

HOLY GHOST, GENOVA – Four Ways to the Cross 2: Matthew (11.3.2020)

When I first planned and gave the original version of these talks, several years ago now, I did not include St Matthew's account of the suffering and death of Jesus: partly because they were given as addresses on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week (so I couldn't allocate an evening to all four Gospels); partly because Matthew's account follows Mark's much more closely than either Luke or John does. However, Matthew does differ quite significantly from Mark at several points and in one case the difference has caused two millennia of suffering to one particular group of people.

But to begin, as Dylan Thomas wrote, at the beginning: Mark and Matthew both begin their account of the passion after Jesus' description of "the end times", but Matthew inserts, as a kind of buffer, the three long "parables of the Kingdom" which make up chapter 25 of his Gospel, popularly known as "the wise and foolish virgins", "the parable of the talents", and "the sheep and the goats", all of which are about judgement, in one way or another, and the last of which is about judgement by the king who is, in Isaiah's words, "despised and rejected", unrecognized and ignored by those who should have helped him. It is that story which leads into a warning that "after two days the Passover is coming" and Jesus' final prediction of his coming suffering. "The Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified".

Then Matthew's account links up again with Mark's, as both Gospels describe the meeting at which the chief priests and the elders of the people (not scribes as in Mark's account) decide to "arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him" – but not during the festival, for fear of civil disturbances breaking out. The anointing of Jesus by a nameless woman follows in both Gospels – as does the ensuing row. Then comes the meeting between Judas Iscariot and the Jewish authorities at which Judas agrees to hand Jesus over into their power. But Matthew adds one significant detail. Where Mark simply says "They promised to give him money", Matthew tells us exactly how much the authorities paid Judas. That's a detail to which Matthew will return later and one which would probably already have set bells ringing in the community for whom he was writing.

After that both Gospels begin the story of the Last Supper, Most of it is pretty well word for word the same, although Matthew omits the detail of the man with the water-jar and adds, right at the end of Jesus' announcement that one of the twelve will betray him, a brief exchange between Jesus and Judas Iscariot. "Surely not I, Rabbi?" asks Judas (using a form of words that in Greek "expects the answer 'no'"). Jesus replies with the enigmatic "You have said so." The "words of institution" at the giving of the bread and cup are also, so far as we can tell, slightly different. I say "so far as we can tell" because the text at this point is "contaminated", as the scholars say, in many manuscripts by assimilation either to Mark's account of the Last Supper or to St Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11. However, in one significant detail which is found in neither Mark nor Paul, Matthew makes clear that the blood of the covenant which is poured out for many is poured out "for the forgiveness of sins".

Moving on from the upper room, the story follows much the same course as it does in Mark's Gospel. Peter's denial is foretold, Jesus' struggles in prayer (with a little more detail than Mark gives) while the disciples sleep, and the group of armed men guided by Judas arrive to make their arrest. Then we begin to find a few more significant differences. Jesus responds to the betrayer's kiss by, in a sense, giving him permission for what follows, saying to him, "Friend, do what you are here to do." The Greek word translated as "friend" is, incidentally, only found in Matthew's Gospel in the New Testament, and it is always used when addressing someone who is in the wrong: the aggrieved workers who had spent a whole day in the vineyard, for example, or the man without a wedding garment. The attack on the high priest's slave, specifically by one of Jesus' companions, meets with an immediate rebuke and a warning that violence is always self-destructive. That is, sadly, a lesson that human beings seem most reluctant to learn, whether at the individual or at the national level. Jesus' teaching in this Gospel, though, is consistent and clear, from the Sermon on the Mount to the moment of his arrest: "All who take the sword will perish by the sword." The Christian way, at least in Matthew's understanding of it, is always the way of non-violent resistance.

What Jesus goes on to say at this point also raises questions which go beyond the immediate situation. “Do you think” he asks, “that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” God, in other words, can defend the Son with all the supernatural powers at God’s disposal but God, with the Son’s consent, chooses not to “so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.” What, I wonder, does that say to those, of whatever faith, who think that God’s honour must be defended by all means possible, including physical violence? Or, indeed, to those who imagine that the fulfilment of God’s will depends entirely on their intervention? In asking that second question, by the way, I am not advocating quietism, but I am querying the readiness of some people, in the Church and in politics, to assume that their political programme matches exactly the will of God.

Matthew’s account continues, describing the flight of the disciples but omitting the detail of the young man in the sheet, and taking Jesus to the house of the high priest, named here as Caiaphas. As in Mark’s Gospel the interrogation of Jesus is intercut with Peter’s three-fold denial but then come a number of episodes which are particular to Matthew’s Gospel.

The first is the suicide of Judas. This is mentioned in none of the other Gospels, although a rather different account of his death occurs early in the Acts of the Apostles. It’s interesting and important, that this follows shortly after the three-fold denial of Peter, with the transfer of Jesus to the authority of the Roman governor standing between them. Both Peter’s tears and Judas’s dramatic return to the temple are reactions to their recognition of failure – and Peter’s three-fold denial is not to be seen as a small and pardonable error. In his instructions to the twelve in Matthew 10, Jesus warns them, “Whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.” That is precisely what Peter has done, before the servant-girls and before the bystanders. But his reaction, when the cock crows, is that “godly grief”, as St Paul calls it in his second letter to Corinth, “[which] produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret”, a grief which he contrasts with “worldly grief [which] produces death.” Peter’s grief is open to the possibility of God’s mercy as Judas’s isn’t.

