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Matthew: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Transcript

Matthew 1, the first chapter of the first book of the New Testament, begins in a surprising way. We might think that moving into the books of the New Testament, we get away from the most boring parts of the Old Testament, which are the genealogies. But lo and behold, the first book of the New Testament begins with a genealogy.

Genealogies may seem like bare and boring lists of names to us, but within Scripture they serve a multitude of different purposes. They establish the pedigree of certain office holders. They present historical transitions between blocks of narrative.

They serve to mark out families and the way that they have expanded and particular lines are developed. They manifest some of the patterns in history and the larger arcs of God's work over the course of many centuries. They can present that history in a nutshell, bringing to mind the broader structure of the story without going into every single detail.

And they also can serve the purpose of bringing to mind certain features of the past, certain characters from the past that are salient in understanding present characters. All of these things, to some extent or other, are taking place in Matthew chapter 1. Matthew is connecting the story that he is telling with a story that has gone before. This is not a story that has just begun.

It's the story that the Old Testament tells, brought to its proper culmination and climax. His genealogy establishes Jesus' pedigree. It connects Jesus with David as David's true heir.

It connects Jesus with Abraham as his true son. It tells the story of the Old Testament in a way that helps us to see the larger pattern and flow of that story and the way that Christ might relate to that. It's introduced with the expression, the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ.

Now, this could be read, and many have read it as the book of the Genesis of Jesus Christ. And I don't think that's an accident. It draws our mind back to the very beginning of Scripture, in that book where there is a lot of emphasis upon genealogies.

Also, as in some of the other Gospels, it highlights the fact that Jesus is the Alpha. He's the beginning. He's the one who starts all these things off.

He's the one who's with God before the creation. He's the one who is at the very dawn and the first stirrings of Israel's history and story. He is connected with that part of the story.

And so as we look all the way back to Genesis, we should be able to see Christ there. And telling the story in a way that starts at that point, it helps us to recognise just how firmly rooted Christ is within the story of Israel and the story of the creation as a whole. Matthew does not just begin with the book of Genesis.

He ends with a reference back to the final verse of the Old Testament in its Hebrew ordering, which is 2 Chronicles chapter 36 verse 23. It's the Great Commission of the Old Testament. And what Matthew is doing here is telling his story in a way that is sandwiched by the first verse of the Old Testament, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and the last verse of the Old Testament, the verse that speaks of Cyrus' decree.

Christ sums up that entire story in himself. Christ is playing out the story of Scripture himself. Christ is the new Israel.

Christ is the one who takes all history into himself. It's a book-ended narrative from Genesis to Chronicles, from the beginning to the end. And Christ is the one who holds everything together.

It's also like a new book of Chronicles. The book of Chronicles begins with the very beginning with Adam and God's creation of Adam. And then it moves into a focus upon the genealogy of Abraham and of David.

And that's what Matthew is doing here. He's connecting Christ with that very beginning of the book of Chronicles. And he seems to depend upon the book of Chronicles for

certain parts of his genealogy.

And moving in his story to the very end of the book of Chronicles as Christ fulfills a new Great Commission, a commission that's greater than that even of Cyrus. In beginning his gospel in such a way then, he presents the story as being continued in Christ, as being summed up in Christ, and suggests that the story of the gospel must be anchored in what has gone before. By beginning his gospel in this way, he gives us a sense of just how auspicious these events are, how significant these stirrings in Bethlehem and Nazareth actually are.

In contrast to Luke and Greco-Roman genealogies, but like the Old Testament, Matthew works forward, starting with the most ancient figure and then moving forward to the most contemporary. It ends with the most important name though. Part of this demonstrates the proper lineage of Christ, connects Christ with previous characters.

And we might also see it as something that could have been substantiated by genealogical records of important figures kept in the temple, where they could be checked prior to the destruction of the temple in AD 70. It begins with Abraham, who's mentioned seven times in the book of Matthew. And there's a neat transition between the heading of the book and the genealogy.

It's the book of the genesis of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham, and then Abraham was the father of Isaac. So it leads very neatly into that list. It isn't just a list of names though.

There are people mentioned within it who are not strictly part of the genealogy itself. People like Zerah or people like Uriah or the brothers of Judah or Jeconiah. Likewise, women did not need to be recorded in the list, but they are recorded.

And they're not necessarily the ones that you would expect. If you were going to make a list of the women that are important within the Old Testament, you may think of the great matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, etc. And yet that's not what we see here.

We see characters like Tamar. We see Rahab. We see Bathsheba.

We see Ruth. These are figures who are outsiders who come in. Bathsheba is associated with Uriah the Hittite.

And Rahab is a person of Jericho. Ruth is a Moabite. And Tamar is presumably a Canaanite.

All of these figures are Gentiles who are brought in. And within the Gospel of Matthew, this is something that Matthew wants us to see. That the people of God have always included Gentiles to some extent.

But this is just preparing for the greater inclusion of the Gentiles that will occur through the ministry of Christ. It's also preparing the way for Mary. Mary is someone who gives birth to Christ in an unusual manner.

And all these unusual women who have come into the story in surprising ways maybe prepare us for her and what she does. The names mentioned are sometimes different from the names that we find elsewhere. So the Septuagint of 1 Chronicles 2.9 has Aram rather than Ram.

And here we have Aram rather than Ram, although the ESV changes it to Ram. Amos instead of Amon. And Asaph instead of Asah.

In Jeremiah 22.30 there is a curse upon Jehoiachin or Jeconiah or Caniah by Jeremiah. Neither Jehoiachin's nor Jehoiachin's descendants would sit upon the throne. Thus says the Lord, write this man down as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days, for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling again in Judah.

So it seems strange that he's mentioned on the list here. James Bajon has suggested that Sheol Teal is adopted by Jehoiachin or that new life is breathed into the cursed line by taking in this child from without. And so he's protected from the judgement by means of adoption.

There are three sets of fourteen and fourteen is an important number. It's the gematria of David's name. David frames the genealogy.

Not surprisingly because Christ is the son of David. He is the greater David. Fourteen of course is seven times two.

There are fourteen years from Ishmael to Isaac. There are fourteen years serving for Rachel and Leah. There are fourteen years of plenty followed by famine.

But there's also a pattern associated with the moon. There's a pattern of waxing and waning. So the genealogy waxes from Abraham to David.

Then it wanes from David to the deportation to Babylon. And then it waxes again as Jeconiah is given new life through Sheol Teal and then it leads finally to Christ who comes at the climax of this second great waxing of Israel's history. Forty-two is also six sevens.

Christ is the one who brings in the seventh seven. The seventh seven being associated with Jubilee and the arrival of that time. It's also a time, times and half a time.

As in twelve months plus twenty-four months, two years, two times. And half a time, six months. It makes forty-two months.

Perhaps we're supposed to see Israel's history to this point as a sort of testing that leads to the deliverance of Christ's arrival. Jesus comes at the fullness of time. He's the one who completes this genealogy, who brings it to its destiny, who completes the movement started in Abraham to David, that first great waxing of Israel's history, and brings it into a second great waxing.

He is the son of Abraham. He's the son of David. He's also the son, more directly, of Joseph, the son of Jacob.

Now we've already met a Joseph, the son of Jacob, in the book of Genesis and we'll see similarities between these two characters as we go on. But for now we should note the fact that Jesus is given to a father, not just to a mother. He is born to a betrothed couple so that he would be raised by that couple so that he would have as his father, Joseph, and all that Joseph's genealogy gives him.

This is part of what gives him the foundation of his title as the Messiah, that through Joseph he's descended from Abraham and David. Now he's not biologically the son of Joseph but, as in the case of Jeconiah, there is an adoption here as it were. But he is given to Joseph that Joseph might raise him as his own.

And the story of Matthew focuses on Joseph in its nativity account which should serve as a caution against marginalising or downplaying the importance of Joseph as a figure within the story of Christ. A question to consider. In the way that Matthew structures this genealogy, he is able to pick out certain characters that stand out from the rest.

Characters that are either paralleled with others, characters that need not be mentioned but are mentioned, characters that are repeated or present in particular moments, characters that frame the entire genealogy, and characters that are present within the genealogy in other structural forms. What characters do you see Matthew particularly highlighting? How is he highlighting them? And how does their connection with Jesus and his genealogy help us to understand who Jesus is when he comes on the scene? Matthew chapter 1 proceeds to recount the birth of Christ. Whereas in the Gospel of Luke the narrative focuses upon the character of Mary and the story of the nativity around her perspective, in Matthew it is Joseph who is front and centre.

And Joseph faces a problem. He is betrothed to a woman who is found to be with child before they come together. Joseph is a righteous man and his intention seems to be to quietly divorce Mary so that she will not be openly shamed.

There is an element of mercy here seen as part of his righteousness. That the righteousness exemplified by him is not going to the full measure of what was allowed to him by the law. He could have put her to an open shame but he did not want to.

But yet while he is considering these things an angel of the Lord appears to him in a

dream and assures him that the child is not a result of unfaithfulness but that he should marry Mary, the child that has been conceived being from the Holy Spirit. She will bear the son but he will name the son. The son will be identified as his son.

The son will have the status given by his genealogy. The son is being given not just to Mary alone but to the couple. And in the Gospel of Matthew the prominence of Joseph as a character emphasises this fact.

That the child belongs to Joseph and the child is a child that he has the privilege of raising as his own son. The fact that the child is conceived and born prior to any sexual union between Mary and Joseph is important. The child does not come from them.

The child comes from God. It is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit within Mary. This child to be born is a sort of new creation.

A child born apart from human relations. A child that is given to humanity in the fullness of time. The one who fits into this genealogy that we've read in the beginning of this chapter.

But one who comes apart from the genealogical processes of procreation. He takes up this legacy of a messy genealogy and all the baggage that comes with it. And he comes into it to bring salvation from the sins that this genealogy might bring to our mind.

Joseph is addressed not just as someone who must passively assent to what is happening. He should take action. He should take Mary as his wife and he should later name the child Jesus.

He's given that responsibility towards the child. And the responsibility that he's given is also to bear a knowledge of the destiny of this child and to ensure that it is realised. In the chapter that follows we see Joseph playing this part.

He is addressed by angels on a couple of further occasions and is responsible for the safety of this child. God has committed an important task to Joseph's hand and he is a faithful and righteous man who will complete it. At this point Mary would probably have been a young teenager and Joseph just out of his teens.

Their marriage would have been arranged by their parents but with their consent. Their situation would not have been particularly unusual. There would have been many other couples in a similar sort of situation.

The angel's appearance to Joseph is also important because Joseph now can bear witness to Mary's faithfulness and to the origin of Jesus. Both of them have independently received messages from God concerning the identity of the son that Mary is bearing. It doesn't rest upon Mary's word alone or upon Joseph's word alone.

Both of them have this truth and they will bear it together as they hold together in raising this son as faithful parents and as a faithful couple. The child is to be given the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. The name means Yahweh saves.

It connects with the name of Joshua in the Old Testament and the connection between Jesus and Joshua is one worth reflecting upon. Joshua takes over from Moses on the banks of the Jordan and leads the people into the promised land. Jesus is the one who takes over from John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan and will lead his people into salvation.

You can also think about the relationship between Elijah and Elisha. Elisha, God saves, God is salvation is another name that seems very close to the meaning of Jesus in its significance. And as in the case of Jesus from John the Baptist and Joshua from Moses, Elisha takes over the ministry of Elijah having crossed over to the far side of the Jordan.

These characters then I think have very similar patterns to their lives. Jesus is the one who will save his people from their sins. Jesus comes from heaven but he does not just come down out of the blue into the middle of history as one who is an alien to it.

Rather he is the one who takes up a history himself. He takes up a people and he identifies with those people. He comes as the heir of a great legacy of failure and sin and covenant breaking and he holds that history as his own and will bring salvation into that situation.

All of this we are told is in fulfilment of what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah. In chapter 7 verse 14 of the book of Isaiah he speaks of a young woman who will conceive and bear a son and whose name will be Emmanuel. Now many have debated about the meaning of this text.

Within the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it invited the reading as a virgin. Whereas in the Hebrew it could just be a young woman more generally. Such a young woman might commonly be presumed to be a virgin but that would not necessarily be the case.

So to see this verse as an Old Testament prediction of the virgin birth is maybe to stretch the meaning of that original text which presents a problem for us. What is Matthew doing with this text? He presents it as being fulfilled in Christ and references the virgin conceiving which is an over reading of the text as we find it within the context of Isaiah. What's he doing? Well it seems to me that Matthew uses the Old Testament not just in a way that has a this means that relationship where there's an Old Testament prophecy and New Testament fulfilment.

Rather there's more logic of fulfilment as a filling out, a bringing of the text to a greater

and higher expression of its meaning. So whereas in the original context it may have been referring to Ahaz's son Hezekiah as the fulfilment of that prophecy initially there is a fuller fulfilment which we see in Christ in which case the meaning of the Septuagint becomes more foregrounded. This is a virgin that's going to give birth and it's a fuller realisation of the meaning of the original text.

Now when the New Testament authors use the Old Testament they want us to go back to the Old Testament and pay attention to the context. In that original context a reluctant Ahaz who's not really going to listen much to the advice of the prophet, does not really want a sign but God gives him a sign anyway and this child will be born and before the child comes of age there will be this deliverance that God will come and be present to his people but there will also be judgement. And in that historical situation the child is a sign of God's presence.

God's presence in blessing and in judgement. It's a harbinger of what's going to happen in the future. Christ's birth then is a similar sort of thing.

God is coming, being present to his people and things are going to change. The miraculous birth of this child is a sign that God is with his people and that things are going to change. There's going to be blessing and there's going to be judgement.

God is about to come near to his people in this child and as in the days of Ahaz people need to brace themselves. A question to consider. Why do you think that God told Joseph after Mary had been found to be with the child that the child was from the Holy Spirit rather than beforehand when Mary was told? In Matthew chapter 2 Matthew is placing Jesus within the preceding narrative but also demonstrating Jesus' credentials as the Messiah.

It's important that he establish the site of Jesus' birth. Jesus is associated with Nazareth. He's called Jesus of Nazareth but yet he's also someone who if he is to be the Messiah needs some sort of association with Bethlehem.

Matthew chapter 2 brings these two things together. Helps us to understand how Christ is both a Nazarene and also someone who is the son of David come from Bethlehem. The Magi come enquiring about the one who is to be born King of the Jews.

This is the first introduction of this expression and in both times in the Gospel it's voiced by the Gentiles. It's a Gentile way of understanding the Messiah perhaps. Themes of kingship are prominent within this section.

There's the star and the Magi and there's also Herod who's described as the King. Many different theories have been brought forward for the nature of the star. Some have seen it as a comet.

Others a planetary conjunction. Some a nova or supernova. And others have suggested

that this should be seen as the Shekinah glory leading them through the wilderness.

That connection would certainly heighten the irony of the situation where magicians who are associated with the opponents of Aaron and Moses in Egypt are now coming to the land of Israel in search of the King of the Jews. Whereas the King in the land is going to act the part of Pharaoh and seek to kill the baby boys. So there's a certain ironic reversal taking place here.

It's an inverted Exodus perhaps. In the book of Daniel the Magi also appear as opponents but then also as people that Daniel will rule over and lead. We might also compare the Magi with the Queen of Sheba.

The Queen of Sheba comes a long distance to see Solomon's wisdom and to bring gifts to Solomon. In Isaiah chapter 60 and also Psalm 72 there are references to kings coming that distance to greet Israel and to see the rise of their Messiah. Psalm 72 verses 8 to 11 seems to stand in the background of part of what we're reading in this chapter.

Isaiah chapter 60 Lift up your eyes all around and see they all gather together they come to you. Your son shall come from afar and your daughter shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant.

Your heart shall thrill and exult because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you. The wealth of the nation shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you.

The young camels of Midian and Ephah. All those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense.

They shall bring the good news, the praises of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you. The rams of Nebareth shall minister to you.

They shall come up with acceptance on my altar and I will beautify my beautiful house. All of this is coming to pass in the story of Christ. In Christ Matthew presents these kings coming from afar bringing tribute as an expression of the tribute of the Gentiles brought to the Messiah and to Israel at the time of the kingdom's dawning.

The chief priests and the scribes who within this story are characterized as if they were the magicians in the court of Pharaoh because they're associated with this pharaonic character of Herod they declare that the Messiah will be born in the city of David in Bethlehem of Judea. They refer back to the prophecy of Micah chapter 5 verse 2 but there's also an allusion to 2 Samuel chapter 5 verse 2 which refers to the fact that David is going to be established as the king the one who will shepherd the people of Israel rather than Saul. And this plays off the character of Herod as well.

Herod is a Saul-like character one whose authority will ultimately be taken from him and the one who has all true authority all authority in heaven and earth is Christ. Many have

seen here an allusion in part to the story of Balaam and Balak. In the final oracle of Balaam he says Here we see a descendant of Edom, Herod the Idumean king, and a descendant of Jacob standing up against each other.

Jesus is the true king of the Jews and Edom is going to be dispossessed. The Idumean king Herod might also recall some of the conflict between Israel and Edom in the past. We might think for instance of the story of Hadad in chapter 11 of 1 Kings which has a number of similarities with the story that we read of Christ here.

And the Lord raised up an adversary against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite. He was of the royal house in Edom. For when David was in Edom, and Joab the commander of the army went up to bury the slain, he struck down every male in Edom.

For Joab and all Israel remained there six months, until he had cut off every male in Edom. But Hadad fled to Egypt together with certain Edomites of his father's servants, Hadad still being a little child. And moving ahead a few verses.

But when Hadad heard in Egypt that David slept with his fathers, and that Joab the commander of his army was dead, Hadad said to Pharaoh, Let me depart, that I may go to my own country. This is very similar to the story of Christ escaping from Israel to go to Egypt to take refuge there while Herod is seeking the life of the baby boys. This story is playing out again, but the roles have been reversed.

It's as if Christ is taking upon himself the burden of the sins of David's house. And the fact that it is an Idumean king that's persecuting him brings to mind the rivalry and the opposition and the mistreatment of Edom by David in the past. In the gifts that they give to the infant Jesus, the Magi present him as the king, but also in some ways as the brigrum.

The brigrum, the lover, is connected with spices, with precious stones and metals and other things like that. Jesus is not just the king, he's the brigrum of the people. Dreams are important within the story, not just for Joseph, but also for the Magi.

The Magi are led by dreams, and Joseph is led by dreams. Joseph is led by a dream to take Jesus and Mary into Egypt. We can think about the fact that in the previous chapter he's been introduced to us as Joseph, the son of Jacob.

Now there's another Joseph, the son of Jacob in the Old Testament. And Joseph, the son of Jacob in the New Testament is playing out something very similar in terms of pattern of life. He's someone who has dreams and he's someone who leads his people down into Egypt to take refuge.

In being delivered into and then later from Egypt, Jesus is a new Israel. And to underline this point, Matthew quotes Hosea 11. The verse in Hosea 11.1 refers to Israel and the first Exodus, but Matthew says it is fulfilled in Jesus and his deliverance from Egypt.

Now part of what we're seeing here is that Matthew is using the Old Testament in a far more creative way than many people think. Many people think that there's an Old Testament verse and it directly points to Christ, and then there's the New Testament fulfillment. But then there's a problem when we see verses like Hosea 11.1 which clearly do not refer in the first instance to Christ.

They refer to specific historical events. And it might seem to us as if Matthew is just taking verses randomly from the Old Testament and applying them for his own theological purposes without any regard for the original purpose or context. However, it's important to have a sense of the richer theology that Matthew is operating in terms of.

He does not treat what happens to Christ as a straightforward fulfillment of a prediction, but rather something that's playing out a parallel, a model and a fulfillment. The Old Testament deliverance of Israel from Egypt was a symbol of something yet to come. We should also note the various inversions of themes that can be seen in this chapter.

Jesus is brought out of Egypt, much as Israel was brought out of Egypt. But Jesus is brought out of Egypt as one who has taken refuge in Egypt from a pharaoh-like figure who's on the throne of Israel. The chief priests and the scribes are the ones associated with the pharaoh figure, whereas the magicians are the ones that come from afar following the light to come to meet the king of the Jews.

