretation of Matthew 25: 31-46

The interpretation of this passage has been disputed at least since the third century, and some of the exegetical problems associated with it remain a puzzle.¹⁵ The main point of contention is whether the text is concerned with the attitude of the world (everyone) to the needy, or the world's attitude to the church. Who are the *panta ta ethne* (all the nations) in verses 31 and 32 and «the least of these my brothers» in verses 40 and 45?¹⁶

There are two main approaches to this pericope, each with its own variations.¹⁷ One view¹⁸ is that all nations (i.e. everyone) will be finally judged on

the basis of their response to the poor and needy, and therefore to Jesus himself. The text is seen as a continuation of the exhortations found in previous sections of Matthew's fifth discourse, which it concludes. A variant of this position is that, by that time of the final judgement, Gentiles will have been converted, and it is Christians who are to be judged. Another variant suggests that the poor and needy are members of the church. Another view¹⁹ is that the non-Christian nations will be judged on the basis of their response to Christians (in particular the least of them).²⁰ However, this is a weak argument because 24:9, 14 suggest that «the nations» has a more inclusive meaning. There it is used as a synonym for the "whole inhabited earth."²¹

There is more agreement on the meaning of "the least of these." Some opt for "Christians"²² and some for the narrower "Christian missionaries"²³ Others say the reference is to the "underprivileged" or people in need generally.²⁴

On the interpretation of «the least of these my brothers», Stanton argues that Matthew's redaction of the Markan passage in chapters 10 and 18 confirms that the term *hoi mikroi* (the little ones) is a specific term for disciples. The phrase «the least of these my brothers» is similar to the phrase «these little ones», and this confirms that it refers to the disciples. He suggests that the phrase «these my brothers», which appears in 25:40, adds strength to the argument that the nations are to be judged on the basis of their response to Christian disciples, and he claims that his argument is further strengthened by the fact that there are no passages in Matthew that *identify* Jesus with the poor, whereas Jesus' identification with his followers is "not unexpected".²⁵

On the other hand, Luz has argued that there are difficulties with the view that «all the nations» refers to non-Christians.²⁶ One difficulty is that, following the interruption at 24:31 and the warnings to the community in 23:32 and 25:30, one would expect an indication of a universal judgement and not an appended text concerning the judgement of non-Christians only.²⁷ Theologically Matthew does not distinguish between judgements on Christians and the world. It is possible that Matthew used a pre-existent text which contained reference to a universal judgement in which Christians and non-Christian were to be judged together.²⁸

It seems to me that the passage suggests that Jesus is to be identified with the "least of these", and more importantly the identification of Jesus with human beings in need. It is the identification of Jesus as one in solidarity with humanity that is the key to unlock the divine mystery of incarnation (God present through the life of the world) and in resurrection (the continuing presence of Christ). My reading of the passage suggests that Jesus is providing his disciples with a way of recognizing and relating to him after resurrection. The "least of these" become the Jesus who is present to them in that new future.

Hence, it seems to me that a vital element in this passage is the response that is made to Jesus who is present in and through human experience. If we were to consider the implication of this for discipleship today, we could well say that the way in which Christians respond to people in need in our situation, is to recognize God with us. Hence «God with us» is God present through oth-

ers. Incarnation, kingdom and discipleship are integral to Matthew and are inter-related dimensions of mission in Matthew.

Incarnation and kingdom

First, kingdom is the locus of incarnation, the place and context in which God is at work in the world. In post-resurrection time, we can speak of incarnation as mediated through those events and people in which God is present, that is where the *missio Dei* is carried out and fulfilled. Jesus, the incarnate one, is central to the gospel as a whole. It speaks of divine presence: *God* present in the person of Jesus. Jesus is “Immanuel”, God with us, the Son of God (1:23; 2:15). This theme runs through the gospel in texts that relate to the identity of Jesus and identification of his way.²⁹ The question, “Who is Jesus Christ?” receives the answer: “He is *God* incarnate, the power of God in the world.” In Matthew 25:31-46, the answer given is that Jesus Christ is to be found in those who are poor and needy. A response to them is a response to him. Mission is engagement with this Jesus and a participation in his presence and activity in and through those in need.

