

ALL SAINTS  
PECKHOM

Week 3



# Daily Lent Readings

Journeying through Matthew's gospel with Tom Wright

## Day 13: Monday 6<sup>th</sup> March

### Read: Matthew 10v 1-15

Every so often, usually just after a change of government, there is a spate of political autobiographies, as former leaders do their best to cash in on the public's hunger to find out 'the inside story'. One of the most fascinating elements of such books, to me, is the description of the early days, when the young and more or less unknown politician gathers friends around him or her, makes sure that they are loyal, and gives them tasks to do as part of the campaign for leadership, part of the means of gathering support.

There is more to Matthew 10 than that, but not less. Jesus calls twelve of his followers — twelve out of several hundred who had been with him on and off up to this point — and gives them instructions, things to do on his behalf. This requires that they have cut their previous ties: there will be no regular fishing for Peter and Andrew, for James and John, while they are going about these new tasks.

Jesus entrusts them with an urgent mission, specifically to 'the house of Israel'. The Jewish people must hear the call of God's kingdom as soon as possible before, as Jesus had already predicted (8.11), the other nations will be brought in (21.43; 28.19). St Paul, reflecting on all this thirty years later, declared that the Messiah had become 'a servant to the circumcised' (that is, the Jewish people), in order to fulfill the ancient promises God had made to their ancestors, and that then the Gentiles, the non-Jews, would glorify God for his mercy (Romans 15.8—9). Matthew is very conscious of the promises to Israel, and of the fact that Jesus was fulfilling them in order that, through that fulfillment, the whole world might become the sphere of God's saving rule.

The Twelve (representing, of course, the ancient Twelve Tribes: Jesus is deliberately symbolizing the fact that God is renewing his people) are to do pretty much the same things that Jesus had been doing: healing, exorcizing, announcing the good news that God was becoming king at last. You might have thought that this good news would be received as such. But Jesus knew that many would reject it, because it didn't correspond to their expectations. They wanted a different sort of kingdom, one that would support and validate their own national and personal ambitions. Jesus therefore warns the disciples that their mission will be rejected by some, even though others will be enthusiastic.

This is an obvious warning for us as well. All of us like to be liked, and want to be wanted. But not everyone — not even the people we might imagine — will be pleased at the news that God is now running the world in a new way, the way Jesus was showing and teaching. The message of 'peace' (verse 13) is wonderful news for some, but it's unwelcome to those who have decided that the only solution is violence. That message, though, is as urgent today as it was two thousand years ago.

**PRAY:** Gracious Lord Jesus, make us instruments of your peace, and of your saving kingdom, wherever we go.

## **Day 14: Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> March**

### **Read: Matthew 10v 16- 42**

Let's stand on the edge of the crowd and listen as Jesus gives his twelve disciples these next instructions. Some of the Twelve are looking decidedly uncomfortable, but there's nothing they can do about it. Jesus has called them and they're going to have to get on with it.

These words are uncomfortable. Jesus is telling them it's going to be tough. Not just tough in the sense of hard work with no pay and an uncertain future. Tough in the sense that people are not going to like the message. In particular, in this passage, it's clear that word is going to get back to the officials, whether in the Jewish communities or the wider world. And those officials may well take action.

You might have thought that the news that God was becoming king would be something his ancient people, the Jews, were eager to hear. In a sense, you'd be right. But several of them, particularly those in power like the Sadducees, and those who supported King Herod, didn't really want God to be king, or not just now. They were doing all right out of their own position, thank you very much, and didn't relish the idea of being taken down a peg or two. Especially by a bunch of wandering Galileans with news of a strange would-be king who was doing all sorts of things that no respectable king would ever get up to.

What about non-Jewish rulers? Obviously, news that the God of Israel was becoming king would be a threat to them. There had been revolutionary movements before, shouting 'no king but God' and meaning 'no, we don't want to pay Caesar's taxes!' Jesus can foresee that it's going to be as bad, if not worse, as it was then. Families will be divided. Persecution and even assassination may follow.

So what do you think, hearing all this and seeing the reaction? It may all seem quite unrealistic in today's comfortable western world. But the demands of the kingdom are no less today than they were then. As we find ourselves drawn in from the edge of the crowd, Jesus turns to us. What is he going to say? Are we prepared, in our own day, to follow his way even if people sneer, or threaten, or accuse us?

