

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 38”

Matthew 13:47-52

Well, we're back again in Matthew's Gospel this morning. Having taken a break from this series for Advent, Christmas and the New Year, we're going to pick things up where we left off at the end of November and we find ourselves back in chapter 13, in amongst the series of parables that Jesus was using to try and communicate to his listeners a little of what they could expect from the Kingdom of God, which has been very much at the centre of his teaching and preaching.

Maybe it would be a good idea to recap a little – “the story so far” kind of thing. There are some of you who have started worshipping here since November, others of you who might have forgotten stuff and a fair number, probably, who just weren't listening in the first place – so let's remind ourselves of what this Gospel is all about. This is really Matthew's account of the life of Jesus. As a disciple, Matthew has seen firsthand what Jesus did and has heard Jesus' teaching directly from the man himself. But anyone who sets out to write a book, particularly a factual book, has some particular reason for doing so – and this was long before big publishers' advances and the lure of huge royalties would have made money the reason for writing.

Matthew was, by the time he wrote this book, a leader in the newly formed Christian church and that church was full of believers who were from a solidly Jewish background. They had generations of tradition behind them and were very keen to follow what God wanted. Why should they suddenly start to follow this newly proclaimed Messiah? Wouldn't that be turning their backs on centuries of belief and religious tradition? Wouldn't it be betraying everything they'd ever stood for? Matthew's purpose in writing this Gospel is to help those anxious Jewish believers see that Jesus has not come along with some completely new set of beliefs that cuts across what they believe. Jesus is actually *the culmination* of their beliefs: he's what it was all leading up to. We've noticed how much Matthew refers to the Hebrew Scriptures, their Bible, our Old Testament. He quotes from it extensively and he draws all kinds of parallels between what Jesus is saying and doing and what the Jewish believers have read in their Scriptures. This Jesus is the one who was prophesied and predicted by the preachers, prophets and poets of the Old Testament. Of course, there have been other Messianic pretenders, other people who have claimed to be sent by God and appointed by him for specific tasks, but none of them has fitted the bill exactly as Jesus has. Here is someone who is the very embodiment of all those things that the Jews had been expecting. Here is the one who is truly appointed by God and anointed by his Holy Spirit. “You don't need to worry about betraying your faith,” says Matthew. “This is actually what your faith is all about!”

And one thing in particular is at the heart of all this. Not only did those Old Testament prophets and preachers herald the arrival of a Messiah – a Christ, to use the Greek word – but they also pointed forward to a Kingdom that this Messiah would inaugurate. Running through the whole of the Old Testament is this idea that God will one day return this messed up world, with all its brokenness and brutality, to the state in which he originally intended it to be in. He will exert his sovereign rule over a cosmos that seems to be heading for chaos due to the pervasive influence of evil that has run through it almost since the dawn of time. He is going to usher in his Kingdom, his rule, his perfect creation once again – and it is where the followers of this Kingly Messiah will spend eternity.

But first, evil has to be dealt with and people have to be shown something of what this kingdom will be like. Isaiah, Micah, Amos and the other Hebrew prophets have talked about this kingdom of righteousness and justice, but now the Messiah has come to start to make it a reality. And as we have read through these first thirteen chapters of Matthew's Gospel, we have seen Jesus giving glimpses of the Kingdom in the way he has spoken and acted. We have seen him bring wholeness to broken lives as he has healed, and liberated people from the power and influence of evil. We have seen him reach out to those in need as he has transformed lives, provided for those who were disadvantaged and defended the vulnerable. We have seen him exert his power over the forces of the natural world in miracles and signs and wonders. Jesus has shown by his own lifestyle and example what justice and love are really all about. We have heard him challenging the vested interests of powerful minorities and helping people to see what true religion should really be all about. We have heard his words of encouragement and rebuke, his stories of hope and challenge, his guidance (particularly in The Sermon On The Mount) for getting the very best out of life. We have seen him bringing wholeness, hope, health and healing to the broken, the desperate and the dispossessed – and urging his followers to do the same.