Kingdom and discipleship

Second, “kingdom” provides the framework in which God’s presence is experienced and acknowledged, and in which discipleship is exercised and mission is done. For Matthew, the ministry of Jesus is integral to and framed within the kingdom of God. This is the synoptic tradition’s way of understanding the scope and meaning of Jesus’ mission.³⁰ Resurrection faith recognizes that the reign of God is manifest in the person of Jesus.³¹ Jesus proclaims the kingdom in word and deed (4:17, 23; 9:35; 12:28) and he sends his disciples out to do the same (10:17). The future consummation of this kingdom (see the parables plus the eschatological discourse in chapters 24 & 25) is linked to its present reality. The kingdom of God “has come upon you” (12:28), and has been present from “the days of John the Baptist until now” (11:12). Indeed for Matthew, kingdom and incarnation are synonymous. The kingdom is Christ in community, and discipleship is the recognition of it in the life of the world and the mediation of it in word and deed, which is the force of Matthew 25:31-46. Hypocrisy excludes people from the kingdom (23:1-25:46). Righteousness is a requirement for entry to the kingdom (5:1-7:27). One must expect persecution if one proclaims the kingdom (10:1-42). To understand the kingdom (13:1-52) and to be humble and forgiving leads one into its fellowship (18:1-35).

Kingdom discipleship as the way of Jesus

Third, kingdom discipleship is discipleship with love, integrity, courage and humility. 25:31-46 illustrates what it means to love and to witness with integri-

ty, courage and humility in the service of the kingdom, and so provides a fitting climax to a typically Matthean theme. While mission entails the making of disciples (28:19), discipleship *is* mission. The Matthean redaction of the tradition used in the mission discourse in chapter 10 consciously relates the mission of Jesus to the mission of his disciples.³² To be a disciple is not simply to be a learner of teachings. It is to be a witness to reflect the life of Jesus and the kingdom, i.e. to follow Jesus' way. It is mission in the way of Jesus. Divine revelation enables the disciples to recognize Jesus as the Son of God, the Saviour who will "suffer many things" and die, and be raised from the dead (16:21). Peter's inability to understand the way of Jesus, or his bold attempt to prevent Jesus from walking that way, leads to his condemnation (16:22-23), and to Jesus' deliberate challenge to the disciples to follow the way of the cross (16:24ff.).

Discipleship is undoubtedly the way of learning, and of knowing. It is also about being and doing. It has to do with understanding Jesus' words and obeying them just as he acted in obedience to the divine word. To be a disciple means to teach by word and example to observe everything that Jesus had commanded (28:19). Love is at the heart of this "everything" (19:19; 22:39). Love for God flows out into relationships; it will help Christians not to betray one another (24:10-12) and to support one another (10:40-42; 25:31-46). Love for one another will encourage Christians to endure difficulties, and show itself in acts of mercy (5:7).

The Jesus way is resolute in its public proclamation and witness. It is the way of love that responds to the needs of people for salvation from sin, healing from illness, and liberation from the forces of darkness. It is the way that remains steadfast in the face of opposition and life-threatening realities. It is the way of suffering that leads to the cross, which every disciple must be willing to bear. It is the way of humility that gives priority to the "least of these", as Jesus did. A true disciple does not seek titles of honour (23:8-10), but shows humility (18:4; 23:12), is willing to serve, is not self-seeking, and is happy to be just one among the "little people" (18:3; 23:11).³³ This is the Jesus way, and nothing less will do.

Kingdom discipleship and righteousness

Fourth, the kingdom is where steadfast love and faithfulness meet, and righteousness and peace kiss each other (Ps. 85:10). The righteous (25:37) are those who have been faithful witnesses, those who have "done the right thing" by showing love to those in need. Matthew presents Jesus and John the Baptist as teachers of righteousness (5:33; 21:32). Jesus came to fulfil the law and the prophets (5:17-18), to reveal the radical will of God, and to call people to a "better righteousness" as he perfects the law, taking it to its radical end (5:21-48; 19:10-12).³⁴ It is a call to break through the doctrinal and other formal systems which offer disobedient hearts a false sense of security (5:21-48).³⁵ The righteousness of a genuine disciple surpasses that of the false professional

teachers and guardians of the tradition and makes one fit for entry into the kingdom (5:19-20). It is a righteousness that flows from one's inner being (5:8; 18:35), is neither hypocritical nor pretentious, seeks no merit, and shows faith in the face of danger (8:26). It leads to public confession of Jesus (10:32-33), and the right attitude to prayer.