Jesus knew it was urgent. 'You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes,' he said (verse 23). This is very puzzling. It looks as though Jesus is talking about 'the Son of Man' as someone other than himself. He also seems to be saying that this cataclysmic event ('the coming of the Son of Man') will occur not just in their life-time but within a year or two at most. What's more, we might assume that Matthew wouldn't have reported Jesus as saying something like this unless he thought it was true. So what is it about?

The answer, as we shall see more fully in due course, is that this is heavily coded political language. Jesus is alluding to the picture we find in Daniel 7, a very popular passage at the time. It was widely read as a revolutionary text, speaking of the 'coming' or vindication of 'one like a Son of Man' — this figure 'coming' not to earth, but to God, to receive power and glory. At the moment, all the bystanders would hear would be a reference to 'the great event God has promised, through which his people will be vindicated'. Jesus would later show them there was more to it again than that. But for the moment they — and we, listening in — need to know that God's purpose is going ahead and that we, caught up to our surprise within it, need to act urgently to play our part in sharing the good news of his kingdom.

#### PRAY

Give us courage, good Lord, to follow you and to bear whatever suffering or insults may come as a result.

## Day 15: Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> March

### Read: Matthew 11

Jesus is here being put on the spot. Today, when interviewers try to force politicians to say things they didn't really want to let out, they tend to prevaricate, to ignore the question, or even to tell downright lies. We have print and electronic media that can take any sentence uttered by a public figure and beam it round the globe in an instant. In Jesus' day they had some- thing almost as powerful, and just as deadly: the rumour mill. Anything you said in one village might precede you to the next. Anything someone like Jesus said about kingship, about God's new purposes coming to pass, might easily land on the desk of the present would-be king of the Jews, Herod Antipas. So, when the awkward question comes, he has truthful but elusive answers ready.

The question was asked by John the Baptist, who was in prison after annoying Herod with his preaching. (John had been saying, among other things, that Herod should not have taken his brother's wife. Accusing someone of blatant immorality was certainly to be taken as a political comment: such a person could hardly be the true king of the Jews. No wonder Herod was annoyed.) But John had pointed to Jesus himself, and had declared that he was God's chosen one, the coming Messiah. Jesus, in other words, was the reality, and Herod just a cheap imitation. Now Jesus had been healing people, announcing that God was becoming king — but he hadn't marched on Jerusalem, he hadn't launched an attack on Herod, the present wicked usurper. What's more, he hadn't rescued his own poor cousin from Herod's clutches. So: 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we be looking for someone else?' It's the natural question.

But Jesus cannot simply give it the natural answer. To say 'yes' is to send a message directly to Herod via the rumour mill: You, Herod, are supposed to be 'king of the Jews', but now there's someone else going around saying it's him instead. Not the sort of thing a king likes to hear. So Jesus speaks instead in biblical terms. The great prophets,

notably Isaiah 35, had predicted a coming time of blessing and healing for God's people. This is coming true in his own work. 'Blessed is the one who takes no offence at me,' he says: in other words, this is what the Messiah is supposed to look like, and if you were expecting something else it's you that needs to adjust your picture!

But then Jesus makes two other points, more cryptic still. First, he asks the crowds why they came out into the wilderness — already knowing the answer, that they came to see John. What were they looking for? A reed shaken in the wind? They would all know that this referred to Herod Antipas, who had a Galilean reed as the emblem on his coins. Or someone clothed in silks and satins? No: you'd had enough of would-be kings, jumped-up little princelings copying the worst habits of Rome and its emperors. This was indeed subversive stuff, but Jesus hasn't said anything that would enable Herod to arrest him too.

But then comes a still more cryptic, powerful saying. The crowds had come to see 'a prophet, and more than a prophet'. Jesus has worked the conversation round. John the Baptist is the greatest man who ever lived; 'yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he . . . and he is Elijah who is to come.' No wonder he had to say, after that, 'If you've got ears, then listen!' He was speaking in riddles. If John is the greatest man ever, but since then something new has happened which introduces a whole new value-scale, then it can only be that the 'new' thing that has happened is Jesus' own presence, Jesus' own work. If John is Elijah, Jesus is the one whom Elijah was going to announce as imminent . . . which makes him at least Israel's Messiah. Perhaps even the living embodiment of Israel's returning, judging God.