The irony of the situation should not escape us. Jesus has a background in the surrounding Gentile world within Matthew's portrait, continuing the themes that we see in the genealogy where the women that come in are Gentiles for the most part. In describing the massacre of the innocents, Matthew again draws attention back to the Old Testament.

This, he argues, was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah. A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children. She refused to be comforted because they are no more.

As usual, it's important to go back to the original context to see where these words come from. Matthew is bringing to mind the memory of Israel's exile. At this location, this was where the Judean captives were taken from Ramah.

And this mourning of Rachel is mourning the exile of her children. But there is the immediate promise after that that her children will be restored, that there is hope for her future, that God will visit her in her plight. This is not the first time that Rachel might be lurking in the background of Matthew chapter 2. In verse 6, there's a citation from Micah chapter 5 verse 2. And looking in the broader context of Micah chapter 4 and 5, there are many references back to the struggle of Rachel in birth with Benjamin.

And the way in which she almost died in that situation. But now there's the promise that

there will be a child that comes from Bethlehem. Rachel died on the way to Bethlehem, as she gave birth to Benjamin, who was the ancestor of the first king of the people, Saul.

But now, finally, they're going to arrive at Bethlehem. And it's going to be from Bethlehem that the true king is going to arise. So Rachel's story is in the background in chapters 4 and 5 of Micah.

And now Rachel's story again is recalled from Jeremiah chapter 31. She's the one who stands as the great matriarch of the people. As they go out into exile from the place near her death, she mourns and she weeps for them.

And as she weeps, God will hear her voice. These children will be restored. And the immediate verse that we have next is the death of Herod and the appearance of an angel in a dream to Joseph telling him to return to the land.

Now notice the way that it's described. In Exodus chapter 4 we find something very similar. It's very similar because Moses is being connected with the characters of Jesus and Joseph.

The pattern of the Exodus is being played out again. Returning to the land of Israel, Joseph avoids the region of Judea because Archelaus is reigning there in the place of his father Herod and has a bad reputation too. And he goes to the district of Galilee instead.

The realm of the older Herod, the Herod that has just died, was divided between Herod Antipas in Galilee and Perea, the east of Jordan, Archelaus in Judea and then also Philip. The chapter ends by connecting Jesus with the town of Nazareth where they settle in the district of Galilee. And on account of settling in Nazareth we're told that what was spoken by the prophets would be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

Now this is a very strange reference and there are many different theories to account for it. There is no Old Testament verse that is clearly referenced here. Some have proposed Judges 13, verse 7 where it's told that Samson shall be a Nazarite.

But the word here is Nazarene, it's not Nazarite. The words may be similar but there seems to be some difference. The birth oracles connected with Samson and Samuel may have some similarity with John the Baptist.

And while Jesus does play the part of a Nazarite at the very end of Matthew, it doesn't seem that he plays the Nazarite more generally. He's one who comes eating and drinking. The other thing is that this is connected with the place name, the place where he ends up settling.

So any explanation would seem to have to take account of that. Others have suggested a connection with the Hebrew word for branch, Netzer in Isaiah chapter 11, verse 1. Maybe there's something there. There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse

and a branch from his root shall bear fruit and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

So it may be a reference to the shoot or the branch that comes up. Now whatever we're supposed to make of this, it has to connect with Nazareth. And I think the most promising suggestion I've seen brings those two things together and it's suggesting a play upon words that Matthew is doing something a bit more creative here.

Jesus is the branch but also the branch that comes up out of dry ground, out of unpromising soil. And Nazareth is a new town. It has under a thousand inhabitants.

It's a place that has no particular auspicious things associated with it. In John's Gospel, chapter 1, Nathanael asks can anything good come out of Nazareth? Nazareth seemed to be a place that was not really regarded very highly. And in that sense it fit.

This may be what it looks like for the Messiah to arise out of dry ground. And this lack of recognition of his origins is appropriate to a figure who comes as it were incognito rather than with great fanfare from a centre of activity and power. What Matthew has done by this point though is present a strong apologetic for Christ's identity.

As one born in Bethlehem, as one associated with Nazareth, as one to whom the riches of the kings come, as one who plays out the story of Israel being delivered from Egypt again, he is one who bears all of the hallmarks of the true Messiah, the true leader of the people. A question to consider. In Exodus chapter 4 verse 22, God describes Israel as my first born son.

In Matthew chapter 2, Matthew quotes Hosea chapter 11 verse 1, out of Egypt I have called my son. How do you think that Matthew's use of Hosea chapter 11 and the Exodus tradition is serving his characterisation of Christ both in relationship to God and in relationship to Israel? In Matthew chapter 3 we are introduced to the character of John the Baptist. John the Baptist is very important in each one of the gospels.

And in the book of Acts we see that to be an apostle you had to be a witness of Christ's ministry beginning from John the Baptist to the resurrection. John the Baptist is not just mentioned in the New Testament, we also see him in the works of Josephus. His practice of baptism also seems to be related to Jewish ritual washings for purity.

It's not something conjured up out of nothing. The community associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls also seems to have practiced similar sorts of baptisms. In the book of John there are people who come to John and ask him about his practice of baptism and seem to be discussing it according to the lines of ritual purity more generally.

So it's not an unprecedented movement. It draws upon earlier covenant and natural symbolism. Water has a natural symbolism.

Washing, cleansing, union, blessing, all these sorts of things. And John is drawing upon that and his practice. But he's also drawing upon existing practices of washing.

He's drawing upon the symbolism of a particular place. The crossing of the Jordan was where they entered into the land. By baptising people in the wilderness on the far side of the Jordan, he's preparing people symbolically to enter into the land again.

And he's calling people to join in this new exodus movement. It's distinct from later Christian baptism and it's not self-baptism either. So there are important things to notice about that that distinguish it both from some of the baptisms that we find in places like the book of Leviticus, but also the baptisms that we encounter later on in the New Testament.

John declares the Kingdom of Heaven. And the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God are largely interchangeable expressions. This is central to John the Baptist's ministry and announcement.

It's also central to what Christ declares as he comes on the scene. The words of John the Baptist draw our minds back to Isaiah chapter 40, where there is this prophecy of a new exodus that's going to happen. Israel has been forgiven of its sins, its warfare has ended, and God is going to come to reign among them.

That promise of the reign of God or the Kingdom of Heaven is, in its original context, a prophecy of the return from Babylon. God is coming to rule and John the Baptist characterises himself as the one bearing this message. This frames our understanding of Christ's ministry when it comes.

Note how little the Bible gives attention to appearance of characters, to scenic features and details of diet. But yet it describes John the Baptist. He's dressed in a garment of camel's hair, he has a leather belt around his waist, and his food is locusts and wild honey.

Now, why on earth does it matter what he eats for his breakfast? Why does it matter how he dresses when he goes out on the day? Well, it matters because it connects us with various other things that help us to understand what type of character he is. Most particularly, it brings our mind back to 2 Kings 1, verse 8, where the character of Elijah is described. He wore a garment of hair with a belt of leather around his waist.

He said, it is Elijah the Tishbite. The very last prophecy of the Old Testament promises that, behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes, and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. The final verse of chapter 4 of the Book of Malachi, the final verse of the Old Testament in our typical ordering.

And now we see this character on the scene who dresses in the same way as Elijah. He is the Elijah to come. And later on in Matthew chapter 17, verse 10 following, he is described as the Elijah that was to come.

In Luke chapter 1, verses 14 following, he is described as one who will come in the spirit and the power of Elijah. And so this reminds us of Old Testament prophecy. It characterises John the Baptist, helps us to see who he is, and what prophecies he's fulfilling.

He eats locusts and wild honey. He's detached from the society. These aren't cultivated foods.

They're wild foods. He's connected with the poor. The locusts may be connected with enemies of Israel.

Honey with the sustenance of the land. Wild and uncultivated. It's a return to the state of exodus, like eating quail and manna.

And his location is important. He's in the wilderness. This brings up themes of exile, fulfilment of prophecy.

He goes outside of society, a place where there are the fugitives and the outcasts. And John's baptism is connected with a certain exclusion from society. You're stepping away from society to be baptised.

You're going outside of the main area of the land. You have to re-enter again through this washing. Pagans who wanted to join Israel would have repented and been baptised.

Israel is being treated in the same way, subject to proselyte baptism. This is in keeping with John's message that Jewish ancestry was no guarantee of safety as God came near to his people. It also sets the terms for much of the rest of the New Testament message.

About Jews and Gentiles. And keeps with the themes of Matthew at this point. Many might assume that the merit of Abraham would protect them.

But John attacks that notion. He speaks of them as brood of vipers. It's the seed of the serpent.

And this may also be an allusion to the idea that vipers killed their mothers. They were set against their ancestors and not walking in their ways. What really matters is that they need to bear the fruits of repentance.

So this theme of trees and fruits is the characteristic of the righteous man. A tree that bears its fruits in season. And they need to bear the fruit of repentance.

There's also this play on children and stones. You can see that in both Aramaic and

Hebrew. And it reminds us of the idea of Israel being taken, hewn from the stone of Abraham.

That if they're going to be the true sons of Abraham they have to be hewn from this. The axe is laid to the root of the tree. This is the language of Isaiah.

Isaiah often uses this language of trees being cut down. Or of things growing up from a stump or a root out of dry ground. The axe is laid to the root of the trees.

The leaders of Israel are about to be cut down. The heads of the people. And this great forest is about to be felled.

God is going to come near. He's going to judge. And they need to be prepared.

You see a similar thing in Daniel. Where it describes the story of Nebuchadnezzar. This great tree in which people took refuge.

And beneath its shade and its branches. It's going to be chopped down. He is humiliated.

And then it will be built up again. Now this is a need for a general repentance. It's not just a subset of the wicked.

This is an event of national, not merely private import. John is calling the whole nation to enter into this repentance. It's a collective return to God.

And he uses the language of God coming to the threshing floor. This is again, it's language from Malachi. He uses the language of the threshing floor.

But Malachi speaks of the temple. Behold I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

And the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight. Behold he is coming says the Lord of hosts. But who can adjure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap.

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver. And he will purify the sons of Levi. And refine them like gold and silver.

And they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. It is important to remember here that the temple was built on the site of the threshing floor. And drew upon its symbolism.

The threshing floor is the place where the wheat is prepared. Where things are tested. Where God judges his people.

It's the place where the oxen of the priesthood tread out the grain. Preparing Israel for God's bread as it were. John describes his baptism as anticipatory of a greater baptism.

The baptism of the spirit. Jesus is anointed with the spirit himself. But he will go on to anoint others.

We might ask why Jesus needed to be baptised. John the Baptist makes the objection to it. But Jesus says this should be done to fulfil all righteousness.

Maybe it's referring to God's establishment of his saving righteousness. This fulfilment of prophecy. Jesus is identifying with his people.

He's also symbolically identifying with Israel. He crosses the water and later he'll be tested in the wilderness. And so he's leading the people on this new exodus movement.

There's a handing on of the baton here as well. Jesus continues from the last great prophet. And this is the baton that has been passed to John himself.

John is the Elijah that was to come. The great prophet that was promised. And now he passes on the baton to Christ.

Note in the Old Testament the number of transitions that we see at the Jordan. We have Moses transitioning to Joshua. We have Elijah transitioning to Elisha.

And in those cases what we see is a movement from a desert prophet to a land prophet. And in both the case of Joshua and Elisha there are similarities with Jesus' name. Joshua and Jesus are the same name.

And Elisha and Jesus are also closely associated. God saves or Yahweh saves. These are very similar names.

Now Christ is taking over from the desert prophet and bringing things into the land. John is also a witness. Throughout the book of Matthew and particularly John's Gospel, John's witness is set forth as something that is very important.

John the Baptist bears witness to Christ. He is the Baptist but he recognises Jesus as the great baptiser, the one who was baptised with the Spirit. And his identification of Jesus is an important part of the witness to Christ.

Along with the resurrection, this is why it was important for apostles to be aware of John the Baptist's ministry. He comes up out of the water and he is anointed by the Spirit. The Spirit descending in the form of a dove upon him.

He sees this happening. It's not necessarily something that would have been seen by everyone in the situation. In the same way as Elijah ascending into heaven was not necessarily a sight that anyone would have seen.

Rather your eyes need to be open to see this. John the Baptist saw this. Jesus saw this.

And this is an anointing of Jesus by the Spirit for his mission. The heavens are open. The dove descends and the voice declares his status.

This is a multifaceted witness to Christ. He is marked out as the Son at this point. This is also a deeply Trinitarian event.

The Father speaking from heaven, the Spirit descending upon him and Christ in the waters. We might also reflect upon the different voices represented here. The voice of Scripture as a witness to Christ.

The prophetic voice of John the Baptist as a witness to Christ. And then also the heavenly voice as a witness to Christ. All of these join together in a unified witness to who Christ is.

The Spirit descends in the form of a dove. You can think back to the story of Noah where the dove is what descends upon the earth as it first comes out of the water. This is like the Spirit on the original waters as well.

It's associated with themes of love. Doves come out from eyes to express the love between persons in the poetry of something like Song of Songs. And so this is expressing the belovedness of the Son.

It's marking out the Son as it were as the new creation that's just emerged from the waters. And heaven and earth are united at this point. This is a descent of the Spirit upon the Son who's standing in the waters.

And all the different aspects of creation are joined together at this point. The heavens, the waters beneath, the earth and there's as it were communication between heaven and earth. This is a Jacob's ladder type theme.

And that voice coming from heaven declares that he is the beloved Son. This is the language of Isaiah chapter 42 verse 1 for instance. Where we read, A question to consider.

Later on in the Gospel of Matthew as in the other synoptic Gospels we read of the transfiguration. Which has a number of similar themes to the baptism of Christ. What similarities do you see and why might these two events be similar? In Matthew chapter 4 we read of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness.

Each of the synoptics have an account of the temptations of Christ. But each introduce it differently. In Matthew Jesus is led up by the Spirit into the wilderness.

In Mark Jesus is cast out by the Spirit into the wilderness. And in Luke Jesus being filled with the Spirit is led in the Spirit into the wilderness. Now these are the same events but they're being recounted in very different ways.

And the differences between the ways that they are recounted suggest that there are different aspects of Old Testament narrative that are being brought to the forefront. Matthew wants us to hear particular echoes. Luke wants us to hear different ones.

And we should think about the Old Testament background that is being summoned here. There are several Old Testament stories that would seem to have some comparisons with this story of Jesus, his baptism and his temptation. You can think about Adam and Eve in the garden being tested in that context by the serpent.

The story of Israel in the wilderness. 40 years wandering in the wilderness. We might think of the story of David and Goliath.

David is anointed and then in the next chapter he faces off against Goliath who has stood against Israel for 40 days. His struggle with Saul as well has similarities. The story of Ezekiel might also come to mind.

The heavens are opened in the 30th year when he's by the river Chebar with the captives and he sees visions of God. Later on he's taken in the Spirit to various locations. Different extremities of the temple, the high mountain and to the wilderness, the valley of dry bones.

We might also think of the story of Nebuchadnezzar. The tree that is cut down, the great tree that's felled by the axe, the Holy One coming down from heaven, driving him out from among men so that he dwells with the beasts. Now here the particular background that seems to be most emphasised is that of the Exodus.

Jesus is led up by the Spirit. That's the language that's often used of the Exodus. Israel is led up out of Egypt by God in the pillar of cloud and fire.

He's led into temptation and he's tested in the wilderness. This is a similar thing again to Israel's experience where Israel was tested 10 times or they tested God 10 times in the wilderness. He's there for 40 days and nights.

This is similar to Moses in Exodus chapter 34 verse 28 and in Deuteronomy chapter 9 verse 9. The order of the temptations in Matthew differs from that in Luke. In Luke the order is that of the turning the stone into bread followed by going up into the high mountain and seeing the kingdoms of the world. Although it's not mentioned as a mountain in Luke.

And then the third one is the pinnacle of the temple. And so the differences here are noteworthy. The different order again helps to bring to mind different aspects of Old Testament background.

In Matthew there's a temptation concerning forbidden food, a temptation to move beyond the protected realm and then a temptation to claim authority before it's time.

Maybe we compare this to the movement from seeing something as good for food, something as a delight to the eyes and then something as desirable to make one wise. The devil uses the words of God to try and trip Christ up.

The temptation that he is bringing to Christ is for Christ to abandon his mission and more particularly the way of the cross. The devil comes to him at his weakest point. At that point where he's hungry and where he feels weak and alone perhaps and at that point he's tested.

Satan is coming on the scene in person too. This is a preparation for a greater conflict of spiritual powers. He knows who Jesus is and his challenge is to Jesus' identity.

If you are the son of God, Jesus is a new king but he's also an Adamic figure. Adam was the son of God and Jesus is also a son of God like David and Solomon were described as the sons of God. The temptation in the garden was that if they eat of the tree they would be like God or the gods knowing good and evil.

That they would have this status. Now Satan is offering a very similar temptation here. That if he wants to enjoy all these privileges of power and rule, all he needs to do is reach out and take what is perfectly within his grasp.

Now there are three temptations. Jesus withdraws from his disciples three times in chapter 26 when he's being tested there. Peter is tested three times and he fails three times.

We should also note the recurrence of these questions at the cross followed by the confirmation at the end. Truly this was the son of God. Matthew structures his gospel carefully.

He wants us to recognise symmetries between different parts. So the questions are in chapter 26 verse 63. Tell us if you are the Christ, the son of God.

And it's the choice to accept the cup or not. To bear witness to who he is or not. Then there is a temple reference.

You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself. If you are the son of God, come down from the cross. It's a similar thing.

It brings to mind the temple and also that temptation to cast oneself down from the temple. To abandon the mission. To leave the people behind.

And then the final temptation is echoed again. He saved others, he cannot save himself. He is the king of Israel.

Let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him. He trusts in God, let God deliver him now. If he desires him, for he said, I am the son of God.

So he is tempted and tested in chapter 4. And then he is tested again at the cross. Note that this is coming straight after the events of the baptism. Where the voice has come from heaven saying, this is my beloved son, in him I am well pleased.

And now he is being tested. If you are truly the son of God. If your father truly loves you.

Then do these things. Then take this route. Why would you have to go the way of the cross? Why would you have to take that difficult route? Where you could just claim all these things as your own.

Note the fact that heavenly figures are testifying to Jesus' identity here. The father, the devil and then later on demons. Jesus' identity is at stake.

The question of who he is. And that is recognised by the centurion at the end who says, truly this was the son of God. But he has proved that through his suffering, through his faithfulness.

Through sticking to the course that his father set. His sonship is not seen in great acts of power. But in a loving work of faithfulness to his father's mission.

That is where his sonship is most clearly seen. Jesus could perhaps be compared to Moses here. Moses was in the wilderness cut off from bread.

The bread of Egypt. They had to leave behind the bread of Egypt, not least through the celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. But they also were cut off from the bread of the land.

They could not fully enter into that. They were weaned off these things and they had to eat manna for many years. And he would hunger to enter into the land.

There is also the temptation to move beyond the mission that God had prepared for him. To go out ahead, to leave the wings of God. Now the word for the pinnacle of the temple is the wings of the temple.

This is language that is taken from, among other places, Psalm 91. The temptation in Moses case was to go straight into the land. Rather than to wait for God to lead them to the land in due time.

And finally Moses had to die. He could not enter into the land. And so he was brought onto a high mountain and he saw the land from a distance.

But he had to die. In the same way Christ has to die. Perhaps you can imagine Moses on that Nebo looking out of the land.

And just wanting to go ahead and enter into it. He had wandered for 80 years of his life. And now the promised land is tantalisingly near to his grasp.

And he is told that he can't enter into it. Jesus' response to the temptation to turn the stones into bread. Draws our mind back to Deuteronomy from which he quotes.

In chapter 8 there is the quotation concerning the manna. This weaning has to occur before they can enter into the land. And they are told that in that land they will eat bread without scarcity.

In which you will lack nothing. A land whose stones are iron. And out of whose hills you can dig copper.

So they are going to come into a land from which stones they will find life and strength. And in which they will eat bread abundantly. But for the time being they are cut off from those things.

Moses turns stone into water. Striking the rock. But then there is a further occasion where he strikes the rock when he should not have done.