Matthew's story holds faith and praxis together with the integrity with which Jesus did. The way of discipleship is the way of faith and praxis. Knowledge is linked to transformation within the framework of an integrated epistemology. The fundamental choice with which the gospel confronts every Christian is the choice between life and death, as we meet Christ in every situation and person. Matthew 25:31-46 spells out this choice as it draws together the various strands of the gospel message to present us with this choice in a church and world that is diverse. This diversity can and does lead to hostility and persecution. Our diverse world is one in which there is much suffering, and where the "big ones" with their wealth and power dominate and oppress the "little ones". Just as the gospel challenged Christians of Matthew's day to live faithfully in the face of diversity and difference, hostility, and suffering, his story communicates a gospel that challenges us to do the same, and invites us to follow the Jesus way. The fact that 25:31-46 immediately precedes the passion and resurrection is a pointer to the possible consequences for anyone who exercises the choice for life in the midst of the forces of death.

With the knowledge we have of the obviously negative effects of globalization on weaker economies, the abuse of power by multi-national corporations, the imbalance in political power in a world where some "lord it over" others, we are called to remind the "bigger ones" that people matter and that the "little ones" matter most.

With the experience we have today of global cross-cultural encounter, of the arrogance of a few cultures and their obvious, perhaps often unconscious, tendency to dominate many others, we are called to challenge people to live with mutual respect, and to enter into a constructive and healthy relationship in a culturally diverse world.

Faced with the many ethnic and sectarian conflicts that divide and destroy human communities, we are called to challenge one another to learn to live creatively with difference and to work constructively together to build harmonious communities.

In a world church that is as diverse as Matthew's community was, a church in which there are "greater" and "lesser" Christian communities, a church that is still locked into a "missionary" mode that holds some captive, we are called to challenge one another into a partnership of equals, a partnership of mutual respect and sharing for the sake of the kingdom.

We are called to a way of life that helps to build a better world, in partnership with others. The Jesus way is the way that discerns, recognizes and mediates the presence and power of God in the world with all its diversity and discord. It is also the way of the kingdom which is in the midst of humanity, where God

reigns and is engaged in the divine mission, the *missio Dei*, inviting us to participate in the transformation that leads to true liberation and salvation. It is the way of love, integrity, courage, and humility, the way of the cross and resurrection. It is the way of righteousness, a better righteousness that flows from the heart, as a public witness that is neither hypocritical nor pretentious. It is a living and dynamic discipleship which is not hemmed in by institutional and doctrinal superstructures, but one that responds with faith and openness to God's presence in the world, and seeks to share in God's mission.

The Matthean story of incarnation and its power are not confined within the limits of the author's storytelling. The story points readers to the real experience of the living God present and active in the everyday life of people, to the divine transformation of human life that is real for some and possible for all, and to God's invitation, extended to us in the person of Jesus, to participate in the divine project of human transformation that brings true liberation and fulfillment.

NOTES

- ¹ Even where he incorporates earlier traditions without significant modification, re-interpretation takes place by virtue of the immediate context in which these are placed, and also by virtue of the framework and special thrust of the whole gospel. Stanton, G.N., *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1992, p. 52.
- ² Davies, Margaret, *Matthew*, Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1993, p. 9.
- ³ Luz suggests that the gospel should be read as a whole because "...all the Gospels, though perhaps least of all Luke's, have an internal "line of tension" extending from beginning to end. Each has an underlying conflict that arises in the course of the narrative, reaches a climax and arrives ultimately at a resolution. In the English-speaking world this underlying conflict is called the "plot" of a story, though perhaps "plan" might be a better word." Luz, U., *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995 [E.T.], pp. 1-2.
- ⁴ Stanton, G.N., *The Interpretation of Matthew*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 2nd. ed. 1995, p. 3.
- ⁵ Note that I do not use the phrase "tradition and redaction" because it implies that in every parallel case there is an obvious dependence on Mark and deliberate changes to Markan tradition. "Tradition and interpretation" allows for alternative theories to the priority of Mark, and acknowledges that the common traditions used by Mark and indeed by the other gospel writers could have come from sources that are other than the four gospels, and for the possibility that oral traditions existed and were transmitted alongside written ones.
- ⁶ Gundry, R.H., *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, Grand Rapids, W.B. Eerdmans, 1994, 2nd ed., p. 599; Carter, Warren, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 2000, pp. 16-17.
- ⁷ Various other settings have been proposed, e.g. Phoenicia, perhaps Tyre or Sidon (G.D. Kilpatrick, 1946), Alexandria (van Tilborg, S., 1972), Caesarea Maritima (Viviano, B.T., 1979), East of the Jordan (Slingerland, H.D., 1979). See Stanton, G.N., *The Interpretation of Matthew*, *op. cit.*, p.14.
- ⁸ Luz, U., *op. cit.*, p. 18; Stanton, G.N., *The Interpretation of Matthew*, *op. cit.*, pp.14ff; Carter, Warren, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.
- ⁹ Davies, Margaret, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
- ¹⁰ Stanton, G.N., ed., *The Interpretation of Matthew*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
- ¹¹ Davies, Margaret, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
- ¹² Stanton, G.N., *A Gospel for a New People*, *op. cit.*, p. 2; Gundry, R.H., *op. cit.*, pp. 5ff; Luz, U., *op. cit.*, pp. 11ff.