I have long thought that the reaction of Judas gives credence to the theory, popularized by Dorothy L. Sayers in her cycle of plays “The Man Born to be King”, that Judas was a member of the Jewish resistance against Rome and that his willingness to betray Jesus was part of a project to manipulate this charismatic teacher and healer, who reached across all sorts of boundaries, into becoming the figurehead of an anti-Roman uprising. On this view, Judas plotted to seize Jesus with the aim of triggering that uprising as his followers resisted their leader’s arrest and called out the crowds of pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover in support. What he failed to take into account was Jesus’ commitment to non-violence and the Jerusalem establishment’s implacable hostility. When Judas realized that the revolution wasn’t coming and that he had overplayed his hand, Matthew suggests that he tried to sort something out with the Jewish authorities, but was told bluntly “That’s your problem” – and consequently took his own life as his only way out of the mess he had created. For Matthew, though, the main interest (as often) appears to have been the fulfilment of scripture, as he combines (and misattributes) Zechariah’s “thirty pieces of silver”, his wages as a shepherd which he paid into the temple treasury, with Jeremiah’s visit to the house of the potter in Jeremiah 18 and his purchase of his cousin Hanamel’s field at Anathoth in chapter 32 for seventeen (not thirty) shekels of silver.

After that, Matthew again returns to Mark’s storyline, with Jesus disturbingly silent before Pilate in the face of the accusations made against him and with the governor’s misfiring attempt to free him, but into that sequence he inserts two significant details not in Mark, the intervention by Pilate’s wife and Pilate’s washing of his hands.

The intervention by the governor’s wife is a curious coda to Matthew’s account of Jesus’ life. In the first two chapters of the gospel there are repeated dreams, conveying messages to Joseph, the wise men, and Joseph again (twice) about matters of life and death. Here in the penultimate chapter we hear of one more dream, which also conveys a message about a matter of life and death.

‘Have nothing to do with that innocent man,’ says the governor’s wife, “for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.’ That dream bolsters Pilate’s reluctance to order Jesus’ death.

It also highlights Matthew’s determination to place the blame for the death of Jesus firmly on the Jews. At the time when Matthew was, most probably, writing his Gospel, in the bitter times after the failure of the Jewish revolt in the late 60s, relationships between Jews and the earliest Christians had broken down irretrievably. At this stage in the history of the Jesus movement the Roman authorities (with spasmodic exceptions) were much less hostile to it than were the leaders of the synagogues. So, despite the fact that Pontius Pilate, as we saw last week, has something of a reputation among Roman historians as a brutal but ineffective provincial governor, Matthew portrays him as trying hard to do the right thing and being prevented by the simmering hostility of the crowd. “So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.’ Then the people as a whole answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’”

Those words (Matthew 27:25) have probably caused more misery than any other single verse of scripture. The crowd’s answer, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’, has been used by Christians for two thousand years as justification for persecution, ghettoization, stripping of civil and religious rights, expulsion and massacre, culminating in the Nazis’ “Final Solution” 80 years ago. For all his anti-Judaism, I suspect that Matthew, who was almost certainly himself Jewish, would have been horrified by the uses to which those words were put. He would, I think, have regarded them as having been fulfilled in the capture and destruction of Jerusalem during the Jewish War of AD66-73. And they point up a paradox. How can Christians square their treatment of Jews, based on *this* verse of Matthew’s gospel, with that other verse to which I drew attention a few minutes ago: Jesus’ statement at the last supper that his blood, the blood of the covenant which is poured out for many, is poured out “for the forgiveness of sins”?

From this point on the narrative again follows Mark closely but with the addition of small details which bring out Matthew's conviction that Scripture is fulfilled in the death of Jesus. The wine laced with pain-killer of Mark's gospel is replaced by "wine mixed with gall" from Psalm 69. The parallels between what happened to Jesus and the words of Psalm 22 are repeatedly highlighted, not least by the chief priests, along with the scribes and elders, whose mocking words, set brilliantly by Handel in "The Messiah", "He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to," are a more or less direct quotation from Psalm 22:7-8. "All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; 'Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—let him rescue the one in whom he delights!'" As is the detail, shared with Mark, that the soldiers "divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots" – that's verse 18. And, again as in Mark's Gospel, the death struggle comes to its climax with the very first words of the same psalm, but quoted by Matthew in Hebrew, rather than Mark's Aramaic, followed by the wordless cry of anguish as Jesus breathes his last.

And here follows the last of Matthew's additions to Mark's basic story. Where Mark tells of the rending of the curtain in the temple and the centurion's confession and then moves on to the women who were watching, and Joseph of Arimathaea, Matthew inserts, as he will later in his account of the resurrection, what cynics might describe as a few supernatural stage effects. Just as "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" Matthew adds "The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many." In adding these details, which are found in none of the other Gospels, Matthew is making a theological statement about the meaning of the death of Jesus. The earthquake, as in many poems in the Hebrew Scriptures, from the Song of Deborah in Judges 5 to the Psalms, is a sign that God is at work. And the rousing of "the saints", the holy men and women of Israel's past, from the sleep of death is not completed until after Jesus' resurrection, because, while his death brings life to those who have died, he is, in St Paul's words, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

This insertion serves another purpose, too. In Mark's Gospel the centurion's confession of Jesus as "son of God" comes like a bolt from the blue. "Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'" For Matthew the earthquake and the disturbing of the tombs are the lead into *this*: "Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'" What had been the confession of one man in Mark's Gospel, becomes for Matthew a witness statement, confirmed not only by the centurion, but also by "those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus". This is the prelude to judgement, foretold in those three parables in Matthew 25, and acted out in the three succeeding chapters. We are moving away from Mark's shattering account of the crucifixion, and its challenge: "Can you, like the centurion, see God in this?" Instead we are moving to a story shaped for the preacher and teacher, as we shall see next week when we come to St Luke's version of events.

A.W.D.

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