When Jesus says that the kingdom has been breaking in violently, and that violent people are trying to snatch it, what he seems to be saying is that God's kingdom had indeed been decisively launched in his work, and that those bent on violent revolution were trying to get in on the act. That would of course provoke Herod all the more, and indeed — as happens sometimes in our own world — someone who is determinedly pursuing an agenda of violence will not welcome the news of God's kingdom of peace and healing.

The crowds, meanwhile, just don't get it. John looked too crazy, Jesus looks too normal. Sometimes even Jesus just had to plough on, realizing that people hadn't understood, but going ahead anyway. Sometimes we have to do the same.

**PRAYLord**, give us grace to recognize you, to hail you as our Lord and King, and to follow you even when we too are misunderstood.

## Day 16: Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> March

### Read: Matthew 12 v 1-21

To get the full flavour of what's going on here, you should really read not just Matthew 12, but Isaiah 42 as a whole. Actually, even that isn't really enough, because Isaiah 42 is a key passage within a much larger unity, Isaiah 40-55 . . . maybe you should set aside some time later on and read those 16 chapters right through. Imagine yourself in Matthew's congregation. Ask yourself what he's trying to tell you by quoting from that great prophecy.

We have already seen that for Matthew, and for Jesus himself, Jesus' public career was the fulfilment of the ancient prophecies. Not just 'fulfilment' in the sense of a few random long-range predictions that were now at last 'coming true' in an isolated fashion. Rather, 'fulfilment' in the sense of a mountain climber who, after several days of hiking, sheer rock faces, ice floes and so on, is now standing on the summit ridge with the peak of the mountain at last in sight. 'Fulfilment' in the sense of a couple who have endured a long engagement while one was called away on urgent business and who now, at last, can hear the wedding bells ringing as they make their way to the church. Jesus is the 'fulfilment' of scripture in that sense. He brings its long, winding story to the place it was meant to go all along.

When Matthew quotes these verses from Isaiah 42, then, he isn't just suggesting a distant resemblance between Jesus' commands to silence (12.16) and the humble behaviour of Isaiah's 'servant of the Lord'. He is indicating that this 'servant' passage and the others like it, which reach their own climax with the servant's death in chapter 53, are a key part of the build-up of the ancient story. It is all driving forward, looking eagerly ahead, to an ultimate moment in which all the meaning built up over the centuries would be displayed in one extraordinary burst of fulfilment. Every bit of the 'servant' prophecies points to Jesus, Matthew believed. Here, nearly half way through his gospel, he wants to rub our noses in the fact. He could assume that many in his audience would know the whole section of Isaiah quite well. We, who probably don't know it quite so well, may need to catch up.

The point he is making, underneath it all, is that of a different kind of kingdom, an alternative model of kingship. John the Baptist had misunderstood what Jesus was up to, hoping that he might be the sort of leader who would mount a rescue operation and get him out of prison, and he had to be put right. James and John, later on in the story, were eager to have the best seats when Jesus became king, and they too needed to be put right (20.20—28). In the same way, Matthew is keen to point out here that Jesus is redefining what God's kingdom looks like, and hence what being God's Messiah might actually mean.

In fact, of course, what he says here is exactly in line with the Sermon on the Mount. The meek will inherit the earth, and Jesus is leading the way. God's kingdom belongs to the humble, and Jesus is showing how it's done. The kingdom of heaven belongs to those who suffer, are

persecuted, and even killed, because they are following God's way . . . and Jesus will go ahead of them in that, too. Matthew, by quoting this passage here, is pointing forwards all the way to the climax of his gospel, when Jesus will be 'enthroned' as 'king of the Jews' by being nailed to the cross.

There is, to be sure, great comfort for us in all of this. If God's kingdom came the same way that earthly kingdoms come, by force of arms and military victory, the weak and the vulnerable would once more come off worst. But God does things the other way up, and we should all be thankful for that. In particular, those of us who struggle from time to time in our faith and discipleship should take heart from Isaiah's words, applied here to Jesus: he will not break a bruised reed, or quench a smouldering wick. His task, and his delight, is gently to fan into flames what was smouldering, gently to strengthen and firm up the weak, bruised faith, hope and love that we have at the moment. Let that be our prayer this Lent.

