MATTHEW 22-23

22: 1-14 – Parable of the Wedding Banquet

This parable is also told in the gospel of Luke. But in Luke, the context within which Jesus tells it is different. Here in Matthew it follows closely the parable of the wicked tenants Jesus just told in 21:33-46. This parable, like the one before, is quite explicit as to who is being talked about. The king, his son and the wedding banquet represent God, Jesus and the promise of the gospel for new life and hope for the people of God. The problem is all the key players in Jewish society reject Jesus as the Messiah of God and refuse to come to the party. The invitation, then, is extended to the riffraff, the people who are on the margins – the lame, the blind, the prostitutes and tax collectors – those who are morally and physically cursed. But there is also a catch. Just because Jesus invites all these to the party, doesn't mean the call of the gospel isn't about change. Tax collectors have to change their practices. Prostitutes need to experience some healing. Those who responded to Jesus' gospel from the heart transformed their lives as well. That's what the reference to being at the party without proper wedding clothes is all about.

As we will continue to see, "weeping and gnashing of teeth" in hell is for all those who claim the privilege of belonging without the responsibility for manifesting gospel love. At the front of the line are the religious, political and wealthy leaders of Israel.

22: 15-22 – The Question about Taxes

In what follows Jesus is engaging different groups of religious leaders. Here he is engaging the Pharisees and Herodians (those who support Herod as King). The question about paying taxes to Rome is deeply political and divisive. When Jesus was a boy there was a famous Jewish revolt against paying taxes to Rome led by a rebel called Judas. Paying taxes to Rome was a constant reminder of Jewish subjection to a foreign oppressor. The denarius (main currency) was also a reminder because it had the emperor's image on it, with the words: "Son of God, high priest" inscribed on it. For a Jew this was idolatry. Judas and the revolutionaries were captured and crucified on crosses.

If Jesus claims that the tax must not be paid, he will be supporting the revolutionary fervour and gather respect from the majority of people who expected the messiah to lead some kind of revolt against the Romans. But this would also set him up for crucifixion and play into the hands of the religious leaders who want him dead. If he claims that taxes should be paid, he will be discredited among the people. Jesus' response is brilliant because he resists either trap. He asks to see a denarius, and it is the Pharisees and Herodians who produce it (meaning they

have possession of the currency, while Jesus does not). He looks at it, perhaps with some disgust, and asks about the image on it (Caesar). If it belongs to Caesar, give it back to him. But God demands something much greater than material currency. God demands our heart and soul. Clearly in this exchange, it is the Pharisees and Herodians who appear more beholden to Caesar than Jesus, and Jesus has managed not to tell people to refuse paying taxes either. If our heart and soul is rooted in our money, then we are slaves to a power that is not God. God wants something much more of us, which means we have to detach from our money and how much our lives and our identities are intertwined with our money and possessions. The more attached to money you are, the more you have to lose.

22: 23-33 – The Question about the Resurrection

Now the Sadducees have a go at Jesus. Sadducees are at the top of the hierarchy of the religious establishment. They run the temple and rule the top governing body of the Jewish people called the Sanhedrin. While most religious leaders and the vast majority of Jews believe in some kind of resurrection of the dead, Sadducees do not. They try to provide a scenario where the resurrection would seem ludicrous. Would there not be conflict in heaven if there was a woman with 7 husbands there? (In Jewish law, the wife of a man who dies without having children to carry his legacy, should then be married to another brother without a wife, so that the next sibling produces a child for his dead brother to carry the name. It was called "Levirate Marriage." Whether it was applied or lived out is a big question given what was being asked.) imagine a scenario of a woman having been married to multiple brothers who keep dying childless. Once they're all inhabiting heaven as resurrected beings, whose wife will she be?

Here's how Jesus counters their ludicrous example aimed at disproving the resurrection:
1) Resurrection life is eternal life and therefore the need to populate the world through reproduction is no longer necessary. Being like angels means that sexuality for reproduction and much that shapes life here and now are no longer necessary. Life will be different. Angels are classically described as non-binary, sexless beings. Angels are important in Jewish folklore and spirituality.

2) Resurrection is a current possibility, not just a future one. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob may still participate in a future resurrection of the dead, but they are alive and present with God right now. Isn't this what the scriptures teach even those parts that don't mention resurrection explicitly (the reference to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the present tense is in an early part of scripture the Sadducees respect)? If they are alive now so will all who transition through death into resurrection life.

22: 34-40 – The Greatest Commandment

The Pharisees are big on the law. Jesus points them to the heart of it. If we have the goal and destination right, our lives will better approximate God's will than if we have the wrong goals in our sights. If making money or defeating our enemies is our goal, our energies and priorities are directed accordingly. If love of God and neighbour from our heart outwards is our goal, than this directs our energies, values and priorities accordingly.

22: 41-45 – The Question about David's Son

This is a riddle with an important message. The Messiah is David's son by lineage, which makes him human like everyone else. But he is also "The Lord" (God) in relation to David, and hence above David and any ordinary human being. Clearly Jesus is claiming more for the Messiah than merely prophetic or ordinary kingly status. Jesus is claiming the Messiah to be the very representation of God, of greater authority than any human being. Jesus is both Messiah and Lord!

23: 1-39 - Jesus denounces the Scribes and Pharisees & Laments over Jerusalem

Chapters 23-25 look to the future and warn of things to come. This is the final block of Jesus' teaching balancing what was said in the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5-7).

Religious leaders are great at doing two things: 1) Telling people what they have to do to be right with God so that God may come back to save them; and 2) making a big show of their religiosity public. In fact, however, they are 1) hypocrites in their hearts and 2) burdening people with the wrong things and refusing to bear the real burdens of the law – compassion, mercy, justice, and righteousness of the heart before God.

This is evident in many ways – they value the gold above the temple and the gift above the alter (vs16-22). They like to be treated with respect and honour, to be called teacher and rabbi. Jesus emphasizes humility and servanthood. That's what a real leader under God would do, to point to God rather than themselves. They focus on tithes (money for the temple and synagogue) and external rituals (separating themselves from uncleanness) but inside are full of hatred, contempt and self-righteousness. They are part of a long line of priests and teachers of the law who condemned and killed prophets before Jesus.

Jesus is so upset with them because they have led the people astray and have turned them against Jesus and the true path to Israel's salvation. And so, Jesus ends by lamenting about Jerusalem (as he lamented about Galilee earlier (a prophet is not welcome among his own)), that his fate, as all prophets before him, will lead to the destructive fate of Israel, beginning with Jerusalem the capital. In the next chapter Jesus will become more specific about this fate.