

Study following Sunday October 4th

Prepare: Think about how stories can have different meanings for different people.

Praise: Spend some time giving thanks to God that he comes to us as a story, a story he began at the dawn of time, and a story that we are now part of.

Passage: Read Matthew 21.33-46

Ponder: Jesus continues to teach during the week leading up to his death. He uses the picture of a vineyard again for another parable. The link back to Isaiah 5.1-7 is even stronger than the parable in Matthew 20. Jesus takes the traditional motif of God's prophets being rejected and even killed and places it alongside the metaphor of Israel as God's vineyard. As he brings these two together a new picture emerges of Jesus' rejection being the climax in the story of rebellion against Israel's God (Allison, 2004).

- Imagine the anger of the Chief Priests and Pharisees as they work out this parable may be about them and their disloyalty to God.

- Maybe they also worried about their reputation among those listening who may start to question their spiritual authority and turn to Jesus' teaching?

Jesus interjects the parable and his interpretation with a quote from Psalm 118, that the rejected stone will become the 'cornerstone' through God's power. In the Old Testament the image is of Israel, or its king, being rejected by the nations, but Jesus reapplies this picture to the rejection of him and his message by the Jewish leaders. The image of a 'cornerstone' is possibly the keystone from an arch of stones. The 'cornerstone' may also be the capstone or copestone that appears on the top of a pillar or corner, a stone that cannot be used elsewhere due to its angular upper face. Elsewhere the 'cornerstone' refers literally to the stone that marks the base of the corner and from which the other stones of a building are measured and aligned.

- How might each of these ideas help us when looking at Jesus' ministry and life?

In our current passage there is an obvious linking to the stones of the temple. Jesus has spoken of building his Church, a place where God will be encountered. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple is foretold in this parable.

There is a lot about judgement in this section of Matthew. As Jesus approaches the dark events of Good Friday, it seems that God's judgement is front and centre. There is no doubt that Jesus wants to teach his readers that there will be consequences for their actions and that God's judgement will come. What we see elsewhere is that God's judgement can be surprising and that his mercy and faithfulness are always present.

- How do you react to the idea of God's judgement ?

Ian Paul describes a current online debate he is having about whether God's judgement is ultimately just about purifying, purging and preparing for eternity rather than the possibility of ultimate destruction. In the end we must leave judgement to God, whilst recognising he is the God who holds love and truth, mercy and justice together. We can draw from Solomon's wisdom in Ecclesiastes chapter 3 - knowing we will never 'see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end'. But we can seek to bear the fruit of repentance and hope as a response to his life and message and we can seek to bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives of faith.

Pray: Pray for those, Christian or not, who struggle to see God as a God of love because of past experiences or unhelpful teaching. Pray for us all to see that we have a part to play in response to God's judgement and his big story, to grow his kingdom and bring in the harvest, guided and energised by the Holy Spirit.

Study following Sunday October 11th

Prepare: Think about invitations that you have had, and how the events worked out.

Praise: Spend some time giving thanks to God for his persistence in reconciling the whole world.

Passage: Read Matthew 22.1-14

Ponder: This passage is more reflection by Jesus on the way his message has been received, especially by the Jewish leaders. The tension of Holy week mounts as Jesus' challenge is understood. In the parable, the King represents God, and the wedding banquet for his son is the messianic banquet.

- Read about the prophesied messianic banquet in Isaiah 25.6-8 and also the similarities to John's vision in Revelation 19.1-9

Again, as in the previous parable, the servants are the prophets and those who are seen as messengers of God, and again their message falls on deaf ears.

The parable is also recounted in Luke 14.25-24, but Matthew's form builds more on the previous parable of the vineyard. Matthew is unique in recording verses 6-7 about the destruction of the city, this may show that the final version was assembled after AD 70 when Jerusalem was all but destroyed. Verse 6-7 also echo the potential transfer of privilege also shown in Matthew 21.41-43.

At this point, as the wedding banquet is seemingly curtailed, I am reminded of those who have had, or are having their weddings postponed or curtailed in some way due to the Covid19 pandemic. Perhaps they can appreciate the anger and frustration of the King as his plans seem in tatters.

- How do you associate with the King's frustration and anger at having his great plans ruined by others?

Whilst the King's anger lasts for a time, the parable quickly moves on to the King's generosity. In Matthew Jesus' King gathers the good and the bad, perhaps reflecting that there will be good and bad gathering to hear the Gospel, gathering as part of the church. The parable ends with a sub-plot involving a man without the correct attire.

- Have you ever been barred entry to somewhere because of the way you were dressed?

The custom at the time, was to wear your own best clothes for a wedding, a linen garment that would have been washed and cleaned specially. It seems this one guest has not shown respect to the King, or his Son, and has worn clothes that are not suitable. It is understood that there will be those who are not able to join the messianic banquet because they do not wear the 'right clothes'.

- How do you understand the meaning of the 'wedding clothes' not worn?

There are several understandings for the wedding clothes that he is not wearing. Firstly perhaps they are the righteous deeds that have not been done. Secondly they may refer to the faith in Jesus and his message, or thirdly it may refer to the stranger not having been baptised in a linen robe to become one of God's children. In a way each of these interpretations all point to the same thing, living out the Christian life - faith and deeds cannot be separated and a commitment to the wider church through baptism is an important part of standing up with and for our saviour.

An understanding of the final phrase may be helped by recognising that the word often translated 'chosen' can also mean 'worthy', 'pure' or 'choice'.

Pray: Pray for all Christians, who have been 'invited', that we would seek to show we are 'worthy' by our thoughts, words and deeds, guided by God's Holy Spirit.