#### **PRAY**

Humble Lord Jesus, as you reach out to us in your gentle love, help us to find the way to bring your kingdom in our own day.

## **Day 17: Friday 10<sup>th</sup> March**

### **Read: Matthew 12 v 22-50**

Just in case anyone thought that the vision of a gentle, humble Messiah meant that he would be a pushover for every evil power that came along, the present passage sets the balance straight. One of the things everybody knew about the coming Messiah was that he would fight God's battles and rescue his people. The Bible had said so.

But what is the real battle? For Jesus, it wasn't the battle they all expected him to fight — with the occupying Roman troops, or with Herod and his supporters, or perhaps even with the Sadducees and their would-be aristocratic clique in charge of Jerusalem and the Temple. Jesus' followers probably thought he would fight one or all of them. Having watched as he did many other remarkable things, it was quite easy for them to believe that he could fight a supernatural battle against these natural enemies. Jesus himself spoke, later on, of being able to call several legions of angels to his help.

But on that occasion he refused; because that was the wrong sort of battle to be fighting. In fact, as gradually becomes clear, the real battle is against violence itself, against the normal human wickedness that shows itself in the desire for brute force to win the day. If you fight fire with fire, fire still wins. And Jesus has come to win the victory over fire itself, over the rule of the bullies and the power-brokers, in favour of the poor, the meek, the mourners, the pure in heart. It is precisely because Jesus is right in the middle of the real battle that it is vital not to confuse it with other battles.

The real battle, then, is against the real enemy, who is not the flesh-and-blood enemy of foreign soldiers, or even renegade Israelites. (When the Romans crushed the Jewish rebellion in ad 66–70, more Jews were killed by other Jews, in bitter factional fighting, than were killed by the Romans themselves — and they killed quite a lot.) The real enemy is the power of darkness, the insidious, sub-personal force of death, deceit and destruction that goes in scripture by the name of 'the Satan', which means 'the accuser'. It goes by other names, too; a familiar one was 'Beelzebub', which means literally 'Lord of the flies'.

One of the most familiar tactics of this nasty, underhand enemy is to hurl accusations around, which, even though they may be absurd, can be painful and damaging. Ironically, it is the accusation in verse 24 that shows how seriously the Pharisees were taking Jesus and his powerful deeds of healing. You don't bother saying that someone is in league with the devil if all they are doing is mouthing platitudes. But Jesus' response shows where things had got to from his point of view: 'If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you' (verse 28). God's sovereign power is at work — through Jesus; and he has won the right to put it into practice because he has first 'tied up the strong man' (verse 29), which presumably refers back to his initial victory over the dark enemy in his own solitary wilderness temptations (4.1–11). As is so often the case, the initial struggle that an individual has with temptation will, if successful, clear the way for fruitful work in the days and years to come. In fact, one might suggest that precisely the reason for the fierce temptation early on in someone's life, or ministry, is because the enemy knows precisely how important that later work will be, and how vital it is — from that hostile viewpoint! — to sabotage it as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

As well as being conscious of having won that earlier victory, Jesus was also fully conscious, ever since his baptism, that he had been endowed with God's own Holy Spirit, to enable him to do what had to be done. When people discounted him personally, that was one thing. They were entitled to their opinion, however mistaken. But someone who looks at the work of God's own Spirit and declares that it is instead the work of the devil is building a high wall around themselves, preventing any light or grace getting in. It isn't that 'the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit' (verse 31) is a peculiarly bad sin which God will punish in a specially harsh way. It is simply that if I deny the existence of the train that is coming in to the station, or declare that it has been sent to deceive me and take me in the wrong direction, I am automatically stopping myself from getting on it. The Spirit was at work through Jesus, to launch God's kingdom; but if someone looked at what was happening and ascribed it to the devil, they could not possibly benefit from it.

A solemn warning, of course, and one that we should heed carefully. It may be that, in our own day, God will do new things which cut against the grain of what the church, or our contemporary world, had led us to expect or hope for.

#### PRAY

Gracious Lord, give us the humility to see you at work, and to work alongside you in the power of the Spirit.



