

ALL SAINTS
PECKHOM

Week 8



Daily Lent Readings

Journeying through Matthew's gospel with Tom Wright

Day 48: Monday 10th April

Read: Matthew 28 : 11-15

One of the things people have often said about the early Christians' belief in Jesus' resurrection is that they were obviously so devastated by the failure of their dreams and hopes that they found a way of saying it was all right after all. A grand-sounding phrase has been developed to describe this: 'cognitive dissonance', the clash between something you have passionately believed and something which now turns out to be true. They jangle against one another, like badly played musical notes, and eventually people find a way of bringing them back into harmony. That way they don't have to adjust their original beliefs. Much easier that way.

Part of the answer to this is that the early Christians certainly weren't expecting anything like Jesus' resurrection. It wasn't part of the game plan. 'Resurrection' was something that would happen to everyone at the end, not to one person in the middle of history. They wanted Jesus to be 'king of the Jews' in the fairly ordinary sense; look at James and John and their request in chapter 20. They weren't expecting Jesus to die, especially to be crucified. They were not twiddling their thumbs on Holy Saturday saying, 'Well, that was very nasty, but of course he'll be back tomorrow.' If they were going to make up stories to explain that Jesus' project would somehow go ahead, they would have done what other Jewish groups of their day did when their leaders were killed. They would find themselves another leader, perhaps from the same family. In fact, Jesus' own brother James became the great leader of the Jerusalem church for the next 30 years. But nobody said James was the Messiah.

But the other part of the answer to what the sceptics have said is that it is in fact the sceptics, from that day to this, who are guilty of the very thing of which they are accusing the Christians. It is the sceptical world-view that has been blown apart by Jesus' resurrection. Ever since that day they have been only too eager to find stories to tell to show that actually it didn't happen, that their original world-view (in which dead people cannot, do not and will not rise again) was correct after all, that some other story will explain it. You can feel the sigh of relief in the sceptical camp each time one of these stories is put forward, however unlikely it may be. Phew! We don't need to believe that Jesus rose again. That's all right then. We can cope with him as a great teacher (with whom we may from time to time disagree). We can even see his death as a great example of love in action. We can share his vision of a world in which people live at peace. Only don't ask us to accept that he rose from the dead. That's just too much.

This reaction of the sceptics to the news of the empty tomb began very early, as we find here. Look at the way all the different parties are involved. The guards tell the priests. The priests tell the elders. Together they bribe the soldiers. They agree to tell the governor their new story. Phew! That's all right. We can continue with business as usual. Life as before — in which we run the world, we call the shots, we are the people in power. Al Gore, the former US Vice President,

wrote about the ecological crisis under the title *An Inconvenient Truth*. That's as may be. The biggest inconvenient truth of all — inconvenient not just for a 'modern world-view' but for all people in positions of power and responsibility — is the belief that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead. Large sums of money change hands, then and now, to make sure the rumour is squashed. But it's all in vain. The best answer to the sceptics is the fact that there is now a community of people who not only say Jesus was raised from the dead. They show it by their own lives.

PRAY

Sovereign Lord, help us to meet the scorn of unbelievers with the evidence, in what we do and who we are, that you are indeed alive.

Day 49: Tuesday 11th April Read: Matthew 28 : 16-20

All four gospels tell a story which many in today's world have forgotten, or have never even known. It is the story of how Jesus became the king of the world. That's where we have been going, ever since, back near the beginning, Jesus came into Galilee announcing that 'heaven's kingdom is at hand'. So often this has been turned into a very different message, about 'telling people how to go to heaven', that we have ignored the far more startling truth that Jesus was actually talking about how heaven was coming to us. In other words, how God, the God of heaven and earth, was coming to earth to establish his sovereign, saving rule.

