

## The Gospel According to Saint Matthew

Session 9 – Wednesday May 27, 2020

We opened last week by looking at the Genesis narrative of the creation and fall of humanity, in order to think about it in light of Matthew's teaching. Matthew has been presenting the idea that Jesus is not only the One who fulfils the Law, by revealing the divine will and love that animates it, but fulfils the whole of Scripture. Jesus is the embodiment of faithful Israel in all its aspects and relationships.

We observed that after God breathes life into humanity, and makes it whole in male and female, God places Adam and Even in Eden. There are two trees at the centre of the Garden: the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; and the Tree of Life. Adam and Eve are told not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, but there is no prohibition against eating from the Tree of Life.

But then a curious thing happens. When the serpent appears, he speaks as though there is only one tree in the middle of the garden – the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Eve responds likewise, as though there is only that one Tree.

Adam and Eve's Fall, is that they judge to be good, what God has said is not good for humans, and will lead to their deaths. Among the reasons they give for judging it good, is that eating it will make them *wise*. They equate *Knowledge* with *Wisdom*. But they are not equivalents. *The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord*. *Fear*, not in terms of knee quaking, but in terms of recognizing ourselves in the right relationship with God – *creatures* made in His image. Both those things – we are creatures, and we are meant to reflect the divine life in our life.

The story of Adam and Eve's Fall ends with their banishment from the Garden. The reason God gives for banishing them, is not that they deserve to be punished, but in order to avoid the possibility that they will now reach out and eat of the Tree of Life, and so will live forever.

God doesn't cut down the Tree of Life – it remains. But God doesn't want humans to live forever, now that they have set themselves, set their wills, against His good will for us. They hide themselves from God. They see differences between themselves for the first time. There is division where once there was unity – one flesh in perfect union with God and the world.

The narrative is saying that God does not want humans to live forever in a broken relationship with Him. The Angel with the flaming sword guards the entrance to Eden in order to prevent that.

In summary, the things this narrative teaches us, which has relevance to Matthew's gospel:

- Everything in the Garden of Eden is good, including the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.
- God differentiates between the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Tree of Life, but the devil completely disregards the latter.
- Wisdom cannot be equated with knowledge.
- Human decisions without reference to God's will for us, lead to our downfall.
- God desires us to live for ever in the right relationship with Him.

How does this pertain to Matthew? Matthew is deeply concerned with what constitutes righteousness, which he says ultimately is to be found in the Law as Jesus reveals its purpose. The Pharisees know the Law, but

they are not wise, because they interpret the Law without reference to Jesus' articulation of its purpose. They ignore Love, the Tree of Life.

They are hypocrites, because they seek their own glory, not God's glory. They desire to be *as God*.

They exclude people from community – lepers, women, tax-collectors, sinners. They see the differences between people, and that way of seeing is a consequence of the Fall. Uncorrupted humanity sees the essential unity of humanity, in its right relationship with God and the world, which expresses God's good will.

In contrast to the Pharisees are those blessed ones who possess the nature of those belonging to the kingdom of heaven: *the poor in spirit* – those who recognize our need for grace from outside ourselves, who recognize our essential unity; those who pray to *Our Father*, with one another, and with Jesus – those who live truly as the *son of God*.

We have seen how important this idea is to Matthew, Israel as the Son of God, Jesus as the Son of God, the disciples as children of God. Adam and Eve are also the children of God (St Luke's genealogy of Jesus goes back to Adam), which is to say, all humans are children of God.

In the healing miracles, we have heard Matthew emphasize that Jesus brings, *healing, wholeness, salvation*, to individuals, and to the community. He is restoring humanity's essential unity as creatures made in God's image. And, by associating this healing of humanity's wounds with the Cross, Matthew is proclaiming that Christ is the Tree of Life at the heart of the Garden.

