

MATTHEW 14-15

14: 1-12 – The Death of John the Baptist

Herod the great tried to kill the infant Jesus. One of his sons (Herod Antipas) is now worried about Jesus grown up, even as he has imprisoned John. John has clearly denounced Herod on moral grounds, undermining any claim Herod would have of being the rightful king (messiah) of Israel. What happens to John clearly reflects on what can and may happen to Jesus. The crucifixion already looms in Jesus' horizon.

Jesus' strategy is unlike that of John. He speaks in riddles and parables and only when he comes to Jerusalem will he declare openly his messiahship. Right now, it is only those close to him and those who are healed who are beginning to understand Jesus' vocation as messiah.

14: 13-21, 15: 32-39 – The feeding of the multitudes

If we get past the "miracle" of how Jesus manages to get thousands of hungry people fed, we discern the significance of what he is doing in his role as messiah.

First, his sorrow over the death of John is translated into deep compassion for the many desperate people coming to him for hope and help. Second, just like the people were fed in the wilderness under Moses' leadership, Jesus is providing food for them now. The 12 baskets left over represent the 12 tribes of Israel. The 7 baskets left in the second account represent the 7 days of creation. Jesus is feeding all of Israel and building a movement to renew the people of God and guide them to the promised land (the kingdom of heaven). Jesus is creating a new way, making a new path. This is all a foretaste of the resurrection, where even the worst that the powers of this world attempt to do cannot thwart God's plans in Jesus to show the power of love to overcome all obstacles. Finally, this miracle is about the power of sharing. Jesus doesn't perform the miracle out of nothing. The simple generosity of a few creates a multiplicity of gifts for the many. This kind of "miracle" is what genuine community and sharing is all about. What seems impossible becomes possible.

14: 22-33 – Jesus walks on water

The power of Jesus over the natural elements is given us in a story with several variations in the gospels. In one story, Jesus calms a storm at sea. In this one, he is walking on water in a stormy sea. This story is about the power of faith to provide a way through stormy times of doubt and distress. Peter is at his impetuous and impulsive best, and is humiliated by his fear and doubt. The important thing is that Jesus catches him, even as he admonishes him for his lack of faith.

15: 1-20 – Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees and their ways

The Pharisees criticize Jesus' followers, like they do most Jews, for not being strict enough with the Jewish traditions that are add-ons to the biblical requirements of the law. Instead of answering their criticisms directly, Jesus criticizes them back for breaking not a mere tradition, but the word of God in the 5th commandment. Jesus' intent, it seems, is to show up their hypocrisy. They are quick to quote chapter and verse where it suits them, and just as quick to twist and change the rules where it suits them again. What Jesus wants to get at are underlying motives of the heart. The Pharisees are out to get power for themselves, to undermine Jesus by creating questions and doubts among his followers and among the crowds.

Jesus ends by addressing their criticism directly. What does it mean to be clean and unclean? Is it a matter of washing hands, pots, pans, cutlery, etc? Is contamination about what you take in or what comes out? In our world today, we understand the importance of sanitation and keeping protected from germs and harmful bacteria. But Jesus' point is more a spiritual one. While the Pharisees are strict with external rules, they are breaking the most important commandments that have to do with the heart - love. They are full of hatred, maliciousness and the need to be in power even if it requires deception and political spin. They are not worthy spiritual leaders of the people.

15: 21-31 – Jesus' reputation as a healer keeps growing

The plan of God as Jesus is executing it requires that the gospel of Jesus the messiah must be preached to Israel first. From there it must go out to the rest of the world. But already there are glimpses of the rest of the world recognizing Jesus for who he is, amid his being questioned and undermined by the religious leaders of Israel who should be first in recognizing him.

The Canaanite woman is remarkable for her tenacity, courage, and confession of Jesus as "Son of David," a designation that even Jesus disciples have been slow to adopt. Her faith in Jesus becomes the conduit for healing grace to work.

Jesus continues to heal all manner of illness. Those who are gathering around him and following him are those who are being healed and forgiven. Those who are self-sufficient, self-satisfied, self-righteous, robust and healthy (read "proud and arrogant), have no interest. What does this say about the basis of church?