Now, risen from the dead, Jesus declares that it's happened. 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me!' In other words, the prophetic picture in Daniel 7, which Jesus quoted in 24.30 and 26.64, has come true. Jesus has been exalted to be God's right-hand man. All that God now does, in heaven and on earth, he will do in and through Jesus. (Within a generation, early Christian theologians like Paul, John and the author of Hebrews would point out that this is because Jesus, long before he became human, was God's right-hand person in making the world in the first place.) This is the great message of the whole gospel. Jesus is King and Lord, not just 'in heaven' (that would be quite a 'safe' idea) but on earth as well.

But what — what on earth, we might say — does that actually mean? If Jesus is really King and Lord, why is the world still in such a mess? How does he exercise this 'lordship'? How does this sovereignty, claimed so strongly in this passage, work out on the ground?

The whole gospel, once more, is written in order to give the answer to that. Again, it's an answer many people today have not even begun to think through. Ask yourself this question: how did Jesus come to this point of being king? The answer is obvious. He didn't do it in the way the disciples expected, in the way the crowds wanted, in the way which the chief priests and Pilate assumed he would behave. He didn't

follow the normal human path to power, pushing and shoving his way forward, fighting and killing until his position was established.

He came as the Servant, the one who took people's infirmities and diseases on to himself, the one who suffered insults and mocking and torture and death. He was obedient, through- out his life, to a different vision of power, a different sort of kingdom-dream. And his resurrection not only showed that he was right. It established his kingdom, his type of kingdom, once and for all.

But if that's the sort of kingdom it is, it must be put into operation, not by his followers bullying and harrying and forcing the rest of the world to come into line. That's what people are afraid of today when they warn against 'theocracy', a rule-of-God which would quickly turn into the bossy, self-righteous 'rule' of those who claim to speak for God. Sometimes, indeed, the church has behaved in exactly that way. But that is a denial of the Lord they claim to worship.

Jesus' followers are to implement his kingdom by going and making disciples, learners, students, followers who will be shaped by Jesus' example and teaching. They are to 'baptize' them, plunging them into the very name and life and character of the true God, who is Father, Son and Spirit. They are to teach them everything Jesus commanded, particularly all those wonderful words in the Sermon on the Mount about the meek inheriting the earth, about a different way to be human. That is the character of Jesus' rule, and that is the means by which that rule will be established.

We live at a time of great transition and turbulence in our society. Dreams of 'progress' and 'enlightenment' seem to have produced the exact opposite. Supposedly civilized society has gone back to the use of torture. Supposedly grown-up society cannot educate the rising generation in anything but trivia. This same society regularly tells the church that it is on the way out. The Christian message is bad for you, they say; it's out of date, it's disproved.

This is ridiculous. There is every reason to hope that this year, or this decade, or this century, God will do new things. Jesus is still Lord — but he rules in the same way that he lived, taught and died. When his followers learn again to do the same, we shall see a fresh start. And the encouragement we need is found in the final words of Matthew's gospel, picking up neatly the promise made to Joseph at the very beginning. His name will be 'Emmanuel', said the angel, which means 'God with us'. That God-with-us promise, that heaven-on- earth assurance, has come true in Jesus. Millions of Christians know this in their daily experience, their praying, their living, their work for his kingdom. 'I am with you always, to the end of the age.' That is a promise you can stake your life on. It is also a challenge: if Jesus himself is 'with you', what should you be doing? How then should you live? Easter is a time to ask precisely that sort of question. It is also a time to discover God's powerful answer.

PRAY

Risen Lord Jesus, be with us as you have promised, and help us to go into all the world to bring all nations under the rule of your love.

Day 50: Wednesday 12th April

Read: Matthew 2 : 1-12

We are now going to do something rather different. We have followed the story which Matthew tells, the story of Jesus from before his birth to after his resurrection. But Matthew was of course writing for Christians who already knew more or less 'what happened'. They were already people who believed in Jesus, that he had died to rescue them from sin and death, that he had been raised again and was now the world's true Lord. How would they then read Matthew's gospel, not just as a faithful account of what had happened in the past, but as a blueprint and set of clues for how they should be living as followers of this risen Jesus today?

