



MONDAY 27 MARCH 2017

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Read: Matthew 13:53-57

Plug In...

The story of Jesus' life paused to hear a string of parables about the nature of the kingdom. Now the kingdom story journey resumes with Jesus returning to His hometown. There the people are 'amazed'. But the tone of amazement seems to be disbelief. They're essentially saying Jesus is one of us, so how did He get this teaching, even miraculous ability. The final commentary by Matthew, "They took offence at him" interprets their 'amazement' as one that suggests they are beginning to side with the Pharisees' evaluation of Jesus (12:24).

Chew It Over...

The thrust of all the parables has been the kingdom of God will start, grow, and overcome despite its miniature look, powerless feel, and robust opposition. That's the nature of the kingdom the parables declare. Now, as the story gets moving, we see this nature in action. In real-time, Jesus is appearing to the crowd as weak (or whatever power He has is of an inferior corrupt type), insignificant, and He is not of a measure that can cut through and last. Within the story, we watch Jesus and ask: What's He thinking? Will He trust

all God has said about the kingdom? What is Jesus tempted to believe given the realities on the ground? The disciples. Will they hang in there with Him? Presumably, their families are pulling them aside for the popularly coined “family-intervention”.

How do these questions crop up in your life? What doubts do you have? What groups do you feel increasingly ostracised from because you keep siding with Jesus? Given these doubts, what do you see yourself tempted to do? Is there a group you have relied on for your identity and security? Apply the parables perspective to a situation you currently face that wants to pull you away from Jesus. Allow the parables of the kingdom and Jesus’ own demonstration of that tension navigate your response.

Prayer Suggestion

Lord God, many times aligning with Jesus exposes our doubts. Life as we know it fosters real temptation to run to groups for our acceptance, identity, and security. Lord, we pray, keep us from temptation, distraction, false securities. Increase our faith.



The Lakes

TUESDAY 28 MARCH 2017

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Read: Matthew 13:57

Plug In...

“A prophet is without honour except in his hometown.” The phrase *without honour* is literally the word ‘despised’. [NB: You may remember Jesus came from Nazareth, a town despised – see John 1:45-46.]

Chew It Over...

Same words, ideas, and responses are used in Isaiah 53:1-6 of the Servant. Israel turns away from Jesus. His family turns their backs. Even the disciples shortly flee. Who deserves God, who deserves Jesus? God would be completely just to discard us all. Yet, reflect on the shocking thing about God in the narrative of Jesus throughout Matthew.

Someone, somewhere, said: “It is the glory of God to stoop.”

Prayer Suggestion

Let this inform how you repent before God today and praise Him for His loving-kindness.



WEDNESDAY 29 MARCH 2017

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Read: Matthew 13:58

Plug In...

Jesus did not do any miracles in His hometown because of their lack of faith. This underlines the situation of Israel. The narrative opened that Jesus went into His hometown and taught in their synagogues. Matthew's Gospel shows that Jesus doesn't return to His hometown nor preach in synagogues any further. We are rapidly seeing that the only faithful Israel left is the one Israelite – Jesus Himself.

Chew It Over...

Broadly we see Jesus does heal people who didn't seem to exhibit faith at first (e.g. John 5:1-14). This situation is more pronounced. The story has shown explicitly this group of people who Jesus is. With that revelation they have in turn rejected Him outright. No further demonstration and experience of the kingdom blessings awaits them while that stance is taken. Jesus is here to save people who cast themselves on Him. Jesus is not a performing monkey.

The Bible doesn't quite teach a 'faith = you will experience miracles' formula. Other things are to be understood. There is the truth of suffering before glory (following in the footsteps of Jesus); there is the full expression/experience of the kingdom that lies in the future. Nevertheless, what does this say about the relation of faith to requesting anything from God?

Prayer Suggestion

Who can you pray for today asking that God will show them mercy. Is the first experience of God's mercy that they be released from their blindness to God's grace and promises?



THURSDAY 30 MARCH 2017

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Read: Matthew 14:1-2

Plug In...

Herod is worried about the reports of Jesus. This is Herod Antipas. He is the son of Herod the Great. It was Herod the Great who tried to exterminate the Messiah when he heard about His birth (2:1-18). Only after Herod the Great's death were Jesus and His family able to return safely to Israel (2:21), to Nazareth (2:23). Now as an adult, Jesus is effectively booted out of Nazareth. This story revives the threat of larger forces looming against Jesus' calling.

Chew It Over...

The Herod the Great we saw was neurotic and psychopathic. His son, Herod Antipas, seems to be channelling similar neurosis as his advisors deliver the press report about Jesus. Remember, Herod Antipas was essentially the proxy king of the Jews at this time. Here, as a *Jewish* king, he betrays that he is believing in superstition, or magic, instead of his heritage religion of the God of Israel. We are being shown again just how out of step the entire nation of Israel is. They were meant to be a light to the nations (*cf.* Deuteronomy 4:5-8).

