



**“Look, your king is coming to you, humble,
and mounted on a donkey.” Matt 21:5**

Jesus, the Messianic King (Part 2)

In the second half of the gospel, Matthew continues to portray Jesus as the promised king who will bring salvation to his people. Yet, as Jesus continues to move in the direction of Jerusalem and toward his passion and death, his role as Israel’s royal Messiah is linked more and more to his humble service and self-sacrificing love. The gospel increasingly demonstrates that the inaugurator of God’s kingdom is the suffering Messiah who will give his life to bring salvation to the world.

In the final scene of chapter 16, Peter had proclaimed Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” While Jesus praised Peter’s response and designated Peter as the foundation of his church, Jesus also indicated that Peter had much to learn about what it means to call Jesus the messianic Son and to follow in his way. At this turning point of the gospel, Jesus began to tell his disciples that he must suffer greatly, be killed, and then be raised to life. He also taught his followers that they must take up their cross in imitation of him, and that they must lose their own lives in order to find true life.

The presentation of Jesus as the messianic King, which Matthew has developed throughout the gospel, moves toward its climax as Jesus approaches the royal city of Jerusalem and moves toward the cross. Jesus’ triumphal entry

into Jerusalem near the end of his life is the act of a king. In describing the final judgment, Jesus portrays himself as a king who sits on a glorious throne, separating those on his right hand from those on his left. When put on trial as “King of the Jews,” Jesus is mocked with a scarlet robe and a crown of thorns. Then, as he is publicly ridiculed with a signboard over the cross proclaiming him king, the religious leaders challenge him to prove his royal power as “the King of Israel” by coming down from the cross. Of course the irony of these scenes of Christ’s passion is the fact that Jesus truly is their messianic king, though he does not manifest his royal power with spectacular acts. All of his words and deeds are oriented toward making known God’s kingdom and submitting to his will.

As the gospel proceeds toward its pinnacle, Matthew continues to express his central theme: The saving history of Israel has reached its purpose and goal in Jesus the Messiah. As the fulfillment of the Torah and the prophets of Israel, Jesus brings all the images and institutions of the Hebrew Scriptures to their climactic expression in himself and the kingdom he has inaugurated. As Israel’s Messiah, he is the full embodiment of the ancient kings, prophets, and priests. He is Israel’s greatest king, the Son of David as well as the Lord of David, and the king wiser than Solomon. He is the anticipated prophet like Moses, greater than Elijah, more obedient than Jonah, the one for whom John the Baptist prepared the way. As the bearer of God’s kingdom, he is Lord of the Sabbath and the final temple of God’s presence.

Matthew’s gospel shows the age of promise giving way to the age of fulfillment. As Jesus fulfills the covenants made with Abraham, Moses, and David, he inaugurates the long-awaited new covenant. This new and everlasting relationship with God is accomplished in the passion and death of Jesus and ratified in his blood (26:28). It is the climax of God’s eternal plan to bring salvation to the house of Israel and all the Gentile nations.

Reflection and Discussion

- What can I anticipate as characteristics of the second half of Matthew’s gospel?

- What irony is expressed in Matthew's passion narrative when Jesus is mocked as Israel's king?

Conflicts over the True Inheritance of Ancient Israel

Though Matthew was a Jew and his gospel was written to a community of mostly Jewish followers of Jesus, there are signs throughout the gospel of tensions with other Jewish groups. On the one hand, the gospel emphasizes the Jewish tradition of Jesus and his disciples, insisting on the continuity of Jesus with the Old Testament and demonstrating that Jesus and his disciples followed the teachings given through Moses. On the other hand, the gospel is marked with debates and conflicts between Jesus and many of the Jewish leaders of his day, the Pharisees and Sadducees, the chief priests, scribes, and elders. As the action of the gospel moves toward Jerusalem and enters the confines of the temple, the confrontation becomes increasingly intense.

Matthew's gospel demonstrates that Jesus and his divine mission are the culmination of the history of salvation manifested through ancient Israel. Jesus has completed the law and the prophets, inaugurated the long-awaited kingdom, and will lead the community of faith to the end of the age. Because of the treacherous mismanagement of God's people by their leaders and the attempts of these leaders to turn the people against Jesus, Matthew's gospel portrays Jesus as relentless in his criticism of them. In fact, the gospel suggests that the terrors of the Jewish war with Rome in AD 66-70, resulting in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, are divine judgment upon the city's unfaithful leaders and the generation that fell under their sway.

This intense verbal conflict in the gospel's second half reflects the wrenching separation between Matthew's Jewish-Christian community and the form of rabbinical Judaism being developed after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. Both forms of Judaism claimed to be the legitimate heir of the tradition of ancient Israel. As we read the gospel today, this intense conflict between Jesus and his religious opponents must be read within its historical

context. This was a debate between two groups of Jews, not a conflict between Jesus and Jews, or between the Christian church and Judaism. Jesus and his disciples, as well as Matthew and the community in which he wrote the gospel, were all Jews, seeking to be faithful to the tradition in which God had led them. When the Gospel of Matthew is read in later non-Jewish cultures, it can easily be misinterpreted as a Christian polemic against Jews, as history has sadly demonstrated. The modern reader of the gospel, then, has the responsibility to consider the original context of the gospel, lest it fuel the kind of anti-Judaism that has so dreadfully distorted Christian history.