And in this chapter thirteen we have seen Jesus using a series of parables to help his followers to grasp a little of what this Kingdom of Heaven, this Kingdom of God (but Matthew, the good Jew, won't write the word "God": it's too holy for that), this sovereign rule of God could be like. This little section we've read this morning is the last of that series of stories and aphorisms, all of which begin "*The Kingdom of heaven is like ...*" Frustratingly for us, they don't give us much detail. They are impressionistic and full of imagery and imagination. They need to be seen as little poetic pointers rather than fully developed blueprints. This one – which is really a restating of what Jesus said a bit earlier in the Parable of the Weeds (vv24-30,36-43) – just gives us a glimpse of one aspect of this Kingdom.

Jesus chooses as his example a net – as usual, something that would have been very familiar to his listeners – and says that the net of the Kingdom is cast wide. He is bringing an inclusive message which will touch the lives of many, many people. But in the end not everyone will enjoy the full benefits of the

Kingdom. There will be those who are cast away, who are excluded from final entry to the Kingdom. In a world – a church – where people are falling over themselves to be as inclusive as possible, this is a harsh message. But it's a message that once again – as Jesus has made plain several times already – points to the need for a decision about him. As we have said many times over the past few months, you cannot remain sitting on the fence when it comes to Jesus. Neutrality is not an option. There is a real challenge to choose, to come down on one side or the other. And this parable makes very clear – as do several of the others in this chapter – that there will be a day of crisis, a day of judgement. **God will judge.** Here we read how that can be interpreted with three different but complementary emphases.

1. GOD WILL JUDGE

As Jesus made more explicit in the Parable of the Weeds, at the moment there are all kinds of people who seem to fall within the orbit of the Kingdom of God. Indeed, we would say that pretty well everyone would be included in that. What we do as God's people extends to all parts of the community. We welcome anyone and everyone into this place to worship and to work together. As you'll see if you drop into these premises any day during the week, there's a huge number of different people and groups who come here for things that are run by the church and things that are run by other organisations. Sitting here this morning there are people, I guess, who have one of a huge range of responses to the Gospel of Jesus.

But God is the only one who can truly see the motivation and the mindsets of every whom we welcome here. He is the only one who can truly discern attitudes and ideas that lurk within the hearts and minds of each of us. We may see people whom we suspect are thinking or behaving in a particular way, but it is not up to us to judge. Everyone is to be welcomed. And Jesus, as we shall see in coming weeks, is very clear that we are to make no distinctions. Indeed, we shall arrive before long at possibly the scariest chapter in this book – possibly even in the whole Bible – where Jesus says what will happen when we finally get to stand before God. It's chapter 25 and in there it is made very clear that some of the assumptions we've made about what is expected of us as followers of the Kingly Messiah might not be altogether correct.

In other words, what Jesus is saying here and in the Parable of the Weeds is that we do not have the right or the ability to exclude anyone from our worship, work or witness. In the end, God will make the call, he will be the judge – after all, he's the One who really knows! Just as he has demonstrated his love for everyone in what he has done in Jesus, so we are to reflect that love and reach out to all who come across our path.

2. GOD WILL JUDGE

“*This is how it will be ...*” says Jesus. This isn’t some kind of negotiable end to the story. It’s not like those Hollywood screenings where people are shown alternative endings to films and asked to choose the one they think is best. God’s already decided what’s going to happen and nothing’s going to change that. There will be that crisis moment when we each stand – alone and personally responsible for our actions – before God our Creator and Judge. We will have to face God and at that point we will discover the eternal consequences of our actions.

Now we don’t really major too much on that these days, do we? After all, there are much nicer and safer things to talk about when it comes to our faith and to our reading of the Bible. But it’s a thread that runs right through both Testaments. At some point we all have to make a choice. We all have to make up our minds about God and about Jesus. It’s like in that little section from the Old Testament book of *Joshua*, in chapter 24. The people of Israel – God’s people, whom he loved and whom he had liberated from a life of hopelessness and despair as slaves in Egypt – were at a crisis point in their history. They needed to move forward and Joshua, their leader, challenged them about that choice – the One True God or the values and attitudes of the people who ignored and rejected God. Joshua even points out to the people that it’s going to be a tough call. They will find it very difficult. But in the end they all shout “*We will serve the LORD*”.