I have chosen four passages that we haven't looked at in detail earlier in the book, to take us forward from the Easter story itself into the much longer Easter story that continues to this day. Jesus' Easter people — you and me, in other words — now read the gospels in order to discover, again and again, the presence and power and leading of Jesus in and through our lives and witness. And we begin with that wonderful story about the three wise men.

Here, Matthew is saying, Jesus was already mysteriously revealed as 'Lord of the world' — even though the present Jewish ruler, the sad and bad old king Herod, had no interest in such things except to kill enough people (in this case, little babies) to make sure nobody would upset his own shaky grip on power. Wise men from the East: we are not told here that they were 'kings', though later legend has seen them as such.

Certainly Matthew intends them as representatives of the 'many who will come from east and west' to share the ancient Jewish dream of God's kingdom, and all because of Jesus (see 8.11). By the same token, he is seeing Herod as typical of those 'sons of the kingdom' who will, at the same time, miss out on the promise. As John the Baptist would say in the next chapter, God can raise up 'children of Abraham' from these stones (3.9).

The story of the three wise men, then, can be seen in the light of Easter as a great encouragement to the little church as it sets off on its mission to the wider world: the wider world has already heard about him and begun to come looking for him! But here there is a delicate balance to be kept. Some, eager to show how much God loves the whole world, have seen all non-Jewish religions and philosophies as equally valid, merely needing to be encouraged and developed. But that's not how the story works.

The wisdom of the East, including the stargazing which was such a major part of ancient learning, had brought the wise men to the point where they were ready to travel to the land of the Jews to find the new king. But they needed help to find the right spot. Help was at hand in the form of the Jewish scriptures. They and they alone provided the clue to Bethlehem. Without them, the wise men had simply ended up at the wrong address — a dangerous place to be, as

anyone in Herod's court could have told them. But, with great irony, the chief priests and scribes who have told the travellers where to find the royal child have no interest in going themselves to see whether it's true. They assume it isn't — until, later, Herod smells a rat and sends in his thugs to kill the babies.

Matthew seems to be saying, to his resurrection-based church, that their mission will remain rooted in the Jewish scriptures, and that they will be able with their help to draw the wisdom of the world into homage to the world's rightful king. But he is also warning them that they must not expect all the Jewish people to join in. As Paul would put it, God has subjected all people to disobedience, so that he might have mercy on all. The good news of Jesus, his kingdom-message, cross and resurrection, is always humbling to all people. It is the place where the scriptures and the wisdom of the world can meet and celebrate, but it will take something more as well. The 'wise men' could just as well have been called 'the humble men', or indeed 'the obedient men'. It's people like that who could then be called 'the overwhelmed-with-joy' people.

PRAY

Risen Lord, give us a vision of the whole world coming to worship at your feet, and enable us to play a part in bringing that to reality.

Day 51: Thursday 13th April

Read: Matthew 6 : 25-34

Now, in Easter week, try reading the whole Sermon on the Mount as a blueprint for how Jesus' Easter-people should live. Now at last, with Jesus leading the way through death to new life, we see what it might mean to be poor in spirit, to be meek, peacemakers, and so on. Now, already, the mourners are being comforted, the pure in heart glimpsing the living God in Jesus himself. Now at last, as well, those who follow Jesus will be persecuted because of their love for him and the new world of justice and joy which he has opened up, which challenges the old world to its core. Now, at last, we can see the sense in the demanding new way of life which he has launched.

That is the spirit in which, for instance, we should read the bracing commands of 5.21—48. This is what it might mean to be genuinely human! The Easter message declares that it is possible to live without anger, without lust, without divorce, swearing, revenge and hatred. Most of the world doesn't know this, but Jesus knew it; and at Easter he calls us to die to all those things, and come alive to his new way of life. Yes, it will be tough. Yes, dying in any sense is hard and unpleasant. So many theories about human behaviour have assumed that we ought to feel as comfortable as possible as much as possible. Then we wonder why life goes downhill, rather than attaining the heights we glimpse from time to time. Easter is where we not only see those heights but start to scale them.