And here he is judged as one of the reasons why he does not get to enter into the land. Bread is promised but submission to God's will is primary. And we can also think maybe of deeper themes.

The dead stones of the law are turned into the bread of the word. Jesus has the words of life. Had Jesus listened to the devil it would have been like fallen Adam eating from the tree of life.

Taking life but a life that is cut off from fellowship with God. The next temptation is to cast himself down from the wing of the temple. Again this refers back to Psalm 91 verse 4 and elsewhere.

The temple is sanctuary and refuge and the wing of it is God's wing that is placed over people. Jesus also talks about himself as a sanctuary later on. Talking about gathering Jerusalem's children under his wings.

And in Numbers chapter 14 the people try and escape God's wing. They want to go on ahead of God. God has told them not to enter into the land as a result of their sin.

But they try and have this premature attempt to get into the land. And in Numbers 14 they are badly beaten as a result. For Christ the temptation would be not to have to suffer the cross.

Not to have to take that route. To go away from the route that God had prepared for him. To go out from God's sheltering wings knowing that God will protect him.

And the final temptation is the high mountain. Moses was brought up onto Mount Nebo in Deuteronomy 34. And here Christ is brought up onto a high mountain.

Moses was shown the promised land. The land that he was leading the people to. Christ is shown all the kingdoms of the world.

All the kingdoms that will be given to him. This is his promised land. But as in the case of Moses, death must intervene before he gets there.

Mountains are visionary points in places like Ezekiel and Revelation. Also in the story of Abraham as he is placed on this mountain. Told to look out over the land and says all of this will be yours.

In the same way Christ stands on that mountain. And he is told by the devil all of this can be yours. All you have to do is bow down to me.

You don't actually have to go through all this work of the cross. The three temptations for Moses then is a desire for bread on human terms. A temptation to abandon the people.

It's a further thing that we see in Christ's temptation to cast himself down from the temple. He could cast himself down. He could cast himself down from the cross.

He would be protected. But he would be abandoning the people in that way. Moses has a similar temptation.

God says to him let me destroy this people and I will make a great nation of you. But yet Moses insists on staying faithful to the people. Of not letting go of them.

And in a similar way Jesus' refusal to cast himself down from the pinnacle of the temple. From the wing of the temple. Is a refusal to let the people go.

And then finally there is that temptation to enter the land prematurely. To enter into the land without passing through death. And Jesus' temptation is similar.

Jesus' answers to the temptations are taken from scripture. And they work back through Deuteronomy to the declaration of God. The Shema in chapter 6. Richard Hayes has pointed this out.

They work back from chapter 8 and then back to the beginning of chapter 6. The angels minister to him. Much as they do in chapter 26 when he wrestles in agony in the garden of Gethsemane. After the temptations are over.

The arrest of John the Baptist presents a time to transition back to Galilee. Jesus leaves Nazareth for Capernaum. We see this in Luke chapter 4. In Luke chapter 4 Jesus speaks in the synagogue in Nazareth.

And was rejected and they try and cast him down. And he goes his own way. And here he goes to Capernaum.

Matthew once again stresses that things are being fulfilled here. Isaiah chapter 9 verse 1-2 has a messianic prophecy. The first regions that were taken captive into Babylon are the first to see the light of the Messiah.

Galilee was an area with some Hellenistic cities. It was an important trade route. And it was associated with Gentiles.

And it anticipates the later mission to the Gentiles. Bear in mind all the Gentile themes that we've seen up to this point. And there's a message of repentance and the kingdom that's presented at this point.

Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He then calls two sets of brothers. Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John the sons of Zebedee.

These are two paralleled accounts. With both encounters playing much the same pattern out. The way that Jesus calls his disciples is similar to the call that we see in the case of Elisha by Elijah.

And the distinctive way he calls them is more like that of a prophet than a rabbi. He calls them in their everyday livelihood and calls them to make a break from it. And there's symbolism here.

In 1 Kings chapter 19 verses 19 following we read Elisha's call. So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat. Who was ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him.

And he was with the twelve. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him. And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said let me kiss my father and my mother and then I'll follow you.

And he said to him go back again for what have I done to you. And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him.

In a similar way Jesus calls his disciples in the act of fishing. And he calls them to make that movement from being fishers to being fishers of men. It's a calling into mission.

Elisha was called while he was with the twelve oxen. Twelve oxen that represent Israel. Here the disciples are called while they are working in fishing.

And fishing in Jeremiah chapter 16 verse 16 is associated with judgment. But it could also be associated with bringing things in from the Gentiles. Making them fishers of men is interesting because in the Old Testament the people are generally led by shepherds.

And now it's a focus upon the sea and fish. This suggests again a movement out into the

Gentile realm. Jesus' early mission is focused around the Sea of Galilee.

Now we could talk about the Lake of Gennesaret but it's called the Sea of Galilee. And that is symbolically important. Jesus' mission is going out to the Gentiles.

To those who are outside. And this movement into a sea-based mission from a mission based upon the land and pastoral ministry is an important part of this. Now Jesus probably already knew both sets of brothers.

James and John putting together pieces from the Gospels as we see the women at the cross and the way that they're described were probably Jesus' first cousins. Peter and Andrew were likely people he knew too. People he would be seeing on a fairly regular basis.

Maybe some more distant relations or at least friends. Jesus is not speaking to complete strangers here. His mission involves going throughout Galilee at this point.

Going from place to place, teaching in synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom. This language of the Gospel comes from Isaiah chapter 40, Isaiah 52 and other places. It's the good news that God is King.

That God is coming to reign. That God is returning to his people. That a new exodus is about to occur.

And he demonstrates the power of this Kingdom through healing, through exorcism and through other great acts of power. And he's followed by large crowds from places that are not just within Jewish regions but Gentile areas with significant Jewish populations too. Places like Syria and Decapolis.

A question to consider. Might there be any significance in the different acts that James and John and Simon and Andrew are doing when Jesus calls them? Matthew 5 is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. The first of five great bodies of teaching that we find within the book of Matthew.

Matthew particularly foregrounds Jesus' teaching. Mark foregrounds Jesus' acts of power. Luke, Jesus travelling on a mission and his prophetic ministry.

A number of people have seen in Matthew's five speeches a similarity with Moses' five speeches in the book of Deuteronomy. The Sermon on the Mount begins with eight Beatitudes. And these are mirrored on the other side of the book with eight woes that are given in chapter 23.

As I hope we're beginning to see, Matthew structures his book very carefully. And this development from blessings at the beginning to woes at the end is drawing upon patterns that we see in the Old Testament as well. The book of Deuteronomy, for

instance, is framed by the choice between blessings and woes.

The book of Psalms begins with a Beatitude. Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly. And then speaks about the woes of the wicked.

The book of Proverbs has a similar structure. The first nine chapters preparing you and then that choice between wisdom and folly, the blessing of the person who chooses wisdom and the woe of the person who chooses folly. This then is a structure that we've seen elsewhere in Scripture.

A moral structure for a body of teaching. The Beatitudes themselves were probably designed to be memorised. Peter Williams has observed that the first four Beatitudes all involve alliteration on the letter pi.

The sixth alliterates using kappa alpha and the fourth alliterates using delta iota. So these different Greek letters are all being used in a way that serve the task of memory. There are other parts of the Sermon on the Mount that seem to have a similar purpose.

The Lord's Prayer has poetic elements that once again seem to be designed for memorisation and repetition. There are affinities between Jesus as he's portrayed in Matthew and Moses in the Law. Jesus goes up on a mountain.

He's teaching from a mountain. He's teaching concerning the Law, much as Moses was associated with Mount Sinai and the various events upon it. Jesus ascends a mountain on various important occasions in the Gospel.

In the Temptation account, in the feeding of the five thousand, the Mount of Transfiguration, the Olivet Discourse, the Great Commission. On each of these occasions, Jesus is associated with a mountain as the site on which he's delivering a body of teaching or some significant event is happening. Another thing we might notice is that there is a movement through Israel's history in the story of Matthew.

Peter Lighthouse has argued that Matthew works through the entirety of the Old Testament, recapitulating, playing out again, the story of Israel step by step. It begins with the patriarchal era, with Abraham, with the story of Joseph leading them down into Egypt and his dreams. Then the exodus from Egypt, now Sinai.

And then there's wilderness wanderings, the 40-day period. There's the entrance into the land, the early kingdom, Solomon and the parables of the kingdom, Elijah and Elisha, Joash, Jehu, the later monarchy, Jeremiah and the prophecies that he gives. The New Covenant and the resurrection of Israel and then finally return from exile.

All of these themes are playing out in the story of Christ. Christ holds Israel within himself. So Matthew is a very carefully structured book for this reason.

We also notice things that bookend the entire narrative. So it begins with a reference to the very beginning of Genesis or to the very beginning of 1 Chronicles and ends with the final verse of 2 Chronicles being alluded to. And then there are bookended themes on either side of the book as well.

Jesus as the king of the Jews and the son of God at both ends of the book. Jesus and the Gentiles, angels and women present, Joseph and Mary at both ends, new tomb, a virgin's womb, dreams and warnings. All of these things bookend the account of Matthew.

I will also see the way that these Beatitudes mirror the woes that we find later in the book. The Beatitudes themselves may be alluding back to passages such as Isaiah chapter 61. Which is a programmatic statement for Jesus in the Gospel of Luke for instance.

To grant to those who mourn in Zion, to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes. The all of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit. That they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.

They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations. They shall repair the ruined cities, the devastation of many generations. The first of the Beatitudes ends with the words, theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And then the last of the Beatitudes, verse 10, ends with, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. These Beatitudes ultimately are about the reception of the kingdom. And they divide into two sets of four, with 36 words in both sets.

There's a structure to them as well, as we go through we might be able to see. It's important not to detach these from their historical context. The people to be blessed are not blessed because these things are effective in themselves.

Rather they're blessed because God is going to act on their behalf. We should be careful not to read the Beatitudes as if they were an implicit set of imperatives too. God isn't just saying do these sorts of things.

Note the presence of persecution for instance. Rather the point is that these are the things that characterise those people that God is going to act on behalf of. God has visited his people in Jesus Christ.

And now it's a time in which the redemption and the salvation of these people is dawning. And they can take comfort and assurance knowing that these situations that they've wrestled with, these troubles that they've experienced, these ways in which they've been persecuted and experienced, all these things against them, that these things are going to be overcome. That the kingdom of God is about to dawn in their context.

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The in spirit is a sort of qualifying phrase but there is a connection between material poverty and spiritual neediness. A connection that is clearer within the Gospel of Luke but it's important here as well.

Those people who are actually materially poor are better able to see their dependence upon God and God's goodness towards them. This may be quoting in part or alluding in part to Isaiah chapter 66 verse 2. There's the force of the present tense to this. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This is anticipating what will be given to them but it has the surety of them already possessing it now. Later on in chapter 23 Jesus will speak about those who shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. And this is characteristic of the scribes and the Pharisees.

It's the first woe and they do not have the kingdom of heaven and they keep other people out. The next beatitude is those who mourn that they will be comforted. And the emphasis upon mourning is something we've already seen in Isaiah chapter 61.

That God will comfort those who mourn. Those who mourn the sins of Zion. Those who mourn its state of being alienated from God's blessing and presence.

And in contrast to this we can see the characters of the scribes and the Pharisees in chapter 23. They devour widows' houses. So not only do they not mourn they destroy and feed and prey upon the mourners.

The next one, the meek shall inherit the earth. Once again Jesus is alluding to the Old Testament. In Psalm 37 verse 11, But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace.

This contrasts to kingdoms obtained through force of arms. And it also contrasts with the corresponding woe in chapter 23. The scribes and Pharisees travel on sea and land to make converts.

And they make him a child of hell. So rather than inheriting the earth he's become a child of hell. One who will inherit hell itself.

The next beatitude, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness shall be satisfied. Righteousness here I think is deliverance or salvation or God's will more generally. It includes personal obedience.

But I think it's more than that. It's also referring to God's action in history. It's about God setting things right.

It's about God coming on the scene and justice being established. Not just justice against

our enemies but justice in our own lives. That we would have holiness and righteousness.

That we would be people that conform to his desire for our lives. And the contrast with this is in the scribes and the Pharisees. They're swearing by the temple or the altar.

And seeing those things as less than the gift upon it. Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy. And the contrast again with the scribes and Pharisees.

They tithe mint, anise and cumin but they forget the weightier matters of the law. Justice, mercy and faithfulness. And the people who understand these weighty matters of the law.

Who show mercy to others. Who are those who forgive others. They will receive forgiveness.

And this theme is important within Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Those who forgive will be forgiven. Those who are merciful will obtain mercy.

The sixth beatitude. The pure in heart shall see God. Again these are words taken from the Old Testament.

Psalms 24 verses 3-6 Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord and who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart. Who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

Such is the generation of those who seek him. Who seek the face of the God of Jacob. There is a contrast here between true purity which is inward.

A purity of the heart. And mere outward purity. A purity that is just covering up what is truly inside.

And this again contrasts with the behaviour of the scribes and the Pharisees. And the woe that corresponds to that is that they are people who cleanse the outside of the dish only. They do not deal with the inside.

They do not deal with the situation of the heart. The seventh beatitude. Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God.

And sons of means they are people who reflect God's own character. And this is also something that is anticipating something in the future. They will be called sons of God.

God will mark them out as his own children on that great day to come. The contrast of course is with the scribes and the Pharisees who appear beautiful on the outside. But inside they are full of dead men's bones and uncleanness.

Rather than being heirs of the resurrection, people who will be marked out as the sons of God. They are people who are marked out by death rather than by life. And the eighth beatitude.

Those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. They seek God's will on earth.

And those who do so will face persecution in an unjust society. And here once again we see a clear contrast with the scribes and the Pharisees in the corresponding woe. They are the sons of those who persecuted the prophets.

And there is a shift in the final beatitude to address it to the disciples more directly. Assuring them of the fact that they will be persecuted. It's a repetition and an expansion of the eighth beatitude.

It's no longer in the third person. And Luke has all of the beatitudes in the second person. But this is in the second person.

Note the implicit parallel between for righteousness sake and on my account. This is what it means to be a person of the kingdom. It's to suffer not just for righteousness sake in general but on the account of Christ.

And this connection is a connection with Jesus and his disciples and the prophetic tradition. They persecuted the prophets like this. They are going to persecute the followers of Christ like this.

And again in chapters 23 and 25 there are associations between the disciples and the prophets. The disciples are told that they are salt and light in the world. They are told that they are these things not how to become them.

And the strength of the statement is important. You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. This is the calling that was given to Israel and it is being fulfilled in them as the true Israel.

The children of Abraham were to be like sand and like stars. And now they are like salt and light corresponding things. Many people have wondered what the salt means here.

Some have pointed to the fact that salt preserves things. Others have pointed out the way that salt can be a way of destroying land. As we see in places like Deuteronomy chapter 29 verses 22 to 23.

Salt is also associated with sacrifice in Leviticus 2 verse 13 and Mark 9. Salt gives savour like a sort of solid fire that we feel upon our lips. And we are told in Colossians 4 verse 5 to have speech seasoned with salt. And the contrast is between tasteless salt and salt with saltiness.

Salt can't salt itself. Salt is salt for something else. And there is a vision of righteousness here I think.

There is a righteousness that is redemptive and outgoing rather than just a self-focused righteousness. A righteousness that is just about our personal standing without concern for others. This is something that we see throughout the Sermon on the Mount.

True righteousness is not self-focused. It is a righteousness that goes out into the world that seeks to serve and to bless others. Salt has numerous purposes and perhaps what we are supposed to see here is something of those multitude of purposes represented in the calling of the people of God.

The danger however is if we lose this purpose, if we neglect it, we will risk being trampled underfoot. Israel as it rejects Christ becomes like salt that lost its savour. And the result is being trampled underfoot.

That language I think alluding in part perhaps to military occupation that later occurs. Once again Jesus is drawing upon the language of the Old Testament. These are things that we see in the book of Isaiah.

In chapter 42 verse 6, And then in chapter 49 verse 6, These are the people in whom God is working out his purpose in the world. In the preceding chapter we've had a description of Christ as a light dawning. And here we see that theme applied to the church in its calling.

Jerusalem was the city set on a hill. We are supposed to be like a city set on a hill as Christ's disciples. The lamp may be connected to that of the temple as well.

The disciples are to display light to the world. They bring things to light. They also cause people to glorify God.

Much of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount will be concerned with the status and the keeping of the Torah, the law. And Christ begins by insisting upon his fulfillment rather than abolition of the law of the prophets. The law and the prophets refer to the entirety of the Old Testament scriptures.

Christ fulfills the prophetic intent and the content of the law and the prophets. Realizing what the law itself did not yet achieve. The law and the prophets are not abolished but fulfilled and accomplished.

They reach their intended destination. They are not merely reaffirmed or reissued. The truth and the divine authority of the law and the prophets are underlined.

But in a way that reveals them to be transfigured in Christ. Their fulfillment is not just their perpetual continuance but about their arrival at the intended destination. And his

statement makes clear that the law and prophets were never a static and timeless body of revelation.

But were always straining forward towards something yet to be revealed and fulfilled. The written law is a creation but even its smallest elements have the same sort of continuance as heaven and earth themselves. Note the parallels between heaven and earth and the law in places such as Psalm 19.

The fulfillment of the law can then lead to a transformed relationship with and way of living out the law. We can see indications of this within Jesus' teaching that follows. The mission of the law is fulfilled in Christ.

The law dies and rises again and then the law can be lived out in a new way. The law retains authority in the kingdom as we see in verse 19. This presumes that the law remains in force in some sense in the time of the kingdom.

There is a symmetry between the way that teachers handle the law and the way that they will be treated in the kingdom. Jesus' project then is not a liberalizing one but one that places immense weight upon the authority of the word of the law. And Jesus here discusses greatness in the kingdom.

The next verse he speaks of entrance into the kingdom which will only be enjoyed by those whose righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees. And the righteousness in view here I don't think is the righteousness of Christ imputed to our account. But it's concrete conduct that contrasts with the hypocrisy of the scribes and the Pharisees.

As Jesus' teaching continues we will see what this transformed behaviour looks like. What it looks like to fulfil the law in the proper way and how Christ has made this possible. A question to consider.

Jesus uses the expression here I have come. And this is found elsewhere in the gospels. It's found also in reference to other figures that speak of their having come to do this or that or the other.

A number of people have seen in this terminology an expression of Christ's pre-existence. That he has come not just as a prophet, not just as someone who has a particular limited mission but as one who has come from heaven itself. How might we find support for that position within the gospels more generally and in other instances of this expression? In the second half of Matthew chapter 5 Jesus continues the teaching that he has begun in his statement that he has come to fulfil the law and the prophets.

And this part particularly concerns the fulfilment of the law. Jesus goes through the second table of the ten words, the ten commandments. Going through murder, lust which is connected with the seventh commandment concerning adultery.

Divorce which in the unpacking of the ten commandments in Deuteronomy in chapter 24 is connected with the eighth commandment. Oaths which are connected with false witness. Vengeance connected with the tenth commandment.

And then finally focusing upon the summary statement of the whole second table of the commandments concerning loving your neighbour as yourself. How are we to understand Jesus' teaching concerning the law? It's often treated as a set of antitheses with Jesus contrasting his more radical teaching with that of Moses. Moses is supposedly concerned with external action but Jesus highlights the internal reality of the law.

And many Protestants have suggested that Jesus is radicalising the law in order to drive us to despair of our good works and to turn to Christ for the gift of righteousness. But I don't think that's what's going on here. Against the suggestion that there is an internal external opposition Jesus typically focuses upon action.

Not merely upon an inner state. Jesus is calling for integrity. The marriage of internal and external.

But he focuses upon particular proactive practices of righteousness by which we can pursue these things. To understand what is going on I think it's important to see the logic of Jesus' argument. It's generally read as antitheses.

Jesus says that the law teaches X but I say Y. Y is some more radicalised teaching of the law that internalises it or puts it beyond our reach. But that doesn't seem to be what Jesus is doing here in Matthew. Indeed if we read it this way it can often make some of the interpretations very clumsy.

Jesus does not give a prohibition much of the time but states a fact. So there's another way to read it. The other way to read it is to think that Jesus is presenting the traditional teaching.