There’s a choice to be made, folks. What’s it going to be? How much longer are you going to put it off? You never know when that moment of crisis will come, that moment when it will just be too late to make up your mind. But it will most definitely come. And in the end ...

3. GOD WILL JUDGE

God is going to make a choice in the end. It’s vital that we acknowledge that. He is not going to let everyone into his eternal Kingdom. This passage makes very clear that Kingdom is not a universalist Kingdom. Some will be excluded. If everyone was going to be welcomed into that Kingdom then pretty well all that we do here would be a waste of time. None of it would make any difference. I’d have wasted nearly 30 years of my life and a good deal of other people’s money! Somehow – and Jesus here uses the image of angels getting stuck in – God is going to separate off those who are truly followers of the Kingly Messiah, Jesus and they are going to meet a very unwelcome end, however you interpret v50.

That's uncomfortable, isn't it? And many people reject what God has to say on those very grounds. They don't like to think of a God who could do such a thing and so they decide that they don't want to have anything to do with him – which pretty well means they can be sure of where they will end up. God will indeed honour that choice.

But Jesus refers to this teaching about the Kingdom as “*treasures*” (v52). This isn't scary stuff, really. This is good news. And the good news we discover in reading through this Gospel of Matthew, the good news we discover leaping off every page of this amazing book, the good news that we see radiating from the faces of those who follow the Kingly Messiah, is that God does actually reach out to everyone. He doesn't make his judgement on the basis of some irrational set of rules and regulations, nor on the basis of a purely arbitrary assessment of how much he likes us. God truly loves everyone. That message runs through this teaching of Jesus, through the preaching of the prophets, through the letters of the apostles, through the poems of the Psalmist in a way that cannot be ignored.

Jesus calls everyone, regardless of race or gender or age or income or ability or sexual orientation or past history or future plans, to follow him. Some of that stuff might be transformed as he subsequently acts on their lives, but the invitation is there for everyone. And he has shown how serious he is about that by being prepared to go to the cross, to go through the pain and humiliation and agony of the crucifixion, just to make it clear beyond any doubt that he loves you. And his resurrection from the dead proves just how seriously we can take that, because it shows just how powerful his promises actually are.

The trouble is, not everyone wants to accept that. For all kinds of reasons, people decide they're going to turn down the invitation to become a follower of the Kingly Messiah and with it the certain prospect of eternal life in the Kingdom of God. You might be one of those who, up until now, has decided that following Jesus isn't for you, you're just not willing to take that step of faith. If you stick to that, then you're losing out on the greatest opportunity you will ever get and, with sadness in his eyes and in his voice, God will return his judgement that, if you don't want to be part of what he has planned, then that's your decision and off you go.

This parable – along with the Parable of the Weeds – makes as clear as daylight the need for you to make a decision. We're going to sing a final song in a moment and one of the verses begins, “*The Kingdom of God is challenge and choice*”. Here's the challenge for you this morning: are you going to walk out of that door without having made a positive choice to follow the Kingly Messiah, to throw in your lot with Jesus? If you do, there's a whole host of people here this morning who would tell you what a fool you are. But, more to the point, one day you'll stand before God and he will tell you what a fool you've been. And by then it will be too late to change your mind.

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But God is the only one who can truly see the motivation and the mindsets of every whom we welcome here. He is the only one who can truly discern attitudes and ideas that lurk within the hearts and minds of each of us. We may see people whom we suspect are thinking or behaving in a particular way, but it is not up to us to judge. Everyone is to be welcomed. Jesus, here and elsewhere, is very clear that we are to make no distinctions. What Jesus is saying here and in the Parable of the Weeds is that we do not have the right or the ability to exclude anyone from our worship, work or witness. In the end, God will make the call, he will be the judge – after all, he's the One who really knows!

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Questions for discussion

1. Spend a few moments recapping what we have already read in Matthew's Gospel.
2. Would it ever be right not to welcome someone into church? Why/why not? What would Jesus have done?
3. Why do we find the idea that some people will eventually be excluded from the Kingdom so difficult?
4. How literally should we take v50?
5. If this choice is so important, why do we hesitate to present it to other people? Shouldn't we be warning them as a matter of urgency?