Then, as the Sermon reaches a kind of climax, we have this passage about worry — or rather, about not worrying. Modern life, of course, thrives on worry. We only have to think back a century or two before

radio, television, regular swift mail around the country and the world, and so on, to realize that for most people most of the time the world beyond their immediate village was a closed book. Worry was localized — none the easier for that, but think what we have done. We have made a global issue of it: we worry about nuclear power in the Middle East, about bush fires in Australia, about ecological disasters in Alaska. And, of course, this doesn't remove the local and personal worries about meeting the bills, about feeding the family, about the uncertainty of life itself.

And Jesus tells us — the Easter Jesus tells us — not to worry about any of them. He could give that instruction already, during his ministry; how much more can he give it now that he is raised from the dead, now that he has overthrown the greatest worry of all, death itself? One of the chief notes in the life of the early Christians was joy: joy because a new way of life had been launched, new creation had begun, and it was clear that God had commenced his reign and could be trusted to bring it to completion. 'Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness,' said Jesus, 'and all these things will be given to you as well.' And Easter reaffirms, gloriously, the way in which Jesus drew his examples from the natural order. The birds don't plant seed and reap harvests, but they get enough to eat. The lilies don't work at weaving, yet they are dressed magnificently. Other philosophies might scoff at such examples: they come from this world of space, time and matter, not the eternal world of ideas. But Easter reminds us emphatically that the world of space, time and matter is redeemed, not abandoned. In raising Jesus, God has reaffirmed the goodness of the natural world, and his compassionate care for it. In that care we can rest secure.

Worry and Easter, then, don't go together. Someone once asked that great teacher and saint, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, whether he was an optimist or a pessimist. 'I am neither an optimist', he said, 'nor a pessimist. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead!' He had learned the Easter lesson which brings the Sermon on the Mount to life. Our life.

PRAY

Help us, gracious Lord, to live our whole life in full and joyful trust in the power of your resurrection.

Day 52: Friday 14th April
Read: Matthew 13 : 1-23

Reading Jesus' parables in Easter week is particularly fruitful. Imagine Matthew's friends reading his book, with their own Easter celebrations now a regular weekly feature of life, and hearing them in a whole new way. Jesus had spoken elsewhere, after all, about his own life in terms of a grain of seed falling into the earth and dying, and then bearing a great deal of fruit. It looks as though he was applying to himself the strange picture in the parable of the Sower, where much seed seems to be thrown away (how sad, people sometimes say, that Jesus died so young when he had so much still to give! What a waste!), and yet some bears fruit 30, 60 or 100 times over.

What started life, then, as Jesus' explanation of how his own kingdom-work was going ahead during the course of his public career can be translated, without difficulty, into the explanation that the Easter church now needs for how the work of world mission will fare. One of the standard objections to the Christian message, as we saw, goes like this: how can you say the kingdom of heaven has arrived on earth, when it's obvious, looking around you, that nothing of the kind has happened? Things are still pretty bleak. Often Jesus' followers seem to be part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Jesus' own explanation of how the kingdom works is still the classic answer to this question. What did you expect: that God would send in the tanks like a totalitarian dictator, crush the opposition and set up a 'kingdom' which would leave half the world bruised and resentful? What sort of a 'god' would that be? No! God will bring in his kingdom by the same means, the same strange process, that he seems to use in the natural world. Seeds will be sown; many will apparently be lost, but others will be powerfully fruitful. Or, as the chapter goes on, there will be seeds sown which are then threatened by weeds. One day the weeds will be pulled up, but for the moment they grow side by side. Or again, the kingdom will come like seed growing secretly. At the moment there may be nothing to see, but suddenly, one day, people will be putting in the sickle because it's harvest time. In other words: yes, the kingdom has indeed been launched; yes, it is making its way in the world; but no, it isn't doing so in the way you might have imagined. It is doing so in the way God has imagined: by the Sower himself becoming the seed sown in good soil, and rising again to celebrate the harvest of God's new creation.

PRAY

Give us the faith, good Lord, to see your kingdom at work even when seeds seem wasted and the soil seems bare. Thank you for the promise of the great harvest, of which your resurrection was the first fruits.