He is then highlighting a vicious cycle associated with that teaching. And then finally presenting his transformative initiative. And so what Jesus is presenting here is filling out what he means by a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

So it addresses the internal state. But it does so in a proactive external manner. Not just ordered around avoidance.

Another thing to notice here is the authority with which Jesus is speaking. I say unto you he's speaking with authority. Not just as one who's making a theological argument.

But as one who's speaking and addressing people with authority. Making a claim upon their practice. So the first teaching concerns murder.

The traditional teaching is you shall not murder. But there's a vicious cycle here. And the

vicious cycle is being angry with and insulting your brother.

Now when that is at root within your heart it would be very hard to avoid that coming out in various ways that actually take the form of violence. And so what Jesus teaches is a response to the vicious cycle that fulfills the traditional teaching. And that response is a transforming initiative.

And it's found in being a reconciler and making peace. And this is where the imperatives are found. Not in addressing it to the heart in a way that radicalises it.

But in addressing positive action to the problem. Jesus identifies the problem of unaddressed sin in the heart. This is a seed that can grow into the sin of murder.

Now think about the story of Cain. Before Cain actually kills his brother something else happens. He's angry with his brother.

And it's that anger that leads him to act. And God stops him. He stops him and he addresses his anger.

Says you need to deal with this. There's a beast crouching at the door. And if you do not deal with it it will seek to control you.

And so he has to deal with that anger first. Now how would Cain have dealt with that? By making peace with his brother straight away. By being a reconciler.

By taking positive action in that way. Because as long as he did not do that the sin within his heart would fester. So what is Jesus' alternative to the problem of this vicious cycle of anger within the heart? To Cain leave your gift at the altar.

Be reconciled with Abel. And as you are reconciled you'll find that that anger problem is dealt with. The response is proactive reconciliation and peacemaking.

And this again note is acting redemptively. This is not just a righteousness for our own sake. A righteousness to get us merit before God or for God to look on us and approve of us.

This is about acting within the world in God's name to bring peace. To bring reconciliation. To bring love where hatred and animosity used to exist.

To overcome hostility with forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus then moves into teaching concerning lust. The traditional teaching is you shall not commit adultery.

But there is a vicious cycle here. Because if you look at a woman with lustful intent you've already harboured that sin of adultery in your heart. And it's already at work.

It's already germinating. It's already moving towards the surface to be expressed in

dangerous ways. And so what is the alternative? The alternative is a transforming initiative of taking radical action to address the cause of the temptation in yourself.

Now sexual immorality Jesus highlights is a sin of great seriousness. It puts your entire body in jeopardy of hell. And the alternative is to sacrifice members of your body so that the whole will not be lost.

This is a focus upon the man's duty in this case. It's not denying that women should not purposefully excite men's lust. But Jesus is focusing upon the agency of the man here.

It's very easy to blame other people for our sins. To say the woman that you gave me or something like that. But the point that Jesus wants us to grasp is that we have within the realm of our own responsibility causes of sin that are far more immediate to us.

So Jesus uses hyperbole here. The focus is upon changing practice. Cut out whatever it is that is causing you to engage in that sort of sin.

Cut out certain contexts from your life. Avoid certain persons. Sacrifice certain things and pleasures and activities that you may find yourself led into temptation in.

Jesus' focus is upon intimate obstacles. Your own eye or your own hand. It highlights just how unsparing we should be in rooting out the sin.

But Jesus' emphasis on causes of sin is no less important. Some people like to believe that sin is merely a matter of a lack of virtue. But Jesus teaches here that we need to recognise our own weakness and remove things that tempt us.

To get rid of the obstacles that might stand in our way. So when you see yourself falling into the trap of the sin of adultery and lust, what do you do? You deal with those things that are nearest to you. You recognise your own limitations and you take radical action.

Now Jesus is teaching here in part that we need to use wisdom in our struggle with sin. We need to recognise those things that give sin some sort of purchase upon us in our lives. Some sort of power over us.

And deal with those little footholds that sin has in our lives radically and decisively. Jesus goes on to teach about divorce. He presents the traditional teaching in the vicious cycle but not the transforming initiative here.

What is the transforming initiative? Well I think we find it in 1 Corinthians 7 verses 10-11. Where Paul presents a transforming initiative as the charge of Christ himself. He writes, To the married I give this charge, not I, but the Lord.

The wife should not separate from her husband. But if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And the husband should not divorce his wife.

What's the point of all of this? Well the point is not so much a sort of halachic teaching concerning divorce. What cases is it legitimate in, what cases is it not legitimate in. The point is not legalistic prohibition but rather a presentation of the way of the kingdom.

Which restores and upholds the good intent of the original creation. So the contrast is between legal permission and positive action. So you may have permission to divorce in this particular instance.

But as those committed to the way of the kingdom, your duty is to seek reconciliation where at all possible. To heal wounds, not to allow these things to be undermined. God created marriage to be good and to be lasting.

And so the way of the kingdom is to pursue that. And even when it's difficult to seek reconciliation above all else. Jesus moves on to oaths.

The traditional teaching is do not swear falsely but perform your oaths. Now there's a vicious cycle here. Oath making, particularly in a context of deceit and manipulation, simply multiplies and becomes a means of falsehood.

You can see this in Matthew chapter 23. The different escape routes that you could have for oaths. What oaths count and what oaths do not count.

All of this is a way of avoiding truthful speech. But the transforming initiative is to avoid oaths altogether. And to engage in truthful and transparent speech.

Is this ruling out oaths under any particular situation? No it's not. There are plenty of oaths seen in the New Testament. Paul makes a number of oaths.

Rather the point is to address the root problem which is of falsehood. When people who have been so used to speaking falsehood use oaths to bolster speech to give it some sort of credibility when it really has none. And I presume many of you have met people who are like this.

Who just compulsively speak falsehood. And then because everyone knows them to be liars they will bring forward all these oaths to bolster words that are fundamentally empty. They will swear upon their children's lives.

They will swear upon their parents graves. They will swear by God. They will swear against hell.

They will swear against all these different things. And then you find that their words have no substance to them. And the oaths are provoked simply in order to bolster something that has no substance.

And Jesus is speaking a transforming initiative into this situation. That we should be people of truthful, forthright and transparent speech so we do not need oaths at all. And

so that when we do use an oath it's used in its proper way.

Not to veil falsehood or to bolster words that are fundamentally empty but to accentuate truth. And this is something that we see it used to do in the New Testament. From oaths Jesus moves on to the subject of retaliation.

And the traditional teaching is the law of retribution. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But the problem is there is a vicious cycle here.

And that's resisting by evil means. Now this is translated as do not resist the one who is evil in most translations. But I think that's not capturing the true sense of what's being said here.

The point is rather that we should not resist in an evil way. What is the transforming initiative? The law of retribution was designed to limit vengeance. To prevent people from taking two eyes when they lost one.

Jesus advocates resisting vengeance but accepting rather than giving the second slap. Arresting the process of vengeance before it ever gets started. When people use the process of vengeance often what happens is it just spirals out of all control.

And the point of the traditional teaching was to arrest the process of vengeance. Not to give warrant to it. And so Jesus teaches that we should arrest it before it ever begins.

Think of the teaching in John chapter 8 where Jesus draws attention to the person who cast the first stone. Once the first stone has been cast every successive stone is so much easier to cast. And a similar pattern can be seen in the case of vengeance.

Once one person has avenged themselves upon someone else that other person will seek vengeance in return. And as a result you have these cycles of vengeance that just cannot be broken. And just as Jesus teaches that we are to be people who make peace and reconcile with others.

That we are to be people who remove any obstacle to faithfulness. That we are to be people who speak truthfully and reconcile when there is division in our relationships. Jesus teaches here that we should prevent the development of a cycle of vengeance.

The final teaching that Jesus gives in this chapter concerns loving your enemy. Now the traditional teaching is love your neighbour. This is the teaching that sums up the entire second table of the law.

Love your neighbour as yourself. But attached to this in many people's mind is the teaching love your neighbour but hate your enemy. Or the question who is my neighbour? This person isn't my neighbour is he? And Jesus challenges that.

The transforming initiative is to love your enemies and pray for them. So that you may

be like God in heaven. That you may be sons of your father in heaven.

Jesus has earlier declared blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God. And here he is stressing that teaching again. Once again there is a vicious cycle.

There is no reward for those who merely love those who love them. That's not true love. True love must take the initiative.

And once again we are seeing the characteristic of this true righteousness. Is a righteousness that takes the initiative, that goes out, that brings peace, that restores things that are broken. That brings reconciliation, that seeks to be reconciled with people we are divided from.

That seeks to root out any obstacle, anything that might cause bitterness. That seeks to deal with sin in a radical way. It's that pursuit of righteousness that distinguishes the true people of God from the scribes and the Pharisees and their hypocrisy.

And this is the righteousness that will fulfil the law. This is the way in which we truly love our neighbour. This is the way in which we rise to perfection.

Now the use of the language of perfection here is referring to maturity. We fulfil the intent of the law, not merely the external form. Now the external form of the law can be fulfilled in a legalistic way.

But the intent of the law had always been to bring new life. To bring delight to the heart in the law of God. To bring people to meditate and rejoice at God's judgements.

To bring them to express those judgements in healing practice. In ways that restore relationships, that make things whole again. And ways that bring peace where there's conflict.

Now that is what it means to fulfil the law. And this is the sort of practice that Jesus calls his disciples to. This is how they will be perfect.

This is how they will be like their Father who is in heaven. This is the way of the kingdom. Jesus began by saying that he came to fulfil the law.

As we go throughout the Old Testament, the law is always straining towards a fuller expression of itself. An expression that is truly from the heart. That is characterised by positive practice, not just negative prohibitions.

We see this in the Psalms. The Psalms bring the law into song. So we delight in the law of God.

We sing about it. It's seen in the book of Deuteronomy when the laws are unpacked. And we see wisdom within them.

And we see the way in which they're leading us towards positive practices. So we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. That's what the law was always pointing towards.

Not just prohibitions. Likewise, we fulfil things like not coveting by practising thanksgiving, practising contentment and generosity. And so when Jesus speaks about fulfilling the law, he's not speaking about some cold legalism.

But the fresh, clear air of a new liberated life. A life that's free to express the law of God from the heart by the Spirit. And this is what he's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

This is what God's righteousness looks like when it comes. It brings forgiveness. And it brings restoration.

And it makes us part of that process of bringing forgiveness and restoration. We are part of the means by which God's righteousness is being expressed in the world. And the fact that this chapter ends on the note of being perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

And being sons of our Father is no accident. That language is not common in the Old Testament at all. We see it from time to time.

But it is uncommon. Here we find it coming to the forefront. And it's because God is acting through Christ in the world at this time in a way that forms people in his likeness.

That makes them participants in bringing a new order of peace in such a profound way that in those acts they are seen to be his children. A question to consider. As we read the description of what it looks like to fulfil the law, our minds may be drawn to Jesus Christ himself and his practice.

What are some of the ways in which we see Jesus as the exemplar of what it looks like to live out the law and fulfil righteousness in this manner? In Matthew chapter 6 Jesus is continuing the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. And his teaching is about the distinct forms of morality, worship and social relations that should characterize his disciples as they are to be salt and light in the world. This is the sort of righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

He's already discussed the law and its commands, particularly the second table of the law. And now he moves to discuss Christian forms of religious practice. Jesus' disciples are supposed to behave in a way that bears witness to the truth of God and the kingdom.

And there's a repeated contrast between them and the hypocrites who act to be seen by men. That language of hypocrisy originally comes from the world of the theatre. But it had already been adopted by Jewish teachers to refer to moral pretense.

They are hypocrites because they are ungodly, yet trying to project an image of godliness to other men with whom they are really concerned. What really matters to them is how they appear to other men, not how they are in relationship to God. They give little thought to God's judgment, but a great deal of thought to the judgment and approval of other men.

It's important to notice that Jesus is not primarily concerned with motivation here. His instructions are not about the realm of motivation, avoid bad motives for actions. But rather it's about concrete and specific approaches to action.

The change in our manner of approaching the action will impact our motivations, but it is not directly aimed at them. So you can see in Jesus' calls he's giving concrete changes of action. And they're far harder to dodge than challenges to our motivations alone.

It's very easy to say, don't do these things to be applauded by other people. It's a lot more challenging to starve the desire for applause. Because we can very easily hide our desire for applause in different ways to ourselves.

We are practiced at deceiving ourselves concerning our true motivations. The best way to reveal our truest motivations is to begin to starve bad motivations by changing practice. So the wisdom and practicality of Jesus' teaching at such points should stand out to us.

He recognises that those who desire the praise of men are driven by that motivation to particular forms of practice. To the broadcasting or even the trumpeting of their righteousness before men. And so by forbidding the broadcasting, the motivation itself is starved.

By instructing his disciples to pursue their righteousness in secret, the conditions are created for the nurturing of different motivations. So Jesus is not generally focused upon disputing his contemporaries' understanding of the content of ethical practice. So much as their hypocritical behaviour and the manner of their piety.

He's not saying that we shouldn't do charitable deeds or that the charitable deeds that these people are doing are completely misguided. Rather it's the way that they're approaching them. A way of approaching them that is completely focused upon how they appear to other men.

And that's often how we approach our righteousness. We want to be seen by other people. We want to be seen as morally upstanding.

To gain social status through these things. In these teachings Jesus is continuing the triadic logic. The logic of the traditional teaching or practice, the vicious cycle and then the transforming initiative.

Jesus begins by speaking about the manner in which we should practice our righteousness. And that statement is the heading for the teachings that follow. Concerning almsgiving first, then prayer, then fasting.

And Jesus takes it for granted that all these things will be part of the continued practice of his disciples. As people rooted in the Jewish tradition, it would be expected that they would continue its core religious practices. The first form of righteousness in view is acts of almsgiving to the needy.

In the first century there were established structures of relief and support for the poor. Depending upon the tithe for the poor and voluntary contributions. And Jesus describes a hyperbolic situation where almsgivers sound a trumpet before them.

To broadcast their practice to others in order to be praised by them. And such people do get the reward that they seek. But it's a paltry reward.

They do not realise just how great the prospect of being rewarded by our Father in Heaven is. Note that Jesus is quite happy to present rewards as a fitting motivation. But it depends what rewards we're seeking.

The alternative transforming practice is almsgiving that is so secret that your left hand can be completely unaware of the actions of the right. And note Jesus using body-member language here again. Like in his teaching concerning lust.

The you here is singular in contrast to the plurality of the hypocrites. Their religiosity occurs in the realm of the social spectacle. Whereas ours should be in the presence of God alone.

Religious practice easily gets conscripted into the activities of social display. Used to broadcast our virtue, to mark out with whom we are associated and whom we are distanced from etc. And the practice of Christian faith before the world can so often and easily be hijacked by a desire to win the applause and the approval of certain people.

We want to make clear that we hold the right political and social and ideological views. But can give relatively little thought to the approval of God. The danger of this is quite acute within an age of social media.

We should be mindful of the fact that Jesus gives a lot of attention to the context of our action here. And the way that different contexts can encourage virtue or vice. The danger so often is that we want to project an image of our relationship with God.

Designed to maintain and manage our relationship with others. And there is such a danger here in the realm of spectacle. When we're seen by others, everything that we do will be an action that is performed not just for its own ends, but for how it is perceived by those people around us.

Which is why Jesus challenges this at the very root. From almsgiving Jesus moves on to discuss prayer. The hypocrites love to be seen and heard in the act of prayer.

But Jesus' followers must not be like that. Jesus' encouragement of secret prayer is not a denial of the place for corporate prayer, but an emphasis upon orientation. The designed audience for our prayers should be God alone.

And we should think maybe here of Jesus' own practice of secret prayer. In the next teaching Jesus gives concerning prayer, the contrast is not between his disciples and the hypocrites, but between them and the Gentiles. The people who are religious outsiders who are not God-fearers presumably as well.

Their prayers are characterised by meaningless babbling and much speaking. And often this can be a way of gesticulating at God with our words, hoping that God will notice us. Treating prayer as a magical and somewhat mechanical thing, rather than as communication and turning our hearts towards our Father in Heaven.

The prayer that Jesus gives is condensed and focused. The words are very few, but they're to the point. We're not, in this case, verbally gesticulating at God to get his attention.

His eye is already upon us. He's aware of our needs. Rather, prayer is a turning of our hearts towards God.

Now we know from the early church that the Lord's Prayer was used in daily prayer from very early on. The Didache refers to praying it three times daily. The poetic form of the prayer suggests also that it was designed for memorisation and non-mechanical, mentally and spiritually engaged repetition.

The form of the prayer suggests not merely a model prayer, and it is a model prayer, but a specific prayer that is given to us that we should pray this as an alternative to the prayer practice of the Gentiles. And there's a structure to the prayer as well. It begins with the address, Our Father in Heaven, and then moves into three You petitions, followed by three We petitions.

And the things that are forefront are the Name, the Kingdom, and the Will of God. The address is to Our Father in Heaven. And perhaps more than anything else, what comes into strong focus in this chapter and the end of the previous chapter is the Fatherhood of God.

There are ten references to God as our Father in verses 1 to 18 of Matthew 6. And in the Old Testament, there is recognition of God as Father, but it is so much rarer. You don't see it very often. It really comes into clearer focus in the New Testament, particularly through Christ's own relationship with his Father.

And we can see the way it comes into the foreground at times of redemption as well, the language of God as our Father. There is a danger of over-intimatizing the language of Father. Many have seen in the language of Abba, for instance, the concept Daddy.

Whereas this does not seem to be the proper sense of the term Abba. The other thing we should notice here is that God is spoken of as Our Father, not My Daddy. That language can often suggest the child's relationship with the Father when they're about four or five years old.

Whereas in Scripture, the emphasis is upon the Son as a grown adult. The Son is the one who represents the Father in the world. The Son is the one who does the Father's work.

The Son is the one who is given a bride by the Father. The Son is the one who bears the name of the Father and stands for the Father. The Son is the one who will inherit all that the Father has.

The Son is the one who bears the image of his Father. And in all these ways, we need to shift our understanding to think of the Son as an adult. And when we're praying this prayer, we're praying it not as infants or young children in the house of God, our Father, so much as as adults who are working and acting in his name.

As we go out and we act in the world in this way of saving righteousness, the way that has been described in the previous chapter, we will be marked out as the sons of God. That's what will mark us out, not as those who are just passively receiving the love of our Father, but as those who are acting and working and expressing a saving, transforming, healing righteousness in his name. As those who work with our Father, we are identified as his children.

This does not mean there's no place for the concept of childlike dependency upon God and a sense of God as the good giver, who's as a Father giving to his young child, who shows care to give what's good for the child. That is all there in the New Testament. But that needs to be held alongside these other images that foreground an adult child relating to their father.

Another important thing about father language is it refers to the other party in a way that reminds them of their relationship with us. It calls upon them to act in the light of that fact. It calls God to recognize us as his children calling to him for aid and to act on our behalf.

In Isaiah chapter 63, for instance, we read in verse 15 following, Our Redeemer from of old is your name. O Lord, why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our heart so that we fear you not? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage. Your holy people held possession for a little while.

Our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. We have become like those over

whom you have never ruled, like those who are not called by your name. Now the point here is we bear the name of God.

We are those who are his children. And so when we call to him as father, we are calling him to act accordingly. The first petition of the prayer expresses the desire that God's name be hallowed.

We see God's concern for the holiness of his name in places such as Ezekiel 36. God says, But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, These are the people of the Lord. And yet they had to go out of his land.

But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God, It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them.

And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. As passages like this make clear, the call for God to hallow his name is not just a statement of fact. The petition is not just saying, your name is a holy name.

But it's a desire that God act in the world to display the holiness of his name through action. God is ultimately the one who will hallow his own name. The second petition calls for God's eschatological kingdom or reign to come, his reign that he will bring in at the end.

For God's rule to be seen in the situations of history. The third petition calls for God's will to be done on earth as in heaven. This is a redemptive righteousness.

The pattern of heaven worked out in the earth. We can think about ourselves as lightbearers, reflecting the light of heaven itself, and bearing that light out into the world. And we should see that each one of these first three petitions are practicing us in the posture of longing for God's action and calling for God's action in history.