And Christ's mission, which has been presented by Matthew as belonging to the same divine work as the Exodus – the delivery from bondage in Egypt and the bringing of God's people to the Promised Land; and the

return from Exile to home, is ultimately the return to Eden, humanity's original home; the Sabbath rest, of life with God, in true community, which is the heavenly kingdom.

Matthew, chapter 9.

We ended last time by looking at the two healings interwoven in verses 18-26. There is the young girl Jesus raises to life. Interwoven with that narrative is the healing of the woman with the haemorrhage, of 12 years, representing in some sense the healing of the nation of Israel. It is in her healing story that we hear Matthew repeating the same word to allow all the meanings of it to come forward – *health, wholeness, salvation*.

In all these healing narratives, we hear Matthew's articulation of the Church's cry and faith: *Lord, we are perishing. Save us!* And we hear the Church's faith that Christ responds to His disciples' cry with healing and salvation.

Vv 27-31 - healing of two blind persons

As we saw previously, here Matthew doubles the healings recorded by the other synoptic writers: 2 demoniacs, 2 blind persons.

Mark's *messianic secret*, is retained by Matthew, but it has none of the weight and character that it does for Mark.

Again, the use of the address *Lord*, aligns these characters with the disciples. Perhaps more significant, is their use of the title *Son of David*, which we saw to be such an important identification of Jesus in the first two chapters. It is a reference to the king whose kingdom will have no end (2 Samuel 7:12-16).

The Scriptures identify the healing of the blind, as an important ministry of the Messiah, the King of Israel. It will be the first thing Jesus mentions when the disciples of John the Baptist come to Him, asking whether He is the One they are looking for (11:5). Later in the gospel, Matthew records another healing of two other blind people (20:29).

This is the only time Jesus asks directly *Do you believe?* In other healing of the blind narratives Jesus asks, *What do you want me to do?* This direct question here underscores the role of faith mentioned in the other healings we've encountered in this section.

It is faith, not only in Jesus' power, but the use of *Son of David*, indicates that it is faith in the whole of God's saving activity. These blind people heard about Jesus, and heard Him proclaiming the coming of the kingdom, and they made the association between Jesus and the promised Messiah. That is, they know Jesus, because they know the Scriptures, as Matthew has asserted elsewhere.

Vv32-34 healing of the mute person

This tenth miracle is the simplest of all. There are no words, no deeds, just pure will. Jesus wills to heal and the man is healed.

There is an almost identical passage in Chapter 12, but there the man is both blind and mute.

The periscope ends with two different responses to the same event. The crowd marvels; the Pharisees condemn. We are reminded of the end of the Sermon on the Mount: *The crowds were astonished because He taught with authority, and not as the Pharisees* 7:28f

The Pharisees don't deny Jesus' power, but they deny His power to be of God. This is the first openly hostile judgment made by the Pharisees. Earlier in the chapter, in 9:3 it is privately stated, and in 9:14 their criticism is only implicit. But from here the hostility escalates. There is a hardening of the lines. True Israel marvels at Jesus' works, while the Pharisees, those who apparently kept the Law, harden their hearts against Him.

Vv35-38

In these verses we come to the end of the section that began with the call of the disciples. The same verse is repeated to frame the call of the disciples, the teaching of Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount, and the ten healing miracles.

*They were like sheep without a shepherd.* This is a common OT phrase (Num 27:17; 2 Chron 18:16; Jdt 11:19 )

God is the shepherd of Israel – so is the King, the Son of David.

We are struck that what grieves Jesus is not the amount of sickness, but the spiritual need of the people. *Blessed are the poor in spirit* – those who know they are not self-sufficient, but require grace from outside. Grace from God, from the shepherds of Israel, the community of the faithful disciples.

*Pray the Lord of the harvest to send forth labourers into His harvest.*

Disciples are fishers, and they are shepherds, and they are field hands. And yet, at the heart of all of Jesus' words and deeds, is the proclamation of the *gospel of the kingdom* (4:23; 9:35; 24:14). Jesus is the embodiment of that kingdom, as we learned in the genealogy in chapter 1.