Study following Sunday October 18th

Prepare: Think about trick questions you have been asked and how it made you feel.

Praise: Spend some time giving thanks to God that he is over us and in us, that he has the whole world in his hands.

Passage: Read Matthew 22.15-22

Ponder: This passage is another example of Jesus tangling with the Pharisees, and this time the 'Herodians' are there too, about whom not much is known. The Herodians clearly have some affinity with Herod Antipas who was ruler of Galilee, although their priorities would have been different to the Pharisees it seems that they unite in their loathing of Jesus and his teaching.

- See Luke 23.11-12 for another unlikely partnership - brought together through Jesus. The Pharisees are out to trap Jesus, they are seeking to ensnare or entangle him by luring him into saying something incriminating. Here, Matthew clearly wants us to be aware that the words he reports in verse 16, about Jesus being a man of integrity and a teacher of God's truth, are merely words of false flattery and irony. The true irony, of course, is that they speak the truth, they are just too blinded to see it.

- Have you seen someone have to eat their own words when comments made in jest turn out to be true? It can be hard to recover some respect, especially for those in authority.

Ian Paul points out that the last phrase the Pharisees use literally means 'you do not look on a person's face'. This phrase links back to God's passing over of the 7 sons of Jesse because God looked on the heart of the sons and saw David, the youngest, with a heart for himself.

- See 1 Samuel 16.7 for a description of how the Lord sees.

They know that the question they then ask is impossible to answer, if he sides with the Romans he will be seen as compromising his devotion to God, giving into the occupation and not fulfilling the role of the promised messiah so many hope he is. If he sides against the tax then he could be accused of being a rebel and charged with sedition, which he is eventually unjustly convicted.

I confess that this is one of my favourite interchanges Jesus has, how he doesn't just evade the trap, but he ensures that the trappers fall into a trap of their own making

- see Proverbs 26 verse 27 and then Psalm 57 verse 6 for this principal outlined.

Jesus' criticism of the them as 'Hypocrites' comes from a term for Greek stage players, and means 'interpreter from underneath', this was due to the actors carrying a mask from which they spoke behind. A mask can hide expressions and feelings, something we are all learning in these strange times. The fact that the pharisees can produce a denarius with its forbidden graven image is testament to the fact they are playing fast and loose with God's commandments. Their focus seems to have wandered from the provider of all things. Jesus directs attention first to the emperor's image on the the coin, and then his second phrase about "giving to God what is God's" might link to the way we each bear God's image and therefore can offer ourselves to his service.

- We might remember Jesus' words in Luke 12.15 when focussing on the measure of someone's life.

Pray: Pray for those who struggle finding the right priorities between God, Family, Work, Church and Self. Pray for a sense of perspective as we look to God and recognise Him as our creator, redeemer and sustainer.

Study following Sunday October 25th

Prepare: Think about the way giving love to another is a risky business.

Praise: Spend some time giving thanks to God that his love knows no bounds.

Passage: Read Matthew 22.34-46

Ponder: The debate has been raging since Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey at the beginning of what we know as 'Holy Week'. Having comforted the disturbed in his ministry he now proceeds to disturb the comfortable. The Pharisees are perplexed but continue to question him. There had long been a question over which commandments were more weighty than others, Jesus draws on two passages from the Old Testament to settle the argument.

- Look at Deuteronomy 6 verse 5, this is the 'Shema', the closest thing to a creed for Judaism.

- Look also at Leviticus 19 verse 18, and notice that far from being a book just about the priests and their duties Leviticus also contains nuggets such as this one that leads to greater holiness and a closer walk with God. Indeed Leviticus 19 verse 18 is quoted three times in Matthew's Gospel, more than any other Old Testament text.

- See also Matthew 5 verse 43, chapter 19 verse 19, as well as chapter 22.39.

Some writers puzzle at whether, what is known as the 'Great Commandment', is two equal calls to love God and others, or one love for God that supersedes the love for other. It seems to me that if God is the source of all life and love then it is our love for him that leads us to recognise his love for us. We need to know we are loved and indeed love ourselves so that we can truly overflow with love for others (see also 1 John 4.16).

- How do you see these two calls to love?

- Which challenges you more, love for God, love for others or love for yourself?

As Green points out 'If there is a real love for God, there will inevitably be a real love for neighbour; God's overflowing love is infectious.'

Now Jesus goes on the offensive, asking a question to try to prise open the almost closed minds of his opponents. They were seeking a Messiah that could come as a political deliverer, to remove the Romans from ruling and bring a long hoped for freedom. Jesus leads them on a little Bible study!

- See Psalm 110 verse 1, that Jesus attributes to David.

The Pharisees hope that a human hero from the line of David will come forward to save them. Jesus then helps them to see that it is not quite as cut and dried as that. Using the verse from Psalm 110 he helps them see that David will look up to this Messiah as Lord. It seems he is trying to help them examine their own ideas, assumptions and inherited prejudices (Green). Psalm 110 verse 1 pictures the Messiah as exalted at God's right hand, to reign as 'Lord'. So Jesus leaves the Pharisees with a conundrum - how is the Messiah both a 'Son of David' and to reign as 'Lord' at God's right hand? Jesus is seeking to open their minds to new opportunities.

- How do you see the two natures of Jesus - Human and divine?

- How might this give you hope and encouragement?

Thank You for reading these study notes. I would love to hear if they have been useful for personal study or for discussions with others. Please drop me a line to say how you've used them and any other comments you may have. Thank You.

Pray: Pray for those who struggle to love themselves, or struggle to know God's love because of past relationship experience. Pray that we each can find a way to show God's love to us in our relationships with our neighbours.