For hungering and thirsting after his righteousness. All of this is about conforming us to God's will, teaching us to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. And the fourth petition turns to our need for bread.

Perhaps an allusion to manna, our daily bread. A recognition of our utter dependence upon God for our daily sustenance and our immediate provision. We receive all of the good things of the world as a constant gift.

And there's a recognition here of a hand behind our own human providence. We may prepare our food, but ultimately that food comes from God himself. The fifth petition speaks of forgiving debts.

The new covenant involved the general release from Israel's debt as the nation was forgiven its sins. I've already spoken about the importance of Isaiah chapter 61 as a background. The year of the Lord's favour as the year of Jubilee.

And there is a reciprocal element to this. We request forgiveness as we have forgiven others. As Jesus goes on to stress immediately after the prayer, if we do not forgive others, we ourselves will not be forgiven.

This means that we need to live as those who have remitted all debts. Even the debts of gratitude and compensation that we may believe that people or God owe us. We live as people who relinquish the claims of those types.

We put ourselves in the hands of God and in our neighbours. And all the demands of the ego that we place upon people and upon God must be relinquished. As people who depend upon God's giving and his forgiving, we can give up our claims upon others.

God is the guarantor of all our debts. As Paul can say, my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in Christ Jesus. As his response to the charity that other people gave to him.

He recognises that God is the one who backs up all his debts. The other thing that we can see here is that God makes us participants in his giving and forgiving process. When we think about the Old Testament Exodus for instance, God brought his people out of Egypt but also gave them the calling to give rest to their servants.

To be people who gave rest to others, who extended the principle of Exodus and of Sabbath to the people who worked for them. Now we're supposed to do that as well. We have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit as the church but we've been given that in a way that God makes us participants in his giving process.

We are those who exercise spiritual gifts that represent the one spiritual gift that has been given to the whole church. Now as we exercise those gifts, we participate in that one gift but we also become participants in the giving process. And in the same way if we're not actually forgiving, we're not truly participating in the release from sins and all these other things that the kingdom has brought in.

We're trying to stand with one foot in and one foot out of the kingdom and that's just impossible. To participate in the life of the kingdom is to become an active participant in the life of the kingdom. Someone who's extending its forgiveness and its grace to others.

The final petition is a prayer for deliverance from the time of testing and the evil one. We

can think of Jesus' own experience in the wilderness. He was led up by the spirit into the wilderness.

And that testing is one in which he's led by the spirit into temptation. And we recognise our limitations. We are people who are weak, sinful human beings who are fallible and flawed in a great many ways.

And we know that if we are brought into the utmost testing, we'll fail. And so we pray that God will keep us from the utmost testing. That he'll keep us from the time of tribulation.

And this is something that Christ does for his disciples. He takes the tribulation upon himself so that they can be released. These are extreme situations where our faith will be tested to breaking point.

And so we pray to be delivered from those things and from the evil one. Some manuscripts conclude the prayer with a doxology. As do many of the ways in which we pray it within the life of the church.

We can see an example of such doxology in 1 Chronicles 29. This is the sort of statement with which you might end a prayer. Jesus concludes this section by teaching concerning fasting.

There's a sort of ironic reversal here where Jesus teaches us to anoint our head and wash our face. So that we might be seen by others to be in really good health and radiant and happy. Whereas in fact we're fasting in relationship to our God who is in secret.

And he will see us and reward us. The reversal is the hypocrites were very concerned to put on a mask to be seen by others. To be very pious.

To be those who engage in fasting, almsgiving etc. Whereas in some sense we're engaged as a different sort of hypocrite. We're wearing a mask but our mask is designed to cover up the fact that we are fasting.

We will always do our actions toward an audience. But we are really concerned that the actions that we do are towards the right audience. And that audience must be God himself.

The more that we do our actions in a way that's seen by other people. The more we will find the gravity of that audience. Drawing us away from the audience to whom we should truly be acting.

God himself. A question to consider. In this section Jesus pays a lot of attention to concrete practice and context.

To things like where we pray. To how we look when we fast. To the words that we use

when we say our prayers.

And to things such as the context in which we exercise our charity. What are some of the contexts in our lives that we may need to step away from. As they draw us into the activity of performing to others rather than performing to God.

Where do we find the secret place where we can address God in secret? What are some of the ways in which we can anoint our heads and wash our faces. So that we do not appear to be fasting to men. How can we perform a righteousness that is driven by the desire to please God above all others.

At the end of Matthew chapter 6 Jesus continues his teaching about what it looks like to live in a way that fulfills righteousness. Jesus' teaching here is similar to that of Solomon. What we see in Solomon is wisdom unpacking the logic of the law.

Seeing the deeper ways in which the principles of the law can be expressed and lived out. He's recognising shrewd ways that we can conform ourselves to it. Once again Jesus recognises that motives don't float free.

But they can be moved in different ways by material situations and conditions. And there's a problem that we face. The problem is all the things that we invest in on this earth are things that can fade.

Things that can fail. Things that can be lost. And that can be corroded or rusted or tarnished.

And this is similar to what we see in the book of Ecclesiastes. As Solomon reflects upon the fact that even if this person builds up this great wealth through wisdom. They may end up leaving it to someone who's a fool and will swander it.

Or bad luck can hit them. Or they may find that all their wisdom comes to naught in some other way. The alternative then is to invest your resources in something that will last.

Something that will endure. And those are spiritual treasures. The other thing that he notices here that he highlights in his teaching is that the heart will tend to follow your resources.

Where your treasure is there your heart will be also. And there's a logic to that statement that isn't merely condemning the building up of treasures on earth. It's also calling us to invest our resources in things that will last in the things of heaven.

The point that Jesus is making is do you want your heart to be set upon the things of heaven? Well invest your resources, invest your money in the things of heaven. This is similar to some of the things that Jesus has been teaching earlier in this chapter. Do you

want to care about what God thinks over what your neighbour thinks and what the crowd thinks? Well then make sure to perform your prayer in a secret place where only God can see.

And not in front of the audience of your neighbour. You'll perform to whatever audience you have. And so perform to an audience that is of God alone.

And then you'll find that that is the audience that you set your heart upon conforming to and pleasing. Put your money where you want your heart to be. And where it is not vulnerable to loss.

And where it won't place your heart in the same jeopardy of loss. Jesus has already used the imagery of the lamp to describe his disciples. And now he uses it to describe the eye.

We can speak about things like the apple of our eyes, the thing that we are focused upon or cherish above all else. The eye orients the body. It turns the head which moves the entire body in turn.

If your eye is set upon the light then your entire body will be affected by that. However if your eye is set upon that which is evil it will be very different. In Matthew there seems to be a particular meaning that has a bit more of an idiomatic flavour.

And it's concerned particularly with generosity. In Matthew chapter 20 verse 15 we encounter this expression again where the master says to the labourers in the vineyard. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? Or more literally, is your eye bad because I am good? The contrast between the good and the bad eye might be the contrast between a generous person who looks out and sees people to whom to give.

And the envious person who turns green when they see anything that they want that the other possesses. Now that is a way in which we deal with the sins connected with money. Do we have a good eye? Do we have an eye that's fixated upon helping other people? Or are we people that are focused on what we can gain for ourselves and what we envy of our neighbours? Jesus continues to teach about the dangers of money.

Mammon or money can become a master. Our powers place us under their power very easily without us realising what's going on. Our liberties can take liberties with us.

Our technologies can render us subject to them. We think that the economy makes us rich but we can often find ourselves enslaved to its continual growth. It preoccupies our attention.

We become fixated upon it. We can think about similar things with new technologies which promise to make us free and give us all these new powers and yet we find ourselves enslaved to our devices. We're not actually freed by them.

They take us away from things that are good. And so in the same way money can become a master over us if we're not careful. There is a danger of focusing upon ideas and motivations and not being sufficiently attentive to things.

Money itself, not just our motives concerning money, but money itself is a dangerous trap and we need to be very wary of how we relate to it. Treated shrewdly it can be good. Treated foolishly it can entangle us in all sorts of evil and bondage.

Like Solomon, Jesus draws attention to the creatures and God's concern with and provision for them. Once again the issue is our attitude to material possessions and provisions. We are to adopt a posture of dependency upon God for our daily needs.

Worry is far more likely to diminish our life than to extend or fill it. There is relief to be found in a reminder of the limits of our power. This isn't a denial of the value of prudence and provision for ourselves, but it's a spiritual posture to be adopted, with anxiety being the alternative.

And there's a connection with the prayer for daily bread here, the contrast between worry and faith. Jesus will return to some of these themes in the parable of the sower, where the concerns of this age and the worries of this age can choke their seed, the deceit of wealth. All of these things are obstacles for our pursuit of the kingdom.

What is our priority? It should be the seeking of the kingdom and God's righteousness. Everything else must be secondary. The kingdom alone is where we will ultimately find security.

A question to consider. Where in this section is Jesus picking up themes from the book of Ecclesiastes? Look back at the book of Ecclesiastes and see some of the parallels between its teaching and Jesus' teaching here. Matthew chapter 7 concludes the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount.

It begins with a warning against judgment. Judge not, lest you be judged. And with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

This draws our attention back immediately to earlier statements within the Sermon on the Mount. For instance, in verse 7 of chapter 5, Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. And in chapter 6 verses 14 to 15, For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. There is another form of this statement found in Luke chapter 7 verses 37 and 38. Judge not, and you will not be judged.

Condemn not, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you.

Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. This statement might make us think of other parts of scripture.

For instance, Deuteronomy chapter 19 verses 18 to 21, concerning hostile false witnesses. The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness, and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you.

Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. With the measure you meet, it shall be measured to you.

We might also be put in mind of Romans chapter 2 verse 1. Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another, you condemn yourself. Because you, the judge, practice the very same things.

The point of Jesus' teaching here is not that we should not make moral judgments, but that we should not play the judge. Because in so doing, we are taking God's place. And in James chapter 2 verses 12-13, we see it's referring to condemnation in particular.

That act of casting sentence upon someone else. So speak, and so act, as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy.

Mercy triumphs over judgment. Judgment must ultimately wait until the final end. Vengeance and judgment in their final forms belong to God, not to us.

And when we assume the task of condemning others and judging others, we put ourselves in God's place. And there's a highlighting of hypocrisy here as well. It's emphasised that the person who is judging is guilty of the same things that they are judging in others.

We might think of the story of Nathan and David after the sin of David with Bathsheba. You are the man. You are condemning in this other person what is actually in yourself.

It focuses upon the eye. The prominence of the eye in the body is important. It's a means of perception and it's a means of judgment.

And Jesus teaches about the danger of those without perception leading others. The blind leading the blind. It seems to me that Jesus is primarily referring to relationships among his own disciples.

That this is not the way that we should relate to others, placing ourselves in the position of the judge over them. They belong to another master, not to us, and they will be

accountable to that master. That doesn't mean we don't make moral judgments.

We just don't place ourselves in the position of the judge over other people. We must also sort out our own lives first. There's a danger when we become people who are always blaming some other parties, always pointing the finger, always saying you are guilty of this or that or the other.

That accusatory you can often be a way of displacing our own responsibility. That we blame upon others what we fail to address in ourselves. And by pointing outwards and by judging others, we avoid reckoning with our own sins.

We try and place other people's sins in the worst possible light so that we feel better about the unaddressed sins in our own lives. The teaching that Jesus moves onto from this is a particularly difficult one. What is meant by not giving dogs what is holy and not throwing your pearls before pigs? It's a very strange statement.

It seems to me however that it's referring primarily to Israel's relationship with the Gentiles. The dogs are the unclean animals, they're related to the Gentiles and the pigs likewise. They're throwing holy things before these animals that represent the Gentiles.

And I think that refers particularly to the way that Israel was tempted at that point in history to put its trust and its faith in the Romans. To look to them for security and by keeping on their right side to find strength and ability to stand against whatever is assaulting them. In the book of John we see this quite clearly as they're afraid that the Romans will take away their place and their nationhood and will occupy them in a far more brutal and immediate fashion.

And then they're also very concerned that they not be seen as rebels against Caesar. We have no king but Caesar. And they end up throwing before the Romans those things that are most precious.

They throw before the Romans their status as the people of God. They throw before the Romans all these pearls. And yet what do they find? They end up being trampled underfoot.

In AD 70 Jerusalem and the Temple are destroyed. They have cast before the Romans all these things and they end up finding that they are trampled underfoot. What is the alternative to this? Ask, seek and knock.

You will receive not principally because of your persistence but because of God's character as a loving and a good father. Where do you place your faith when things are difficult in the world? In the powers, in the principalities, in the rulers of this age, in the halls of power? No. In our heavenly father.

He is the one you look to. And when you put your faith in the rulers of this age you will

find that you end up throwing before them those things that are most precious. Your faithfulness to God, your status as his people.

And you will find out in time that they will trample those things underfoot. That they will be destroyed. That you will end up finding that you have nothing.

That you have given up those things that were most precious to find security in a source that there was no security to be found in. Where do we look to? We look to our father who is good to us, who hears us, who knows what we need. In Luke's paralleled account in Luke chapter 11 he focuses upon the father who gives the gift of his Holy Spirit to those who ask.

He gives us what we need. He gives us what is good. This is the power to live out the way of the kingdom.

And it's the true alternative to trusting in the Gentiles and the rulers of this age. In verse 12 we see the whole central section of the sermon reaching its completion. The fulfilment of the law and the prophets.

And this is a bookend as it were that takes us back to verse 17 of chapter 5. Which also refers to the fulfilment of the law and the prophets. This is the whole theme of the sermon on the mount. The sermon on the mount has a there and back again structure.

So we're going all this way through these patterns of how the law and the prophets are fulfilled. And now we're finding ourselves going back to where we started. Although now we're going to be focusing upon woes in contrast to the blessings with which we began.

The law and the prophets are fulfilled as follows. So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them. This isn't something that's original to Christ's teaching.

We encounter it elsewhere from previous sources. In Tobit 4.15, 3rd century BC, what you hate, do to no one. Or Hillel in the Talmud, a generation before Jesus.

What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. And this is also a restatement of Leviticus chapter 19 verse 18. We might note that in contrast to some of the other forms, Leviticus and Christ adopt a positive way of expressing this statement.

Aristotle and Confucius both have some form of the golden rule. But the truth and authority of Jesus' teaching does not depend upon its novelty here. Part of the importance of wisdom is in its relationship with natural law, with the grain of the universe.

This is not some novel teaching that has no relationship with the way the world is. To those who have learnt to act in the way that the world is created, this principle will ring true to them. Jesus concludes with a number of warnings.

First of all he speaks of the narrow way. There is a choice between two ways. This is something that we find in other books of scripture, where there is a choice between blessing and cursing.

Or between two invitations. Or between two different modes of life. We might think about Proverbs or Psalms.

In Proverbs chapter 9 there is the call of Lady Wisdom corresponding with the call of Lady Folly. Both of them inviting the simpleton in to eat their fare in their house. And in Psalms, in the first Psalm, we have this contrast between the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers.

Here the choice is between a narrow way and a broad way. One that leads to life and the other that leads to destruction. We shouldn't necessarily presume that these are timeless statements.

Jesus, I think, is primarily referring to his own day and age. And to the choice that faces the people in that situation. Are they going to respond to his words? Are they going to live out the vocation of Israel? Because this is what Jesus is addressing.

Jesus is speaking to these people who have been called as a nation to be the light of the world. And at this moment in their history they face a decisive choice about the sort of people that they are going to be. With huge consequences.

Are they going to follow Christ the narrow way? Or are they going to reject him in a way that leads to them being trampled underfoot by the dogs and the pigs? We should note that the language of the way was important for early Christianity. To the point of being the name for the entire movement. In the book of Acts it's referred to as the way.

We can talk about Christianity or the church. And they would often talk about the way as something that defined the disciples of Christ. You might also think about Jesus' statements concerning himself in John chapter 14.

He is the way, the truth and the life. He's the door. He's the way.

From this warning Jesus moves on to speak about the danger of false teachers within the church. Wolves in sheep's clothing. There's a proverbial contrast between sheep who are tame and docile.

And ravenous wolves who are bloodthirsty and cruel and untamed. In chapter 10 verse 16 Jesus' disciples will be sent out like lambs in the midst of wolves. This I think refers to in part false teachers in the church here.

And there are later warnings in chapter 24 about people who will be false messiahs that will lead others after them. And these people are to be recognised by their fruit. In the

Old Testament in Deuteronomy chapter 13 or in chapter 18 of Deuteronomy verses 21 to 22 the false prophet is recognised by two things.

They lead the people away from God or their prophecies fail. The manner of their life and the manner of their teaching are both seen to be unsound. And we can also see the longer term effects of what they do.

Is the fruit that they produce good? Are they producing something within their own lives that bears witness to the truth of their teaching? This is one of the ways that we recognise authority. If you want to recognise someone as a good teacher you want to see in them some of the things that you want to be developed in you through their teaching. If someone is claiming to teach you how to play a musical instrument and they can't play a single note then they're probably not the person to look to.

But if you see someone who's a virtuoso, who's able to play with great skill they have something in that that testifies to them being someone whose example is to be followed. Whose teaching can be learned from. Jesus repeats the warning of John the Baptist here.

The axe is laid to the root of the trees and whatever tree does not bear good fruit is about to be cut down. He goes on to speak about those who will be judged on the last day as those who never knew him. Important to recognise Jesus is presenting himself as the eschatological judge.

The one who is not just a teacher, a rabbi, some great sage. He is the one who will judge all men on that last day. And there are some people who will say that they did many great things in Christ's name.

They prophesied in his name, they cast out demons in his name, they did mighty works in his name. And he will declare, he never knew them. Depart from me you workers of wickedness.

This is referring back to Psalm 6 verse 8. And there are people within the church who have done great and wonderful things and yet are not true members of Christ. They have no living connection with him. Matthew's church that he speaks about here is not a pure church where there are no unbelievers present.

There are people who are genuinely performing miraculous acts within that church and yet will prove not to be of Christ at all. Jesus concludes with an illustration of a house being built. A house being built upon a rock and then a house being built upon sand.

There's a contrast between wisdom and folly in the book of Proverbs. And the choice here is between a wise and a foolish man. It's not just between good and evil, it's between wisdom and folly.

Which is a more developed contrast than that which we find in the law itself. The law

focuses very much upon obedient and disobedient or faithful and unfaithful. Here the contrast is between wise and foolish.

And that I think takes us back to the book of Proverbs. In Proverbs 24 verse 3 we read, By wisdom a house is built and by understanding it is established. Jesus wants us to be alert to the foundation that we are building upon.

And here he emphasises hearing and doing. Not just hearing the word but actually putting it into effect in our lives. And his warning at the beginning of his ministry and at the very end of his ministry is of a falling building.

The falling building here of the person who does not build their life upon the teaching of Christ. And at the end of his ministry the falling temple. Not one stone left upon another.

The first question to consider. Within this sermon Jesus speaks not just to individuals but to Israel as a nation. What are some of the ways in which Israel more particularly could recognise itself as being addressed within this teaching? A second question to consider.

Within the sermon Jesus implicitly presents himself as a particular sort of person. And by the end the people marvel not just at his teaching wise words but by his very manner of teaching he stands out from the scribes and the Pharisees. What implicit claims are being made by Christ concerning himself within the sermon on the mount? Matthew 8 begins with Jesus descending the mountain.

This descent from the mountain bookends the entire sermon on the mount. It began with Jesus ascending the mountain and now he descends. And perhaps it's also important for framing what happens next.

It begins a series of ten actions in chapters 8 and 9. Cleansing a leper. Healing the centurion's servant. Healing the fever of Peter's mother-in-law.

Calming the storm. Casting out two demons. Healing a paralytic.

Raising the dead girl of a ruler. Healing a woman with the issue of blood. Giving two blind men sight.

And casting out a demon from a dumb man. Peter Lighthouse has suggested that there is a rhythm to the stories with three sections each containing explanations of Jesus' ministry punctuated by reflections on or calls to discipleship. We can see those calls to discipleship in verses 18-22 of chapter 8. Verses 9-13 of chapter 9. And verses 35 of chapter 9 to 42 of chapter 10.

And as we go through this series of events there is also a movement towards greater opposition. These are signs of the new life of the kingdom. Outsiders and those excluded are coming into the kingdom.