Day 53: Saturday 15th April

Read: Matthew 22 : 34 - 40

'So what's your all-time favourite song, then?' I listened as John put his friend on the spot.

They had been discussing music of various sorts and styles. This was a way of getting to the heart of the matter.

'Let me play safe,' the friend replied. 'I'm not going for something new. I'll stick with "Yesterday", by Paul McCartney.'

John was shocked. 'I thought it would be something by Schubert,' he complained. 'You're always on about him.'

'Yes, I know,' came the reply. 'But actually I think "Yesterday" draws together the whole tradition of earlier song, and say so much in a short space. It's beautiful, and it's packed full of meaning.'

The debate will go on. Some readers will no doubt be as shocked as John was. But the explanation was a good one. We're not talking about a whim here, a sudden passing fancy. We're talking about something that draws a much larger picture together and holds it there.

Questions like this come in many shapes and sizes. What's the best golf course in the world? Which is the finest Shakespeare play? Which Scottish mountain gives you the best walk? But one of the most famous, a question repeated in various forms throughout Jewish literature, is the one the Pharisees asked Jesus: 'Which commandment in the law is the greatest?'

Now we note that this isn't simply a question about the relative importance of the commands against stealing, murder, adultery and so on. The law — Israel's Torah — was not just a list of rules to make life a bit less unpleasant. It was the God-given blueprint for the national life, the life that would make Israel the light of the world. It was, so many Jews believed, a direct revelation from God himself, thus making the Torah almost divine in itself. And part of the point of Torah, for the Pharisees of the time, was that any Jew, anywhere in the world, could follow it. Most Jews couldn't get to the Temple in Jerusalem except at the most once or twice in a lifetime. Any Jew could study, learn and follow Torah.

Jesus' answer to the question was straight down the line. 'Love God with all your heart, soul and mind,' he said, 'and love your neighbour as yourself.' As far as it went, as an answer to the question of the time, it was beyond reproach. These are central to the Old Testament as well as the New, and contain within them pretty much everything else the law prescribes.

But what happens if we read them in the light of Easter?

We suddenly discover that something Matthew has often hinted at comes true in a new way. Jesus came not to abolish the law, but to fulfil it. But how did he fulfil it? Not by laboriously obeying all the biblical commands, one by one, ticking them off on a mental list. Rather, by doing and being all that Israel was called to do and be. He became the defining point, the blueprint and yardstick, for the people of God. In his death on the cross he offered God the full love, obedience and devotion of heart, mind and soul to which Israel had been called. And in that same death he reached out in love to neighbours far and near, to the whole world for whom he was dying. He became not just the teacher of a new, fulfilled Torah. He was the fulfilled Torah in person.

The resurrection of Jesus therefore declares that the law, as summed up here, has been fulfilled to the uttermost — by Jesus himself. And, precisely because of the resurrection, it can be fulfilled anywhere and everywhere. Followers of Jesus don't need to go to the Temple in Jerusalem. They can go to Jesus, which is what they do whenever they love God with heart, mind and soul, and their neighbours as themselves.

And when people say, as they will, that these things are very difficult, then Jesus is on hand, with them always to the close of the age, to explain that the more they look at him and learn from him, the more they will discover what it means to love God, and the more energy and goodwill they will find welling up inside themselves to love their neighbours as well. Jesus' resurrection is the greatest demonstration of the love of God for his whole creation, evoking in us an answering love. And when we glimpse God's new world, in which all are invited to share, we look upon our neighbours, of all shapes, sorts and sizes, with new eyes. These are people for whom Jesus died. These are people we shall learn to love as we love ourselves.

This is what it means to be genuinely human. Easter offers us the direct route to be the people we were made to be. God's people. Jesus' people. People of love.

PRAY

Gracious Lord Jesus, dying for us and rising again: show us more and more how great the Father's love is for us, so that we may be drawn to love him more and more in return; and show us, for his sake and yours, how to love our neighbours as we love ourselves.