## Day 18: Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> March

### Read: Matthew 13

'An earthly story with a heavenly meaning.' I used to think that that old Sunday-school definition of a parable was a harmless comment. I now think it's more likely to be dangerous nonsense. Jesus didn't tell parables to provide friendly little illustrations of abstract theology. He told parables because what he was doing was so different, so explosive, and so dangerous, that the only way he could talk about it was to use stories. These are earthly, and sometimes heavenly, stories with an emphatically earthly meaning. They explain the full meaning not of distant timeless truths, but of what Jesus was up to then and there. This is what is going on, they say, if only you had eyes to see. Or, indeed, as Jesus frequently says, ears to hear.

Jesus' parables invite the hearer to look at the world, and particularly to look at Jesus himself, in a whole new way. You can see the force of this if you imagine for a moment the standard objection to Jesus' announcement of God's kingdom, from that day to this. 'Of course God's kingdom hasn't come,' say the objectors (including many devout Jews, to this day). 'Read the newspapers! Look out of the window! If God's kingdom had really come, the world wouldn't still be in such a mess!'

And of course they are right — at one level. If 'God's kingdom coming on earth as in heaven' means the complete abolition of all evil, and ultimately of death itself, then of course it is not yet here. But — as Jesus insisted in the passage we looked at yesterday — if Jesus was indeed winning the victory over the oldest and deadliest enemy, liberating people who had been completely taken over by the forces and powers of darkness, and if he was doing so in the power of God's spirit, then God's sovereign, saving, healing power was indeed being let loose into the world in a new, unprecedented fashion. And the sharpest way of describing that was to say, 'then God's kingdom has come upon you'.

But another way of saying the same thing, more obliquely perhaps but ultimately more effectively, was to tell stories. Jesus told a great many, and lots of them were different ways of coming at the same point: that yes, the full victory, the final abolition of evil, still remained in the future, but no, that didn't mean that nothing was really happening, that God's kingdom wasn't really present in some way or other.

The stories that make this point most effectively include the two little parables in verses 31, 32 and 33. A grain of mustard seed is tiny. But when it grows, it turns into a large shrub, and the birds can nest in it. What is Jesus saying? 'Don't despise the small beginnings of the kingdom. What I (Jesus) am doing is planting seeds. They may not look much at the moment. But they're going to grow. And when they do, then you'll be surprised at the birds that come to roost.' Many people have detected here a reference to foreign nations coming to share in Israel's privileges.

The same point emerges from the parable of the yeast. I once had a bread-making machine, and I never tired of the apparent miracle by which a tiny amount of yeast made the whole loaf rise. In the same way, the kingdom-work that Jesus is doing may be small and insignificant. In his whole life he can't have travelled more than a few hundred miles. He met a comparatively small number of people — though considerably more than an ordinary Galilean villager might expect to meet — and, so far as we know, never went and preached before kings or rulers. He wrote no book; television hadn't been invented, so he was never invited to appear on chat shows or I'm a Celebrity. And yet the yeast that he stirred into the loaf — the kingdom-work he did in a very short time in a very small place — has leavened the loaf of the whole world. Almost everybody now dates world history in relation to his birth. Even those who do their best to ignore his message still have to refer to him sooner or later. His way of love, forgiveness, humility and service has woven itself into the fabric of many societies, so that even where it's ignored people know that something happened in his life and death that changed the world.

There is more. The yeast hasn't completed its work. The plant that has grown from the mustard seed has further still to go. That's why today's other pair of little parables still matter. The other main message of this chapter is that Jesus is looking for people to sign on, people who are prepared to take his kingdom-movement forward in their own day. Here the stories are about someone finding something of enormous value and selling everything they possess in order to buy it. This could be heard in a rather selfish fashion: if I give up everything else for Jesus I will have a wonderful spiritual life. That is no doubt true, but the kingdom of heaven is far, far more than 'me and my spiritual life' now and salvation in the end. The kingdom of heaven is about God's rule sweeping through the sad, decaying world we live in. That is a goal worth working for! That is a vocation to beat all others. Give up your other treasures, Jesus is saying, and buy this one. Give up the small collection of pearls which have meant so much to you. Here is the biggest, finest one you could ever imagine.

Jesus still holds out that clear, almost teasing invitation to us today. His kingdom is still growing, still meeting sharp opposition to be sure, but still making its way in the world. To be part of that work is the greatest privilege you could imagine.

#### **PRAY**

Lord Jesus, tell us again the story of your kingdom, and draw us to follow you, to find the treasure, to help in the work of making that kingdom grow.