Lepers, Gentiles, demon possessed people. The woman with the issue of blood. Jesus is overcoming death and disease, these causes of exclusion from fellowship.

And as he heals these people he is bringing them into fellowship once more. He is bringing people who would have been outsiders into the enjoyment of the benefits of the kingdom. Gentiles in that case.

And restoring faculties to those who lack them. These are all things that are spoken of in the Old Testament prophecies of the kingdom. This series of events begins with the healing of the leper.

And the fact that Jesus touches the leper is a matter of importance. We can think also of the presence of touch in the healing of the woman with the issue of blood. This is probably not what we think of as leprosy.

It's a different sort of skin ailment. It is however something that would have excluded the sufferer from the enjoyment of full fellowship with the rest of the people of Israel. And so healing a person from this condition would allow them to once more enter the fellowship and community of Israel.

Jesus touches this man but he does not contract defilement. Rather he communicates health and life. This is a reversal of the usual direction of movement.

Where usually if you touch a leper or someone who is unclean you would become unclean. Jesus does not become unclean. Rather he communicates life.

A life that is stronger than defilement. And this is a secret sign. It is one that the leper is not supposed to spread the word concerning.

Rather it is like the turning of the water into wine. There are only a few people who know about this. And the people who know it is a sign to them.

For everyone else they don't recognise what is taking place. The next healing is the healing of the paralysed servant of the centurion. And the centurion is possibly the highest military officer in Jesus' base town of Capernaum.

He is an important figure. He has power and influence and authority. And Jesus is asked to perform a healing from a distance.

A healing that will demonstrate the authority of his word. This isn't magic tricks. This isn't something that can be done using sleight of hand.

Jesus is healing from a great distance. It is similar to Jesus' second sign in the book of John in chapter 4 where Jesus heals the official's son. Once again he is demonstrating his authority at a distance.

And the centurion recognises this. Jesus is someone who has authority like he does. He can say go and someone goes.

He can say come and they come. In the same way Christ can speak with authority into the world. And the nature of his authority is that of the authorised servant.

It's the authority of his word that he can use to heal the servant of the centurion. And once again this is a sign of the future of the kingdom. A sign of bringing in someone who is an outsider.

A blessing someone who is a gentile, not a Jew. Verse 7 is translated here as I will come and heal him. But it could also be read as a question.

You want me to come and heal him? A challenge to the faith of the centurion. To which he responds with a recognition that he is not worthy for Christ to come into his house. But Christ's word alone is enough to perform the great act.

And Christ's discussion of the faith of the centurion would seem to give weight to this particular reading. He declares that the faith of the centurion exceeds that which he has encountered in Israel itself. Indeed people like the centurion will find their way into the messianic feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

And yet those who would seem to be the heirs will find themselves cast out into outer darkness with wailing and gnashing of teeth. This speaks of the later gentile mission for instance. Numerous sons of the kingdom finding themselves outside.

And the people who would not seem to be the true sons finding themselves within. The faith of the centurion is seen in this practical request for healing. A recognition in the power of Christ's word that he is one with authority.

And on the basis of that Christ can declare that he is one who is of the type that belongs to the kingdom. He's not just going to enjoy the crumbs. He is going to recline at the table.

The third act in this chapter is the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. Peter's house in Capernaum may have been the base from which the disciples were working at this time. Once again Jesus proves his power to heal.

This time the mother-in-law of Peter with a single touch. And that evening many more come who are healed with a word. Once again the power of Christ's speech is underlined here.

In the previous chapter we were told that he spoke with authority and not as the scribes. And now we're told that he is one who can cast out demons with a word. Who can heal with a word.

And in these respects he's fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah. He took our illnesses and bore our diseases. In the context of Isaiah chapter 53 many have seen these things as referring to the cross.

But yet Matthew presents Jesus' life and ministry fulfilling this prophecy also. Jesus perhaps should be seen as taking these things upon himself. He is not just removing it.

He's taking it upon himself. The death of the world, the sickness of the world, the demonic possession of the world. He's taking it upon himself.

All in preparation to deal with it finally at the cross. A question to consider. Where else in the New Testament are we alerted to the fact that Peter has a wife? Matthew 8 begins a series of dramatic actions that Jesus performs in healings, exorcisms and other wonders.

Here we have an interruption of that narrative with a message concerning discipleship. We've seen something of the order of these miracles and signs and actions. Where Jesus will perform three things and then there's a message concerning discipleship.

Three more, another message. This message underlines the difficulty of discipleship. Both in the fact of not having somewhere to lay your head and also having to leave things behind in a radical way.

Jesus' statement concerning the foxes and the birds of the air might be a subtle reference to rulers within the land and to Gentile rulers more generally. The foxes are those like Herod who's described as a fox in Luke chapter 13 verse 32. And the birds of the air are people like the Romans and others.

This is the first use of the expression son of man in the gospel. And this expression brings back the background of places like Daniel, the references to the suffering of the son of man, to the heavenly authority of the son of man. This is an expression that Jesus uses of himself, particularly when speaking to people outside of the immediate disciple group.

The term is a somewhat enigmatic one and perhaps it's a challenge not just to slot Jesus into an existing slot. There is a slot called son of man that you find within the prophets like Ezekiel and Daniel but it's not clearly defined. And so you have this one character that's a bit mysterious and Jesus can define himself relative to this character but also fill out a picture that has surprising elements to it.

Such as the son of man who's rejected, who's not received, who has nowhere to lay his head. Presenting the starkest contrast with the rulers of this age who unlike the one who has all kingdoms and authorities given to him by the ancient of days dwell in mighty palaces and beautiful houses. The final statement that Jesus makes here is perhaps the most arresting.

In response to a disciple who asks first to bury his father and then to follow, Christ says, follow me and leave the dead to bury their own dead. It's surprising break with what we'd expect of filial piety that the son has to be loyal to his father and bury him. Elsewhere Jesus teaches against the teaching of the Pharisees who allowed people to be absolved of their responsibilities to their parents.

So presumably that's not quite what Jesus is saying here. However Jesus' statement still should shake us. The statement let the dead bury their own dead suggests that there's a cycle of death that's playing out.

That generation after generation the dead are burying their dead and these people are walking dead. There's no actual life that's taking place. The cycle is one of death.

And Jesus throughout this chapter has been introducing a cycle of life. He's been dealing with people who are dead. Dead in the sense of being outside of fellowship with God and other people.

Or dead in the sense of experiencing deep sickness and approaching death. And then we'll see other forms of death as we go through. Jesus has come to break this cycle.

And those who want to follow him must recognise their loyalty to this cycle of life. And not just perpetuating the cycle of death. There is something that must take precedence over that.

Now it's worth bearing in mind that this father had presumably not died yet. Rather the man is waiting for his father to die and then going to follow Jesus. But by that point it would be too late.

This mission has an urgency to it. There's only a few years before Christ will die. And if he's not on board at that point he may miss the boat.

And the urgency with which Jesus presents his call to discipleship starts to sharpen the distinction between the following crowds and the committed disciples. That distinction becomes much clearer. Jesus is followed by his disciples into the boat and out into the sea.

And we might think about the story of Jonah as there's this storm that rises up. And the people on deck are frantic and trying to deal with the situation. Whereas Jonah is asleep in the hold.

Here Jesus is asleep. But the situation changes when he rises up. The storm rises and Jesus is asleep.

Then Jesus rises and the storm sleeps. There is a quaking of the waters. Now there are three earthquakes in the book of Matthew.

The quaking of the sea here. There's a quaking at the cross. And there's a quaking at the resurrection.

And I think this should be a clue that there's something more going on here. Jesus is asleep in the grave. And then he rises up and he delivers his people.

The time will come when the disciples feel that they're left all alone. That Jesus is asleep. That he's not helping them.

That he's gone from the scene. And they face this great storm around them. And then Jesus rises up and delivers them.

And stills the waves. That will happen at the resurrection. And this is a preview as it were of that pattern already taking place.

The little faith of the disciples contrasts sharply with the great faith of the centurion earlier in the chapter. Jesus is in control of the situation. He's able to rule over the waves in a way that causes the disciples to marvel.

They don't know who this person could be. This shouldn't just be presumed to be a proof of Jesus' divinity. But rather of the prophetic authority of an appointed man.

A man who has had incredible authority vested in him. And we'll see as we go through Matthew that actually Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth invested in him. An authority that only God himself can enjoy.

But at this point they're wondering whether this is a great prophet. A prophet greater than all the other prophets. At the other side of the sea they arrive at the country of the Gadarenes.

There they encounter a sort of trifecta of extreme impurity. Demonic possession, tombs and pigs. Why are there two demoniacs here? It's not the only time that Matthew has two of some people or two of some things where the other gospels only have one.

We see two sets of blind people in chapter 9 verse 27 and in chapter 20 verse 29 to 34. And then also a donkey and a colt in chapter 21. You can see pairs of persons healed.

Two demoniacs. A woman and a girl. Two blind men.

Pairs are more common within the book of Matthew than in some of the other gospels. We see the pair of thieves at the cross. We can see the pairs of brothers in chapter 4. And so maybe Matthew's making a broader point about pairings here.

As witnesses perhaps or something else. It's quite possible to harmonise these accounts with the accounts that we find in other gospels. Perhaps Matthew has less of a scenic immediacy than Mark does.

And so focuses upon the numbers of people more than the specific engagements that Jesus has. In which one of the demoniacs would have been the lead figure. Another possibility to consider here is that Matthew is consciously collecting a series of miracles in a way that highlights numbers.

So you have 12 people that are delivered in some way. The leper, the centurion and his servant. Peter's mother-in-law.

Two demoniacs. Paralytic. A woman and a girl.

Two blind men. And a mute man. And putting all these together it's a sign of a new Israel perhaps.

The demoniacs address Christ as the eschatological judge. As the son of God. As the one who will torment them.

We've already seen Christ presented as the eschatological judge at the end of chapter 7. Where Christ is the one who will judge people who come and say Lord, Lord. And he will say I never knew you. Depart from me you workers of wickedness.

Elsewhere we've also seen Satan recognising Christ as the son of God. The use of such a title underlines the fact that Christ's identity was known to spiritual beings. He is not just a mere man.

He is one who has come from heaven to act in a decisive manner. Many people reading Matthew's gospel or the synoptic gospels more generally can suggest that they have no concept of Christ's pre-existence. That Christ is one who has come from heaven but yet has always existed before that.

Thinking of Christ just as a great man perhaps. But passages like this suggest that even in the synoptics there is a concept of pre-existence. The demons beg that if they are to be cast out they be cast out into the herd of pigs.

The pigs then career down the steep bank and are drowned in the waters. It's similar to the drowning of Pharaoh's army in the sea. Christ is the son of God who binds the strong man.

He is the one with the power to exorcise the demons, to drive them out, to deliver people that have been held in bondage. But yet there's a twist in this story. We might expect it to end with the deliverance of the demoniacs and then the rejoicing of the people of the town but that's not what happens.

The Gadarenes beg that Christ would depart from them. Much as the demons begged, there's an association between the demons and the Gadarenes. Now one interesting thing to observe is that these men were cast out of the town.

They were dwelling among the tombs. They were in many ways like scapegoats of the town. And now the demons are cast out of them and the demons enter into a herd of pigs, a great many of them according to the Gospel of Mark.

This is not the way such scenes usually go. Usually you have the one or two being cast out by the herd. But now the one or two are delivered and the multitude of the herd rushes into the waters.

So there's a reversal of the scapegoat pattern. René Girard has argued that within this story we're seeing a reversal of the scapegoat pattern. And in the scapegoat pattern typically a few people are cast out by a larger group as a sort of lightning rod for the problems within their community.

And perhaps that's what happened to the Gadarene demoniacs. Perhaps all the demons and issues of the community were being cast out into them. And they were the ones dwelling among the tombs, holding all these demons of the community.

And then Christ deals with those demons, releases the demoniacs from that oppression. And those demons then go into the herd, which represents the people of the town. The herdsmen run into the town and tell the people and they beg Christ to depart.

Christ upsets the social order. Christ ends up being the one who is cast out, not just the demons from the demoniacs. I've commented upon the patterns of threes within these signs.

And here I think we've seen a movement from more private miracles in the first three signs of chapter 8. To more dramatic signs of authority, causing people to fear, with an emphasis upon reaction. So the first one is, what sort of man is this that even wins and see obey him? And the second reaction is that of the people of the Gadarene city, who beg Christ to depart from them. In these reactions we're seeing some of the options that people have in their response to Christ.

Will they seek to drive him out, as their fear leads to a rejection of Christ? Or will they be people who marvel at his works and follow him? A question to consider. Within these verses we see that Christ is one who shakes things up. Christ is one with great power and authority.

Christ is one who upsets the social order. How can the example of the people of the Gadarene city help us better to understand responses to Christ in our day and age? In Matthew chapter 9 we continue the sequence of miracles that we began in chapter 8. That sequence began with the cleansing of the leper, the healing of the centurion's servant, the healing of the fever of Peter's mother-in-law, and then went on to the calming of the storm, the casting out of the two demons, and now we get to the healing of the paralytic. These miracles come in threes.

The first three are more private, less dramatic miracles. The second three are more dramatic and come with the sense of authority, and the response to these miracles is particularly highlighted. The first miracle of chapter 9 ends the second cycle of miracles, a cycle which places this emphasis upon people's reaction of fear and wonder to Jesus.

The authority of Christ is emphasised and opposition starts to emerge. And in the final cycle Jesus' fame spreads far further. This block of miracles isn't just a grab bag of stuff that Jesus did, but it's like the rest of Matthew, it's progressively presenting a case for the identity and the authority of Christ and moving the larger story forward.

The healing of the paralytic occurs when Jesus returns to his own city from the land of the Gadarenes. From chapter 4 verse 13 we know that the city is Capernaum. The paralytic is carried to him by others on a bed, and Jesus responds to their faith by declaring the sins of the paralytic forgiven.

We've already seen an association between faith and Jesus' work in the encounter with the centurion, and in Jesus' challenging of his disciples for their little faith in the calming of the sea. We see a further example later on in the healing of the woman with the issue of blood and the blind man. The faith in such cases is looking to Christ for deliverance.

It doesn't come with any pretensions of its own or confidence in itself, but just reaches out to him. And in the centurion's case Jesus declared that such faithful persons would sit with the patriarchs in the kingdom. And in this case Jesus declares the sins of the paralysed man to be forgiven.

As in the case of the centurion, it's noteworthy that Jesus is performing these miracles on account of the faith of someone other than the person who's receiving the healing. Faith is extremely important, but it's not always the faith of the person who is delivered by the miracle. On some occasions like this it's someone else entirely.

Reading the story of the paralysed man here, we might be reminded of the benefit of praying for others, of bringing them before Christ, even though they may be paralysed in some way, that they may not be able to come before Christ themselves. We can carry them, and that insistent bringing people before Christ might be part of the calling that we have been given. The scribes think that Christ is blaspheming, claiming a prerogative that is God's alone.

Only God can forgive sins, but Jesus can read their hearts. And he, as a demonstration of his true authority, heals the man. If he did not in fact have this authority to forgive sins, God would not give the confirming sign of the healing that follows.

It's a two-stage healing. It's an inward healing, the forgiveness of his sins, and then an outward healing. Jesus once again speaks of himself here as the Son of Man.

He's acting in a particular office. The Son of Man is a human figure of eschatological

significance, a sort of uber-prophet. You can think of the way that it's used in Ezekiel.

The common argument that Jesus forgives sins as proof that he is God seems to me to short-circuit the case that the Gospels actually present for Christ's divinity. The response of the crowd is important to notice here. They do not see this as proof of his divinity, but proof that this is a truly remarkable prophet.

This is a prophet like no other. To whom does God give authority to forgive sins in this way? You can think about the authority that God gives to people like Elijah and Elisha. They act with authority.

They can do great deeds without necessarily having to pray for them to occur. They are invested with power to do certain acts. But this Jesus of Nazareth seems to be invested with a far greater power than any of these former prophets.

There's something about him that stands out. And the more that we follow this through in Matthew, the more that we'll realise that he is being given the full authority of God. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given into his hands.

And he acts with the authority of God's very name. This is, I believe, how we'll arrive at a proper account of Christ's divinity. It's a longer route, but it leads to a more decisive understanding.

Jesus now calls Matthew. Tax collectors were despised for their collaborations with the Romans, but also for their injustice. Not only did they deal with Gentiles, they were dealing with the imperial oppressor.

The fact that Jesus would eat with such persons was scandalous to many observing Jews. The setting is important. Jesus is reclining at a table in a house with these people.

This is, as it were, a picture of Israel. The picture of Israel of eating round the table. And in Jesus' ministry, particularly in Luke's gospel, but also in the other gospels, Jesus often teaches in the context of a meal.

He teaches that Israel is being redefined. And the meal table is a picture of that. And at this meal table, all the wrong people are present.

It's not just the centurion who's a faithful person who will recline at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It's also tax collectors and sinners, the people who are not welcome within polite society. And here the Pharisees enter the picture as one of the key antagonists of Christ in his ministry.

They challenge Christ for his action, questioning his disciples. But Jesus hears it, and he responds by drawing attention to the character of the law. He quotes Hosea 6, verse 6. And the original context of that is God's restoration of his people.

This isn't just individual repentance. It's God restoring his people to fellowship with him. And this verse provides a framework for perceiving the entire law.

Jesus quotes it again in Matthew 12, verse 7, where he's challenged concerning his practice on the Sabbath. Later on in chapter 23, verse 23, he'll talk about the weightier matters of the law. Justice, mercy and faith.

Earlier on in the Beatitudes he has said, Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Christ is on a mission of mercy. A mission of righteousness that sets things right that have gone wrong.

And this was what the law was always about. This is what God always wanted. We've gone through Jesus' manifesto in chapters 5-7 in the Sermon on the Mount.

An account of saving righteousness. Of righteousness that restores and sets things right that are broken. And Jesus is teaching the same thing here.

God desires that sort of righteousness. Not just sacrifice and a multiplication of bulls and rams and goats. God desires people to give their hearts.

God desires people to show mercy and to heal and restore those that are lost. And yet as tax collectors and sinners seek to get close to Christ to find forgiveness and restoration, all the Pharisees and the scribes can see is a failure on Christ's part to keep himself fully separate. Something has gone deeply wrong in the way that they see the purpose of God's law.

After he has responded to the Pharisees, Jesus is approached by the disciples of John who ask him concerning fasting. Jesus' response is one that underlines who he is. He is the bridegroom with his people.

And when the bridegroom is around there should be joy and delight. It should be a time of feasting and celebration. There will be a time when the bridegroom goes and at that time it will be appropriate to fast.

But while the bridegroom is still there, they should be celebrating. Christ is the one who is restoring Israel. He is also the bridegroom coming to the bride.

And as it were, he is inaugurating the great feast of the end of history in the middle of history. People are having a foretaste of what it is like to have the marriage supper of the Lamb. This response further underlines the importance of what Jesus is doing in these meals and their symbolic significance.

After the illustration of the bridegroom and the feasting associated with the wedding, Jesus gives a further illustration. An illustration of putting unshrunk cloth upon an old garment. Followed up by another example of putting new wine into old wineskins.

The importance for Christ is that both need to be preserved. There are the practices of the law, the practices of the old order. But there is also the practices associated with fulfillment of the law.

And those practices can't be contained by the structure of the law itself. Those old wineskins will be burst by this new practice of the kingdom. But that doesn't mean that the old practices of the law are to be just rejected and dismissed and ridiculed.

They have their place and they are to be preserved in their proper place. But yet the order of the kingdom is one that goes far beyond them. The contrast here may be more explicitly seen in the difference between John and his disciples, who are existing within those older structures.

And Jesus and his disciples, who were the new wine that could not be put into the structure of the old wineskins. A question to consider. Here and elsewhere Jesus uses meals and feasts as a framework within which to reimagine Israel and its identity and the order of the kingdom.

What are some of the ways in which our practice of the Lord's Supper can reorder our societies in the light of the kingdom to come? In this section of Matthew 9 we reach the conclusion of the series of 10 miracles or signs that Jesus performs. Here we have a number of events hot on the heels of each other. One thing after another.

