

MATTHEW 16-17

16: 13-28 – Taking up the Cross and Following Jesus

1) Jesus is confessed not only as some great prophet, but as Messiah of God (King of Israel). From this moment, Jesus is beginning a new community (kingdom) with Peter and the others, a foundation built on rock. The community is based on the acknowledgement of Jesus as Messiah and his teaching of forgiving, generous love. But at this point, the new kingdom is a secret between Jesus' closest followers. The time will come soon to declare it openly.

2) The path of such forgiving, generous love will not be getting to Jerusalem to take military charge. It's not about going into the temple and taking over from the religious leaders who have failed to represent God's will and way truly. Even though such expectations are taken from the prophecies of the Old Testament, there are also other references which speak of suffering, and a suffering borne on behalf of the people and their sin. Jesus is trying to tell his followers, beginning with Peter, that the way ahead will involve suffering, but suffering not as an end unto itself. Suffering is the path to glory, but a very different kind of glory than pomp and circumstance, success, power, military victory, etc. This path of suffering will unlock the power and working of love in the world like nothing else can. Do they believe and understand Jesus? Peter and the others are resistant and do not understand.

Not only are the disciples to understand and believe, they are called to follow, to take up their own cross (life with all its burdens, challenges, priorities, decisions, relationships, etc.) and order life according to the demands of God's love as Jesus reveals and embodies it.

Suffering comes in different ways. Sometimes it is unexpected, other times it is because we make difficult choices out of principle or commitment. We pay a price to love rather than retaliate, to suffer the wrong rather than crush our oppressor. But, however it comes, suffering is not the end, but a means to greater possibilities in God. Love suffered and enacted as compassion, forgiveness, justice and a search for peace achieves things power, force and revenge can never achieve. Can we believe this and live this?

17: 1-13 – The Transfiguration

Jesus and his closest disciples go up a mountain. The parallel is mount Sinai, when Moses goes up to get the 10 commandments, while the people are waiting at the foot of the mountain. Jesus is transfigured, his clothes become dazzling white. This story is not intended to suggest that Jesus is God in the way the church later came to understand divinity. Jesus is as human as you or me, as Moses and Elijah who are also part of the dazzling display. "Son of God" would be a typical reference to any anointed King or messiah type leader. It's only after the resurrection that the term "Son of God" begins to take on other associations - that Jesus is unlike any other human being in relation to God.

Jesus is established and confirmed as the Messiah of God. He is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. His glory will be revealed on the cross (his predictions of suffering and the sign of Jonah are also part of this chapter and are placed side by side with the account of his transfiguration). Clearly the disciples are out of the loop in terms of understanding, for the questioning about whether Elijah will come (believed to be a pre-cursor to the Messiah) indicates that they have missed what has already happened with John the Baptist.

17: 14-20 – The question of Faith

When Moses came down the mountain, he was shocked to see the people had lost their way and made a golden calf to worship. Jesus comes down and finds the disciples having lost faith and disconnected from God (lack of prayer). He is confronted by the problems of humanity in need of God's healing. Genuine and empowering faith is not a matter of quantity (a mustard seed is very small), but quality. It's about focusing our attention in the right direction and right relationship with God in prayer. Faith grows from invisible seeds hidden in the ground (like in the parable of the sower).

17: 22-27 – Jesus against the Temple

Jesus again predicts his terrible fate in Jerusalem. But his followers miss what he tells them will happen on the third day. They don't have any frame of reference, any context or precedent to understand how such a view of resurrection (amid ordinary time) can be possible. And so, they are resistant and troubled.

Jesus also engages in a bit of criticism and perhaps humour around the paying of the temple tax. Clearly, he believes that the temple, run by the Chief Priests and Scribes (Sadducees) is a disgrace. And requiring a tax for upkeep only furthers the disgrace. Many Jews resented it, especially as they were very poor already. Jesus compares the Jewish leaders with gentile leaders who milk everyone else but themselves and their own. It's selfish, hypocritical and unjust. He ends by telling Peter to go fishing and the first fish he catches will have a coin in its mouth, the right amount for the temple tax. Is Jesus serious? Or is he making a mockery of the whole thing? We're never told whether Peter actually goes fishing and gets the coin.