Reflection and Discussion

- Why is Matthew's gospel often described as the most Jewish of the four gospels?
- Why is it so critically important today that readers interpret this gospel while taking into account its original Jewish context?

The Presence of Jesus with his Church until the End

Matthew's gospel shows great interest in the church, the organized community of disciples continuing the mission of Jesus in the world. His is the only gospel to use the word "church" (*ekklesia* in Greek) and much of the gospel is concerned with teaching members of the church how life should be lived

within the community. The announcement of God's kingdom summons disciples in surprising ways from unlikely sources, so that this network of lives joined together in Christ consists of tax collectors and sinners, women and men, Jews and Gentiles.

The whole gospel, highlighted by the five prominent sermons of Jesus, seems to be written to meet the catechetical needs of the growing community. The sermon on the mount (Mt 5–7), the sermon to the apostles (Mt 10), the sermon on the kingdom (Mt 13), the sermon on leadership (Mt 18), and the sermon on the last things (Mt 24–25) instruct the church on how to live within the new covenant until the end of the age. Jesus educates his present and future disciples on how to be humble, to seek out those who stray, to settle disputes, and offer forgiveness. In this context, Jesus' fierce criticism of the religious leaders is not so much an attack on Jewish opponents as a warning to the leaders of the church. The hypocrites and blind guides, who do not practice what they preach, who fail to offer mercy and refuse to listen to the prophets of their day, are not worthy to lead God's people. Unworthy leaders will leave the church as desolate as Jerusalem and its temple.

The church is not the kingdom of God, but the kingdom is present in the church because of the abiding presence of the church's Lord. Jesus is with his church when the storm strikes on the waters, when his disciples are welcomed or rejected when preaching his kingdom, and wherever two or three are gathered in his name. To emphasize the divine presence of Jesus with his church, Matthew frames his entire gospel with this theme. In the first chapter, Jesus is named Emmanuel, which means "God is with us" (1:23). In the last verse of the gospel, the risen Jesus assures his community with the pledge, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (28:20). As a people of the kingdom living in the new age of salvation, the church is able to live in the world with confident trust as it embodies the living presence of its risen Lord.

Reflection and Discussion

- In what way is the Gospel of Matthew intended to be a pastoral tool for the church's preaching and teaching?

- What seems to be the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God according to Matthew's gospel?

The Concluding Chapters of Matthew's Gospel

This second half of Matthew's gospel begins with the vision of Jesus' glorious transfiguration and ends with his wondrous resurrection appearance to the disciples. In the scene of the transfiguration, the disciples fall to the ground and are overcome with fear. Jesus then commands them to "get up and do not be afraid," and they follow him down the mountain to his destiny in Jerusalem. In the final scene of the gospel, Jesus appears to his disciples on another mountain as they bow down to worship him. Jesus then commands them to go forth and evangelize all the nations, assuring them that he is with them always.

Sandwiched between these glorious scenes of transfiguration and resurrection, Jesus teaches his disciples how to live as his church. The journey to Jerusalem and the passion and death of Jesus are narrated in the light of the glorified messianic king. The cross on which he died, the cross that his disciples must carry in his footsteps, is illumined with glory. It is in the light of this cross, with all its pain and all its hope, that the church is called to live in faithful service and watchful expectation. As the historical Jesus formed his disciples to be his church, the Jesus of Matthew's gospel forms the church throughout time to live in the time between his resurrection and his return at the end of the age.

In every period of Christian history, the Gospel of Matthew has brought direction and hope for Christ's disciples, inviting them into an ever deeper relationship with Jesus, who promises to remain always with his church. As we continue our study of this gospel, we will experience the saving news of Jesus as it was experienced by that early community of Jews and Gentiles to which Matthew addressed his gospel. As the gospel equipped those ancient

Christians with the teaching of Jesus the Messiah so they could spread the message of the kingdom to all the nations, the gospel will prepare us through the transforming experience of Jesus Christ to be bearers of the good news in the world today.

Reflection and Discussion

- In what way do I want to be formed as a disciple of Jesus as I study the Gospel of Matthew?
- How does the promise of Jesus to remain always with his church affect the way that I study this gospel?

Prayer

Father of our Lord Jesus, you glorified your Son in his transfiguration and resurrection. May the light of his glory brighten my path as I seek to follow in the way of discipleship. As I travel with Jesus to Jerusalem through the path of this gospel, stir up within me a deep desire to know him more fully and to listen carefully to his teachings. Help me to understand how you have brought your ancient promises to fulfillment and opened salvation to all the nations of the world. Form me as a vital member of Christ's church and show me how to make my life a testimony to the presence of your kingdom.