And in the case of the woman with the issue of blood and the girl restored to life, mixed up together. Jesus has just been identified as the bridegroom. But now there is the healing of two women.

These are two entangled events, even more so in Luke, where not only has the woman been suffering from her condition for 12 years, a detail that we have here, but the girl is 12 years old too. That number suggests a connection between both characters and Israel. Now, both characters connected with Israel being women and Christ having just been identified as the bridegroom, it might suggest that there's something more going on here.

Christ is the one that comes to deliver the bride and to raise daughter Jerusalem to new life. Jesus is asked by the ruler here to come and visit his daughter and lay his hand on her so that she might be delivered from death. This is a grand request.

This is not something that Christ has been asked to do to this point, to deliver someone from death itself. This is a more climactic sign or action. Jesus is going to deliver Israel from its death, daughter Zion, raise her up to new life.

But as he's going on the way, he's interrupted. And he's interrupted by a woman who suffered from this discharge of blood. And she touches the hem of Jesus' garment.

Now, the hem of the garment was an important part of the garment because it was the part of the garment that had the tassels on. And those tassels had a symbolic significance given to them within the book of Numbers. In chapter 15, verse 37, the Lord said to Moses, Speak to the people of Israel and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner.

And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the Lord to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. So you shall remember and do all my commandments and be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God.

I am the Lord your God. And this law connected the garments of Israel with the garments of the high priest. And the garments of the high priest were in turn connected with the tabernacle as a sort of house as garment.

The high priest had these sorts of blue tassels on his garment. And now Israel also have those as well. And those tassels connect their garments to the meaning of the high priest as one who represents Israel's holy status to the Lord.

And every Israelite was supposed to have that represented on their garments. Jesus' garments are significant. They represent his office.

They represent his person. We can see this in the transfiguration where there is a transfiguration of the garments, not just of Christ himself. His garments are taken from him at the crucifixion.

He's stripped of his garments. He's wrapped in linen clothes and laid in the tomb. He's wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the manger.

And in other occasions we read about his garments. His garments are clearly significant for representing what's happening to him and who he is. Here as life flows into the woman and heals her of her ailment, we see that Christ himself is the source of life.

She has an issue of blood. He has an issue of life. Life flows out of him and it gives life to others.

You could maybe think about the blue tassels as like rivers out of Eden, like the rivers that are connected with the living water in the book of John. Jesus is the one who gives life. Life flows from him.

There's also the fact that within the Old Testament the wing of the garment was connected with marriage. To take the woman under the wing was to take her as your wife. And Jesus has the wing of his garment touched by this woman.

Which suggests again that the bridal themes that have been playing just beforehand have not ceased. They're still important. There's something incongruous within this setting.

We have the flute players. Now why mention the flute players? They're not mentioned in the other Gospel accounts. It's a strange detail to include.

And the flute players seem to be out of keeping with the character of the event. They are playing this music that seems to be more appropriate for a dance than for a funeral. And Christ moves them away.

A few chapters further in Matthew I think we might have a clue to the meaning of this. In Matthew chapter 11 verse 16 Jesus says, For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say he has a demon. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, Look at him, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds. Within that passage we have many of the same themes that we've seen in this passage come up again. And again there is this incongruity that's highlighted.

The flute that's being played and people not dancing. The dirge and people not mourning. And the flute here is connected with dancing.

Which seems a strange thing to have at a funeral. But in some sense the incongruity is appropriate. Because Jesus is the bridegroom come to the scene.

He's the bridegroom that's released the woman from her ailment when she touched his garment. The hem of his garment. And now he's the one that's going to raise daughter Israel to life.

So these wedding and dirge themes collide. The flute players are acting in a way that's out of keeping with what's taken place. The death of a young girl.

But there's a level of irony here. Because Jesus is acting in a way that actually is more appropriate to flute playing. Jesus is the one who's bringing in new life.

He's the one who's the bridegroom that's come on the scene. And at the end of this miracle, as in the other ones within this series of miracles. Jesus' fame spreads.

People in the surrounding regions are starting to hear about who this man Jesus is. And his fame and reputation is starting to spread. Following this Jesus heals two blind men.

And once again this involves persistent faith. Jesus does not heal straight away. He presents obstacles to these blind men to prove their faith.

They stubbornly persist. And as they persist, they are healed. Their sight is restored.

And even though they are instructed not to do so. They spread the fame of Jesus even further throughout that district. Once again there's a connection between this miracle and the miracle that immediately succeeds.

The miracles come in rapid succession. One thing after another. And often without one thing being finished, the next begins.

Jesus is acting in a way that has an urgency and a speed and a suddenness to it. And reading through this section, it's important that we have some sense of the urgency and the speed with which things are happening. Things are happening with a rapidity that suggests something about the kingdom of God itself.

And as he's going away, behold a demon-possessed man whose mute is brought to him. Once again this is someone who's being brought to him for healing. We've seen a number of cases of this so far.

Jesus is often requested to heal someone on behalf of someone else. This is a further reminder that Jesus works with groups of people. Not just isolated individuals each having faith for themselves.

Jesus is healing and delivering people as they are brought by others to him. Pray for your friends. Pray for people in your family.

Pray for people in your neighbourhood. Pray for people who may not be able to come to Christ themselves. Because Christ works through other people bringing people to him.

The condition of the demon-possessed man could perhaps be compared to that of Israel. Israel, wherever Jesus goes, he sees Israel oppressed by demons. Even in the synagogues themselves.

You could maybe think back to the story of David and Saul. David is anointed by the spirit and an evil spirit troubles and oppresses Saul. But then David goes to Saul and brings him relief as he plays for him.

Jesus is going throughout Israel and he's bringing relief as the man of the spirit. As the son of David to a nation that's oppressed by Satan. The Pharisees, however, accuse Jesus.

Accusing him of one of the worst things of all. They say that he is acting by the power of Satan. An accusation that aligns Christ with the one whose very works he is going to give everything to destroy.

This is an accusation beyond all accusations. It's an accusation that declares Christ to be the absolute opposite of what he actually is. A question to consider.

In chapters 8 and 9 of the book of Matthew, Jesus is going through a series of actions.

Actions and healings, exorcisms and miracles. And these actions as they occur serve to highlight who Jesus is.

They serve to illustrate the character of the kingdom. They serve to describe the spread of Christ's reputation. And they also serve to highlight the opposition that Jesus is facing.

And the accusation that arises at the end of it. Highlights just how sharp the division between Christ and the Pharisees has become. Exploring this series of actions on these different fronts.

What are some of the things that most stand out to you? About the development that Matthew has highlighted between the end of the Sermon on the Mount. And the beginning of the sending out of the twelve disciples. At the end of Matthew chapter 9, our passage is introduced by the fact that Jesus is going through all the cities and the villages.

Teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. Healing diseases and afflictions. The good news is that God is establishing his reign.

The crowds however are like sheep without a shepherd. This description is one that can be found in the Old Testament. In 1 Kings chapter 22 verse 17, as a result of a rout and battle, Israel is described as like sheep without shepherds on the mountains.

A more significant parallel can be found in Numbers chapter 27 verses 16 to 18. Where Moses says to the Lord. May not be as sheep that have no shepherd.

So the Lord said to Moses. In a similar way Christ will go on to appoint twelve disciples to ensure that Israel is not left as sheep without a shepherd. He will send out under shepherds to guide these cities and these villages that he's been going through.

A further important piece of Old Testament background can be found in Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 2 to 6 and then verses 11 to 16. There God condemns the false shepherds of Israel. The ones who have not been faithful.

Who have left the people as if they are without a shepherd. And then he says that he will be their shepherd. He will search for and restore the lost sheep.

And he will bring them out and gather them from the various countries and bring them into their own land. He's going to feed them. He's going to heal those that are injured.

He's going to protect them from predators. And he's going to judge the unfaithful. Having gone through the cities and towns Jesus has seen the spiritual state of Israel.

And in one respect they're like sheep without a shepherd. On the other hand there's a plentiful harvest but not enough people to go out and to reap and labour within it. And so Jesus is preparing people as shepherds but also people to do the work of harvesters.

Moses gave authority to Joshua to lead the people and Jesus now gives authority to the twelve to carry out a mission throughout the land. All that Jesus has just demonstrated in his actions in the last two chapters which arguably restored a group of twelve people. He is commissioning his twelve disciples to perform.

The harvest is ready. It's time for division to occur. It's time for shepherds to be given to the lost sheep to restore them, to heal them, to rescue them.

And the twelve are labourers for the harvest and shepherds for the flock. They are to continue the work that Jesus has started according to the pattern that he has shown. The description that he gives them authority over unclean spirits to cast them out and to heal every disease and every affliction draws our mind back to chapter 4 verse 23 where it says And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.

This is the same thing that Christ has done. Now he's commissioning his disciples to do the same. It's important that he chooses twelve.

They are twelve patriarchs for a restored Israel. At the beginning of the book of Numbers in Numbers chapter 1 verses 1 to 16 there is the choice of twelve men to assist Moses, one from each of the tribes. Now the twelve here are not a substitute for or a replacement for Israel.

Rather they are the seed of a new Israel within the life of the old. And there's going to be a new Israel gathered around them as Israel is reformed and revitalized. The twelve are listed here.

They're also listed in Mark chapter 3 verses 16 to 18, in Luke 6 verses 14 to 16 and in Acts 1 verse 13. The ordering of the twelve is worth paying attention to. Peter has primacy.

Peter, we're told, is first. And that first is not merely that he's the first to be called or that he is the first to be listed in an arbitrary ordering. Rather in the listings of the apostles he is always the first.

He is the one that has the most significant and honored role. He's the one that leads the apostles on the day of Pentecost in the mission to the Gentiles. He also leads the way on the Council of Jerusalem and on a number of other occasions.

He is the most prominent apostle and he's the one who leads the church in a particular way. Now this doesn't mean that we have to hold a Roman Catholic view of the primacy of Peter as the first pope. But I do think it means that we should accept that Peter was the leader of the apostles.

He was the first among them. The last of the apostles is always listed in the same way. It's the one with the least honor.

It's Judas, who, spoiler alert, would betray him. It may be worth noting at this point that Scripture has no problem whatsoever spoiling the narrative ahead, telling us what's about to come. We may be used to reading stories for the first time, but Scripture is not written for the first time reader.

It's written primarily for people who are reading it again and again and again. And as a result, it's constantly calling forward to events that will happen in the future. It's presuming knowledge of the end of the story, even in the middle of the story, because most people who are reading it are expected to be reading it for the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, hundredth time.

Matthew is the only one whose vocation is given here. And there are differences in the way that the apostles are treated in different gospels. Thomas and Philip are prominent within the Gospel of John in a way that they're not within the synoptics.

Simon the Zealot probably is a reference not to some sort of political revolutionary work that he was involved in, or had previously been involved in, but to the fact that he was a man characterized by zeal. Perhaps we should see in those cases where some other name is attached to the apostle, or there is some relation or some vocation that's attached to them, but just the commonality of that particular name that they had. So Simon was a common name, so he needed to be distinguished from others by being a zealot or by being called Peter.

James had to be distinguished by being the son of Alphaeus. And there are other sorts of distinctions that needed to be made, not just within the group of the apostles themselves, like there's two Jameses and there's two Simons, but also within the larger group of disciples and within people of those days. That can be one of the things that helps us to realize the authenticity of the Gospels, the fact that the names that are common within the Gospels were also common within the other records that we have from that period and that location.

One interesting feature of this particular list that we do not find in the other lists in Luke and Mark is that they're ordered in twos. This presumably was because the apostles were sent out in twos. We see that in the other Gospels.

It's not mentioned here, but they're ordered in twos before they're being sent out. It might also explain why Andrew occurs in parallel with Peter, his brother, whereas in others he might seem to come in the fourth position after James and John, who with Peter comprised the three at the heart of the disciples. Jesus sends the disciples out to the towns and cities of Israel.

In some respects, what he's doing is not dissimilar from a politician on a campaign trail. He's raising grassroots support. He's making people aware of his larger mission.

And when the time comes, there will be a people ready to receive it. However, we could also compare what he's doing to the sending out of the spies who go throughout the land in twos preparing for a future conquest. We see that in Numbers chapter 13.

And as they go throughout the land, they present a test of hospitality. They must depend upon the generosity of others. And this will be the test.

We see that they do not have supplies for the journey. They do not have the means to protect themselves. They do not have the means to clothe themselves and house themselves.

They're dependent upon other people. And in the same way as Rahab was tested and blessed as a result of her reception of the spies, so the people of Israel are being tested in preparation for a new conquest. We see this test of hospitality in the book of Genesis.

In Genesis chapter 18, three angels, one of them being the Lord, come incognito to Abraham. And he greets them and welcomes them and shows them great hospitality and is blessed as a result of it. On the other hand, the next chapter, in chapter 19, those two angels come to Sodom.

And Sodom is judged as a result of their failure to receive them in the right way. And so this testing of the land through a test of hospitality is an important theme within Scripture. And Christ uses it on various occasions.

We see it again in chapter 25, when Christ comes incognito in his brothers. And those who do not receive them are judged. Those who do receive them are blessed.

Beyond the fact that they must depend upon other people's hospitality, they must be confident in God's generous provision. God is the one that's going to provide everything that they need for this journey. They don't have enough of their own resources.

They're being sent out into the most dangerous circumstances without provision. And they must depend wholly upon God's goodness towards them. They are told that it will be worse for the cities that reject them than for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah on the Day of Judgment.

And again, this draws our mind back to the test of hospitality that was presented to Sodom and Gomorrah. They are presenting another test of hospitality and the judgment that follows this is going to be even more severe. They're sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Not to the Gentiles yet, but to the flock of the firstborn nation of Israel. The nation that's

supposed to lead the others. They are to be shepherds, but they are also themselves sheep.

Sheep sent out in the midst of wolves, but sent out in the midst of wolves under the rule of a greater shepherd. The shepherd that is promised in Ezekiel chapter 34 where God says that he himself will shepherd his people. Their defenselessness and their dependence is a sign of their sheep-like character.

And the success of their mission is a sign of the greater shepherd that's overseeing it. Their reliance upon the good shepherd. They are sheep sent out in the midst of wolves, but under the rule of a shepherd who will snatch them away from any that will try and harm them.

They need to be shrewd, but innocent. They will have to use their cunning, trickery, wit and deception to survive and escape from oppressors and opponents. You can maybe think about David fleeing from Saul.

They will be persecuted, hated, abused and brought before rulers and kings. They will live in treacherous times where even those closest family members and friends might turn on them. It's important to remember that the group of disciples aren't just random individuals.

Many of them are closely related. Probably at least three of them are first cousins of Jesus. James and John, the sons of Zebedee and James the son of Alphaeus.

James the son of Alphaeus according to tradition and James and John according to piecing together some of the details concerning the women who are at the cross. Other disciples like Simon, Peter and Andrew are brothers themselves. And within the group of the apostles we can probably expect that there were further first cousins or second cousins and people who had grown up around each other or worked together.

James and John and Peter and Andrew presumably knew each other very well, working alongside each other. And so this was a tight knit group of people with a tight knit family network around them. And so when family started to turn on them it would be an incredibly difficult thing.

Something that would strike at the very dynamics at the heart of their group. Their group was developed out of the life of families and the sort of connections that exist between young males who work together and associate together within a particular region. This is not just isolated people.

These are people who are tied together by familial and friendship and kinship bonds. Perhaps the nearest modern analogy we have for it is something like a mafia family. Where within a mafia family there are interplays between the biological family and the family that is the fictive kinship of the criminal group.

In these sorts of relationships there is an intertwining of the two in complicated ways. And betrayal has a particular force within contexts like that where the tensions between the fictive family group, the larger family group and the more intimate biological family group can be felt incredibly keenly and can be very bitter. They are told that even when they are brought before kings and rulers they are not to worry about their defence.

Just as God will provide them with provisions on the way, he will provide them with the words that they need for their defence. And these words will be given to them by the spirit. Once again this is presumably anticipating events later on in the story when the spirit will be given in the events of the day of Pentecost.

They will still be going through the cities of Israel when the Son of Man returns. Now this return of the Son of Man is presumably at the end of that particular period of time in AD 70 when there will be judgement upon Israel. And they are leading up to that judgement, preparing the people.

There is an event of judgement and harvest on the horizon and they need to get the people prepared. They need to lead the sheep away from danger and they need to prepare the division of this nation into those who are faithful and those who are unfaithful. A question to consider.

Christians can talk a lot about hospitality evangelism, about the importance of opening our homes to others and showing them generous hospitality and giving them good food, a place to stay, these sorts of things. These things are very good but we don't talk very much about a test of hospitality, about the importance of requesting other people's hospitality or putting ourselves at the mercy of other people's hospitality. Reading this passage and the associated passage in Matthew 25 concerning the sheep and the goats, can you think of any ways in which Christ might be calling us to practice tests of hospitality in our context? The second half of Matthew chapter 10 continues the themes of the first.

Faithful followers of Christ should expect to suffer persecution on account of their association with him. If Christ was accused of being beelzebul, casting out demons by the power of the devil, his disciples should expect even worse accusations to be hurled at them. So have no fear of them.

It's a surprising teaching to come next. But persecution is part of the harvest process by which wheat and chaff are revealed for what they are, by which people are separated. It's an essential aspect of their mission.

Persecution reveals things and hearts for what they really are. The charge not to fear also introduces the command to declare openly what Christ has declared in private. Open proclamation will be the first thing to fall by the wayside in the case of fear.

And the point here isn't merely that of not being afraid, it's a calling to be positively bold. The twelve need proclaim their message without fear and without trepidation. We should not fear because persecution associates us with our master and our master is greater than any persecutor.

They cannot kill the soul, only the body. And if God notices even the falling sparrow, how much more will he notice his children who lay down their lives in his service? Every single hair on our heads is numbered and not one of them will be lost without God knowing. If we confess Christ before men, he will confess us before his father in heaven.

Throughout Jesus' teaching here, he's focusing first of all upon our association with him, upon God's notice of us and the attention that he pays to us. Upon the way that he will bear witness to us before his father as we bear witness before men of him. And with all of this, upon the fact that persecution is not an accident.

Persecution is something that in God's providence is part of the process of bringing things to light, of achieving the harvest. Christ brings division into families themselves. Our closest relatives may turn upon us.

Persecution isn't just from the wider culture, but can be those closest to us that can be our greatest enemies. Jesus' disciples will experience the pain of ostracization and betrayal. And in a society where your family was at the heart of all your networks of relations and support, your business, your social recognition, your children's chances of getting married, all these sorts of things are on the line.

If you follow Christ, you might be rejected from the fundamental structure of your society. And this could be absolutely devastating in that particular day and age. But Jesus brings the sword in order to bring peace.

Division must occur in order that something new might be created. Christ declares that those who do not take up their crosses and follow him are not worthy of him. And we should feel the force of this statement.

The symbol of the cross has been dulled for us. When we see it, we see something that can be found on someone's necklace or used in expressions such as, my cross to bear. It can easily be forgotten that this is an instrument of torture and execution, not dissimilar to something like a guillotine or an electric chair.

And it has a visceral force to it. People would have seen bodies hanging on crosses, rebels who were being crucified for their rebellion, and bandits and other people who had been put on these crosses, left to die in the most extreme agony. And there to be mocked and humiliated, stripped of their clothing and presented as outcasts of society.

There to be gazed upon and ridiculed. It was a symbol of the most utter expulsion from society. Society extricating a person from itself in the most excruciating of spectacles.

And this is what disciples were supposed to move towards. To take up their crosses and to walk on the path towards execution. And this would be a following of Christ.

This is the first time within the gospels we have an intimation of the way in which Christ will later die. For all those who follow him, however, they will find their lives. Much as he is risen from the dead, they too will be raised to life eternal.

And as people follow Jesus, Jesus identifies with them. Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. There is an extension of the principle to the person who receives prophets and righteous persons.

They will receive the reward of the person that they have received. That promise of those who give a cup of cold water to a person on account of their being a disciple, that they will by no means lose their reward. This is something that draws our mind forward to Matthew 25.

Again it is a test of hospitality and it is premised upon Christ's deep association with his people. We can think about this in relation to the statement that Jesus makes to Saul on the road to Damascus. Saul saw, why do you persecute me? The head associates with the sufferings of his body.