The story of Israel failing miserably is important for us to understand as we see God's people today fail. Israel shows that humanity has a deep problem of sin that cannot be jumped over easily. Even those in privileged position to God's revelation can't follow God perfectly or enthusiastically. The story of Israel shows us that Jesus is the only Israelite that is faithful. What a human needs is someone flawless to sub in for the flawed. If we pretend that the church is somehow morally superior and try to broadcast this to the world, Jesus gets missed. When we talk about the good life, when we engage in political-social issues, we have to be crystal clear that Jesus is the light to the nations, and we are pointing Him out, not pointing at the church.

How do you find the church in Australia is perceived? What are some of the areas where we are in danger of communicating, even inadvertently, that we are morally superior?

Prayer Suggestion

Ask God for clarity of heart and speech that we always communicate complete reliance on Christ. That we live as sinners who still have grave flaws to deal with, but are simultaneously declared saints because of Jesus. May our testimony to that invite people to want to seek Jesus for themselves.



FRIDAY 31 MARCH 2017

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Read: Matthew 14:3-12

Plug In...

Here we go into the palace, the bedrooms, and the minds of the ruling family. This flashback slows the story down. It recalls the details of the death of a prophet clearly unwelcome in “his hometown”. John is a prophet with compassion. He comes with the message of repentance so that people might receive God’s grace. At pain of death, he risks even sharing this message of grace to those in the upper echelons of power. Herod and Herodias get what they want. John the Baptist’s head silenced. Effectively, the word of God muted. The grizzly image is of Herodias receiving the trophy of her victory, her insatiable hunger for John’s head, then she receives it on a platter as if it was being served as a meal.

Chew It Over...

This is a deliberate slowdown in the story, with vivid description, all designed to smack us around as we hear it. So why this slow down, why this flashback? What’s the impact? It is proof of the truism Jesus just said: “A prophet is without honour in his hometown”. If Jesus applied the proverb to Himself, and John the Baptist’s story bears it out, then Jesus’ fate is predicted and the same for anyone aligned with Him. The final line of this story says, “John’s disciples came and took his body and buried it”. Is that the end of the story? If that is the cost, and it ends there, then it is not worth it right?

Matthew tells us this story to press home that Jesus is not kidding around. Following Jesus is costly, could be very costly. If they hated Him first, they will hate His followers (10:22a). But as hard-hitting as this is, the promise for standing firm to the end is just as forceful. They will be saved! (10:22b). As we flow with the story, we should be asking even at this moment of John the Baptist's death, will he be saved? Of course, this is a hard question to ask with the reality of a body wrapped and buried in a tomb. This is a hard question to ask of anyone of us who has lost someone through death.

This death and burial story has a parallel. A disciple of Jesus comes and collects Jesus' body and places it in a tomb (28:57-61). However, this parallel story diverges at that point. It follows on to announce that shortly afterwards there is no body in the tomb, it has risen! These stories are designed to get us to reckon with the reality of death today. To figure out whether we are living for the short-term gain (i.e. Herod and therefore avoiding repentance), or long-term resurrection.

Prayer Suggestion

Thank the Lord that in the face of death we don't have despair or prop ourselves up through wishful thinking. Thank the Lord Jesus for confidence in resurrection.



WEEKEND 1-2 APRIL 2017

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Read: Matthew 14:13-14

Plug In...

Jesus hears about John the Baptist and has to leave to a solitary place. It is literally 'the desert'. We are about to see a story where Jesus feeds people in the desert. Something that God did for the Israelites as they wandered for forty years while they waited to enter the Promised Land. Here, Jesus in the Promised Land is forced to eject Himself because the people of the Promised Land are pressing in to get Him. Yet, when His need is great, Jesus focuses more on helping and healing the sick as He is motivated by compassion.

Chew It Over...

This following story is juxtaposed with Herod. Two kings. One in a palace feasting and indulging in illicit pleasure and injustice. The other rejected and despised, ostracised to the wilderness and yet, driven by compassion and at cost to Himself, will provide a banquet for others.

The story presses on us, which king will you follow? The answer is not as simple as we might want it to be, for we have real desires, cravings, a need for security, want of power, there's worries that wealth can solve. And, they are being held out and offered to us in many ways. For many of us, they are within reach and we find these offerings delightful and pleasing to the eye.

We know the story of Jesus, we know the promises. But how do we choose to follow Him when His way immediately is narrow and hard?

Prayer Suggestion

Pray that God keeps the transience of this world before our minds. Ask for help in finding satisfaction and security in Jesus.