- ¹³ See, for example, Stanton, G.N., *A Gospel for a New People*, *op. cit.*, p. 2 & chapters 5 & 6; Bornkamm, G. "End-Expectation and the Church in Matthew", in Bornkamm, G., Barth, G. & Held, H.J., eds, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, London, SCM, 1963, p. 20; Luz, U. *op. cit.*, pp. 11ff.
- ¹⁴ Luz, *ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, *op. cit.*, p. 207.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 209.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 207ff.
- ¹⁸ E.g., Gundry, R.H., *op. cit.*, p. 511; Luz, U., *op. cit.*, p. 129ff; G. Bornkamm, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
- ¹⁹ See for example Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, *op. cit.*, pp. 212ff.
- ²⁰ Stanton has argued that if 24:30 is taken together with 25:31 then it is clear that "all the tribes of the earth" does not refer to all the evangelised nations or Christians but to all non-Christian peoples, and that this is reinforced by the fact that Matthew does not use *ta ethne* (the nations) to refer to Christians, or to Christians and non-Christians together. See *ibid.*, p. 214.
- ²¹ Carter, *op. cit.*, p. 493.
- ²² For a discussion, see Carter, *op. cit.*, pp. 492, 496; Luz, *op. cit.*, p. 129f.; Gundry, *op. cit.*, p. 514; Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, *op. cit.*, pp. 214-17.
- ²³ E.g., Luz, *op. cit.*, p. 130f.
- ²⁴ Bornkamm, *op. cit.*, p.37.
- ²⁵ Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, *op. cit.*, pp. 216-8.
- ²⁶ Luz, *op. cit.*, p. 130.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ In 16:13-28 (Confession at Caesarea Philippi) , the question "Who is Jesus Christ?" is raised and addressed in detail. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (16:16). In 28:20 he belongs to the Godhead. He is Lord (8:6, 21, 25), he is worshipped (2:2, 11; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 20:20; 28:9, 17), associated with angels (13:41; 16:27; 24:31), the kingdom belongs to him as the Son of Man (13:41; 16:28), and «all authority in heaven and on earth» is given to him. Such are some of the special and, at points, exclusive emphases in Matthew. Gundry, *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 13-14.
- ³⁰ Senior, D. and Stuhlmueeller, C., *The Biblical Foundation for Mission*, London, SCM, 1983, p. 236.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 236.
- ³² Luz U., "The Disciples in the Gospel according to Matthew" in Stanton, G.N., ed., *The Interpretation of Matthew*, *op. cit.*, pp. 117ff; "As Jesus preaches only to Israel (cf. 9:35), so the disciples are sent only to Israel (10:5f., cf. 10:17, 23). As Jesus has the power to heal diseases (4:25; 9:35), so have the disciples (10:1, cf. v. 8)." The disciples are sent out in Matthew, but there is no mention of their return. The mission discourse ends at 11:1 with the words "And it came to pass, when Jesus had made an end of commanding his twelve disciples..." It seems that the disciples are not sent out during the lifetime of Jesus: they have only got their instructions. Matthew is concerned only with Jesus' instructions.
- ³³ Gundry, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
- ³⁴ Bornkamm, *op. cit.*, pp. 24ff.
- ³⁵ Bornkamm, commenting on the Sermon on the Mount, offers this perspective on that passage: «Its motive from beginning to end is to break through a law which has been perverted into formal legal statements under cover of which the disobedient heart fondly imagines that all is well, and at the same time to urge the original radical will of God with its call to 'perfection'." Bornkamm, *op. cit.*, pp. 25&37.