He recognises those people as his own and their sufferings as his sufferings. A question to consider. This chapter says a lot about whom we should fear and whom we should not fear.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, the idea of fear as a means of control is something that is explored. How does Christ release us from the power of fear? And how can we live in the freedom that he has given us from fear? How is fear presented as the antithesis of faith, hope and love within the New Testament? How can we live lives that are marked by an absence of the fear that Christ warns us against here? In Matthew chapter 11, the 12 disciples have been sent away and Jesus is continuing his ministry. John has heard the accounts of Jesus' ministry but is himself in prison.

John the Baptist preached an imminent judgement but Jesus is healing and restoring people. And you can imagine John the Baptist is uncertain about whether Jesus is in fact the one awaited. He might be wondering where the promised fire is.

He is expecting judgement to fall. And yet he has someone going around healing and restoring, raising the dead, casting out demons and it just doesn't seem to fit the bill. The first part of this chapter focuses upon Jesus' identity and then that of John the Baptist.

The key question is, are you the one who is to come? And the important thing to notice is that Christ is judging. Christ is bringing this judgement foretold by John the Baptist. But he is doing so by showing mercy.

And he responds to John the Baptist's question with allusions back to the book of Isaiah. In Isaiah chapter 35 verse 5 we read, Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. But in the previous context it reads, Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.

Say to those who have an anxious heart, Be strong, fear not. Behold your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God he will come and save you. These things belong together.

What Christ is bringing in his healing belongs with the judgement that he is bringing. And we will see more of that as the chapter proceeds. Jesus answers the question of John the Baptist in a way that highlights the relationship between judgement and mercy.

Isaiah 61 is another passage being alluded to. The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.

And then to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God. Jesus is fulfilling all these themes of restoration and healing that Isaiah foretold. But within it he is also bringing the vengeance and the judgement that John the Baptist foretold.

By sending the messengers from John the Baptist back with this report, he wants John the Baptist to see that he is fulfilling all these different parts of the prophecies of the book of Isaiah. And the other things are part of it. They will be understood in time as things play out.

Blessed is the one who is not offended by me. The point of Jesus' statement there is that he is doing all these healings, he is restoring in many ways. And the person who can see those things and thank God for them, rather than seeing those as an obstacle, is going to be blessed on that account.

I don't think we should read this primarily as a rebuke to John the Baptist. It's a statement of blessing to those who will truly understand what's taking place. And Jesus takes this occasion provided by the messengers from John to discuss the ministry of John more generally.

Who was John? A reed shaken by the wind? Jesus here taking up an image that we find in places such as 1 Kings 14, verse 15. A reed shaken by the wind is something or someone who is weak, easily moved or pressured or swayed this way or that by people around it. John the Baptist was not that.

He was not that sort of person at all. Was he a man dressed in soft clothing, the sort of person that you find in king's houses? No, quite the opposite. He was dressed in the

clothing that you associate with Elijah.

Camel skin and a leather belt. John the Baptist marks the transition between the age of the prophets and the age of the kingdom. And he is someone who was to prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness.

And the kingdom ushers in a new period of violence. This conflict between the enemies of the kingdom, between Satan and his forces and the work of the kingdom which is pushing forward. He was Elijah who was to come.

John the Baptist and Elijah are associated in their dress, in their behaviour. John the Baptist was foretold in Malachi, the very last verses of our Old Testament. Where we read, Like the first Elijah, John the Baptist is a man associated with the wilderness.

He is a forerunner of a land prophet. Elijah led up to Elisha and John the Baptist led to Jesus. He is a man clothed in camel skin with a leather belt, similar to the way that John the Baptist is described in 2 Kings 1 verse 8. And there are further similarities to notice.

Reading the story of Elijah we have a fierce prophet who declares a drought upon the land. Who brings down fire from heaven to burn up opponents. Who wins this great conflict on Mount Carmel and several other dramatic events.

And then God tells him at Mount Horeb that he is supposed to appoint a successor. And he is supposed to anoint two other people. And the Lord said to him, go return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.

And when you arrive you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel. And Elisha the son of Shabbat of Abel Meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place.

And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death. And the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. Now we are expecting this great figure who is going to bring all sorts of judgement.

Bring down judgement upon the people and be this fierce warrior of Yahweh. But that is not actually what we find. When Elisha comes on the scene he multiplies loaves.

He is someone who heals people. He heals Naaman the Syrian from his leprosy. He raises from the dead.

He does all these things that we associate with Christ. And it might be surprising. This is not what we are expecting.

We are expecting this person to bring the sword. And yet he brings healing. However even in those acts of blessing there is a judgement contained.

And we see the same thing in Christ. John the Baptist and the son of man come in contrasting ways. And yet the people of that generation reject both for different and perhaps contradictory reasons.

They do not know the times. They do not know when it is the time to dance. When it is the time to mourn.

A couple of chapters earlier we saw an indication of this with the flute players at the death of the daughter of the ruler. Wisdom however is known by Hadid's. I believe this should be seen as personified wisdom.

And personified wisdom that is manifested in Christ and in John the Baptist. In both cases they come and they act properly for the times. In accordance with the times.

Jesus challenges the cities he has performed most of his works in to that point. This is a preparation for judgement. These people have received great mercy and it is in their response or their failure to respond to that mercy that their judgement is found.

And so the judgement and the fire that John the Baptist foretold is happening through the separation that occurs as a result of the response to Jesus' works. And the works of his disciples. We have seen in the previous chapter that Jesus declares that as his disciples shake the dust off their feet in response to an unreceptive city.

It will be worse for that city on the day of judgement than for Sodom and Gomorrah. And he continues that theme here. Judgement through blessing and through mercy.

He describes Capernaum, his home city, as the one that sought to be lifted up to heaven. This should draw our mind back to Isaiah chapter 14 verses 13-14 where God addresses the king of Babylon. You said in your heart, I will ascend to heaven above the stars of God.

I will set my throne on high. I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the cloud.

I will make myself like the most high. But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit. And Jesus declares the same thing of Capernaum, his home town.

This all sets things up for Jesus' prayer to the Father with which this chapter ends. The Father as the Lord of heaven and earth is the one who reveals and who hides. He hides the truth from the proud who imagine themselves to be wise while revealing things to the weakest and the most humble.

All authority and all things have already been given to Christ. And he is the one who passes on all that the Father has given him. And apart from him there is no access to it, no access to the Father.

He gives a promise of rest to those who accept his yoke, his teaching or his law. You can think about this in terms of the Sermon on the Mount. That's Christ's yoke, the teaching that he gives.

And those who take that upon themselves will find that it brings rest. Christ's commandments, as the apostle says, are not burdensome. This might also be a reference back to Exodus 33, verse 14, where God speaks about giving his presence and bringing them into rest.

Another background for these statements might be found in intertestamental literature concerning wisdom. For instance, in the book of Sirach, chapter 51, verses 23 to 27, we find the words Draw near to me, you who are uneducated, and lodge in the house of instruction. Why do you say that you are lacking in these things? And why do you endure such great thirst? I opened my mouth and said, Acquire wisdom for your souls without money.

Put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction. It is to be found close by. See with your own eyes that I have laboured but little, and found for myself much serenity.

There are probably allusions in this statement back to Isaiah, chapter 55, verses 1 following. Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and he who has no money, come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk, without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me, here that your soul may live. And I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

The book of Sirach, taking up this biblical background, presents these words in the mouth of wisdom. And I think Jesus is doing the same thing. He's speaking, as it were, in the persona of wisdom, presenting her invitation to the people, that they should come and accept her words and find rest, the sort of words that we find in the book of Proverbs, chapter 9, the invitation of wisdom, and Christ is presenting it.

Those who receive the words of Christ, though they may be babes, and not considered the wise of this age, will receive wisdom, they will receive the blessings that are promised to those who have the fear of the Lord and answer the call of wisdom as she invites people to eat of her fare. To learn of Christ is to learn in the way of wisdom. It's to learn from one who has the deeds of wisdom, that demonstrate that he knows the times.

They will also find that his yoke is easy, his burden is light, and that he brings rest for their souls. The point here is not that Christ lessens the law, detracts from its authority, or dismisses or undermines its demands. Christ has already made it very clear in the

Sermon on the Mount that this is not in fact the case.

So how exactly is this yoke easy and burden light? It seems to me that the answer is found in the fact that the Master who places this upon us is gentle and lowly in heart. He's one who reaches out to us in divine humility. He's the one who bears our burdens for us and with us.

He's the one who is present with us in our struggles. These are not burdens that we have to bear alone. He bears them for us and with us.

And as a result, we find that the burden that we are bearing is one that has joy attached to it. The burden of persecution, the burden of suffering, the burden of obedience, are burdens that he himself has borne. He invites us to bear them with him, to follow in his footsteps, to take up our crosses and to walk where he has walked before us.

And that burden, though it might be the heaviest burden on earth to bear, is light when borne with him. A question to consider. This chapter reveals a lot about the relationship between grace and judgment, and the way in which rejected grace can be the means by which the most severe judgment is known.

How does this fact shed light upon our relationship to judgment as members of the household of God? In the first half of Matthew chapter 12, there are two incidents that focus upon Jesus' relationship to the Sabbath. He demonstrates that as he declared concerning himself at the end of the previous chapter, he is the one who gives rest, the true intent of the Sabbath. These Sabbath stories are easily misunderstood as Jesus presenting some technical legal exceptions to the law, or simply trumping it.

There is more going on here, however. Jesus is revealing the deeper intent of the law and the place of the Sabbath within the larger structure of God's purpose. Jesus is fulfilling the law, not merely trumping it.

Jesus reveals that the Sabbath was given for rest, not as a burden upon people. The Sabbath is for giving relief to the burdened, whether by hunger or by ailment or infirmity. People who are bearing heavy burdens should find rest on that day of the Sabbath.

We should bear in mind here that the Sabbath played a very important part in Israel's identity. It was the great sign of the covenant at Sinai, as circumcision was of the covenant made with Abraham. If we compare Exodus 31 with Genesis 17, we can see many parallels between these two signs.

To violate the Sabbath was a very serious offence then. It was to violate the covenant itself. And Jesus challenges the practice, or rather the non-practice of the Sabbath, the way that the Sabbath was made into a burden rather than a gift of rest that actually fulfilled its intent in the book of Exodus.

The disciples were permitted by the law to eat of the grain as they passed through a field. This was a general thing that was permitted to do as a result of the gleaning commandments. So the point of the Pharisees' objection was not that they were stealing some food that wasn't their own.

They had every right to eat of the food, for the most part. The issue was whether this constituted work on the Sabbath. And if it constituted work, they were breaking the law of the Sabbath.

And Jesus, in response, gives the examples of David and the priests. In 1 Samuel 21 verses 1-7, David and his hungry men were permitted to eat of the showbread. Now that's usually restricted to the priests.

But Ahimelech, the priest, recognised that the law of the showbread existed for the good of God's people, not merely as an end in itself. And in those circumstances, the hunger of David and his men took precedence over rigorous adherence to the letter of the law. Not because it was a breaking of the law and something that trumped the law, but because that was the actual intent of the law all the way along.

It is also important that it was David for whom this was permitted. We're not necessarily to presume that this would be the case for anyone who came along. Rather, Jesus is presenting himself to be the greater David, who has the prerogative to determine in this sort of instance.

His men are like David's men. Likewise, they're also akin to the priests, who have to do the work of Yahweh on the Sabbath, even though it involves labour that would be prohibited under other circumstances. They're moving sacrifices around, they're doing particular tasks that, in any other context, they would be prohibited.

But within the context of the service of the tabernacle, it does not count as work. It does not count as a breaking of the Sabbath. Likewise, Jesus' disciples are committed to a divine ministry.

And that divine ministry takes priority, and it's not a violation of the Sabbath at all. The work of the priests isn't counted as Sabbath-breaking work, because it is in service of the temple. And now there's something greater than the temple here.

Jesus himself. Now just think how startling a claim this is, what it implies. The temple was the place where God was present with his people, and the place where service to God was rendered.

And Christ is declaring that he is not just the greater David, but the greater temple. He is the site where God is present. And as his disciples follow and serve him, their activities are not a breaking, but a fulfilment of the intent of the Sabbath.

Once again, Jesus refers to Hosea 6.6. God desires mercy, not sacrifice. And the contrast here is between law-keeping for its own sake, and law-keeping that is truly ordered towards the fulfilment of God's will. The point of the law is not just to obey a rigorous set of commandments.

It's to fulfil God's will. This is something that we've been seeing in the book of Matthew to this point, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is the one who fulfils the law.

And the righteousness of his disciples exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees. The scribes and the Pharisees do not understand what it means that God desires mercy, not sacrifice. They're focused upon rigorous adherence to the letter of the law, and yet they do not bring rest.

They're not bringing God's peace. They're not the people who are fulfilling God's redemptive purpose, as Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, that his disciples must do. They are the ones who are bringing righteousness into relationships, healing to broken situations.

And that's what the law always intended. The law of the Sabbath was not just about rigorous adherence to some principle of rest. It was about giving rest to people.

It was about entering into God's rest and bringing that rest to others. And Christ is a living Sabbath, a living rest-giver. He's the one who goes through the land giving rest to people who are struggling under heavy burdens.

He's the one who pulls out sheep from pits on the Sabbath. He's coming to people who are laboring and are heavy laden, like the Israelites were in the land of Egypt. And he's giving them rest.

He's a walking Sabbath. And his disciples are acting in service of him. Now, as the Pharisees oppose him, as they oppose his giving of rest to people like the man with the withered hand, what they're doing is fundamentally opposing the Sabbath principle itself.

Now, they may think they're obeying the letter of the law, but they're undermining the very spirit of it. Christ is the one who gives the true rest that the Sabbath bears witness to. He is the Lord of the Sabbath.

Jesus directly responds to the challenge of his opponents by healing a man in the synagogue with a withered hand on the Sabbath. Again, he's giving rest on the Sabbath, which fulfills the intent and the commandment of the Sabbath. And he illustrates this with the example of a sheep that needs aid on the Sabbath day.

Now, people are far more important than sheep, as Christ points out. But he's also acting as the good shepherd in this instant. He's the one who replaces the false shepherds.

The people of Israel are like sheep without a shepherd. And as God declares he will do in Ezekiel chapter 34, he has come in person in Jesus Christ to seek out the lost sheep, to seek out the sheep that have been left as if sheep without a shepherd, that have been preyed upon by predatory shepherds who have been false and unfaithful. Jesus has come to rescue the sheep from the ditch and to bring them out and bring them into Sabbath rest.

He is the one who declares the acceptable year of the Lord, the year of the Lord's favour, the Jubilee year, the great year of rest for God's people. And the sheep in the ditch isn't enjoying the Sabbath rest that is God's gift to the animals. So it's the duty of the owner to relieve the sheep's distress and give him the rest that belongs to him.

Sabbath keeping is about giving rest, not laying heavy burdens on people. And all of this demonstrates the way that Christ describes himself on his yoke at the end of the previous chapter. In healing a person with a withered hand, Jesus might also be referring back to an Old Testament narrative.

In 1 Kings chapter 13, a man of God confronts the wicked King Jeroboam and declares that he's going to be judged. And the king reaches out his hand to say seize him and his hand withers. And then the man of God heals that withered hand.

There are similar themes playing here. The people are trying to seize Christ and Christ's healing of a man with a withered hand might bring that biblical memory to mind. We might think about the story of Jeroboam, his rebellion, and the fact that here is the true heir of the Davidic kingdom.

And he is restoring but also judging the false rulers who are trying to seize him. Knowing that the Pharisees are seeking to destroy him, Jesus then withdraws from them. And this is presented as a fulfilment of Isaiah chapter 42.

Jesus is the humble and the gentle deliverer of the people. He's not concerned with proud assertion of his status, with flaunting his power, or with contentious argument. But with gracious action towards the weak, the vulnerable, the wounded, the oppressed, and the outsiders such as the Gentiles.

That is Christ's way of being. That's what marks him out. The reference to the Gentiles here anticipates the Great Commission.

While the beginning of verse 18 looks back to chapters 1 to 4 of the book. Jesus is the one who is the Son, the Servant who has been chosen, the one who has been anointed with the Spirit of God. In all of his actions and words here then, Jesus is underlining the meaning of the words that end chapter 11.

Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Sabbath rest, true Sabbath rest. He is the Lord of the Sabbath who is giving rest to a beleaguered and

a troubled people who are labouring under these heavy burdens.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart. He is the one who is not going to break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick. And you will find rest for your souls.

Again that Sabbath theme coming to the forefront. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Contrasted with the heavy legalistic burdens of those who desire sacrifice rather than mercy, Christ is the one who shows mercy to the lost and wounded and beleaguered sheep of the house of Israel.

And while their shepherds will fleece them and seek to oppress them and prey upon them, Christ will bring them rest as the true Davidic shepherd. As the true temple, he is going to be the place where they find communion with God. And as the one who fulfills all that his namesake Joshua anticipated, he will bring them into the greater promised land.

A question to consider. In Jesus' teaching in this chapter, he's exposing a fundamental perversion of the purpose of the law, where the law is made into a means of imposing burdens upon people, rather than actually fulfilling the will of God and giving his sheep rest. What are some ways in which we can pervert Christ's command in a similar way, and how can we avoid or overcome such errors? In the second half of Matthew chapter 12, Jesus deals with the question of how he performs his exorcisms, and also with the issue of true membership of the people of God.

The question of how Jesus casts out demons, and the claim that he does so by the power of Satan himself, is one that occurs on a number of occasions within the Gospel of Matthew, and it's an important one, it's one that Jesus highlights elsewhere. It's important to consider how much of Jesus' ministry is focused upon direct conflict with Satan and demonic forces. Jesus isn't just a teacher, or even a healer, or a miracle worker.

He's an exorcist. He's someone who drives out evil spirits, like David who gave relief to Saul, who was troubled by an evil spirit after the spirit of God left him. So Jesus, as David's greater son, brings relief to the people of Israel, who are troubled by evil spirits.

The Pharisees accuse him of acting in the power of Beelzebul, or Beelzebub, the lord of the flies, or maybe the lord of the garbage heap. If this were the case, though, Jesus argues, Satan's kingdom would be doomed, as it would be divided against itself, seeking to cast out itself. And they aren't even consistent in their accusations, for if they were, they'd be accusing their own disciples and sons who cast out demons.

Jesus seems to acknowledge here that there are others who are performing exorcisms, but his exorcisms seem to be operating on a different level. He is casting out by the

spirit of God, which is proof that the kingdom of God has come upon Israel. He's conquering the oppressed land for God.

Now, other exorcists seem to cast out demons using incantations, bizarre rituals, and other things along those lines, whereas Christ does so by his powerful and authoritative word, something that's noted in the Gospels, that with a word he can cast out demons. It's his own authority that he's doing this with, it's not with some special trick or some ritual that he has to perform. He has personal authority over the demonic realm.

The demons recognize him and tremble. Jesus binds the strongman, and as a result, can plunder his house. In Luke 11, verse 20, there's a reference to the finger of God in this same saying, which suggests that the story of the Exodus might be in the background here.

As the Egyptian magicians speak about the plagues being performed by the finger of God, that they can't replicate them at a certain point. That is a sign that God is acting, and likewise here, God is acting in Jesus Christ in a way that proves there's a new Exodus-type event taking place. In this moment in history, things have narrowed to a point, and there are no places to stand on the sideline.

You can't be neutral. You're either for or against Christ, either gathering with him or scattering. And Jesus presents this alternative very clearly to people, that they don't have the opportunity to just stand back and be neutral.

In verses 31 and 32, Jesus declares that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. And this is contrasted with speaking against the Son of Man. The best way of understanding this, I believe, is to read it against the background of redemptive history.

In Stephen's speech in the book of Acts, for instance, he speaks about two visitations. About Joseph when he first is rejected by his brothers, and then the second time when he brings them salvation. Likewise with Moses.

And the same is true of Christ. He first comes in humility in his earthly ministry. But then, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit is given to continue the ministry of Christ.

To continue it in power in the ministry of the Church. However, if Israel reject not just Christ in his earthly ministry, but also the ministry of the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit, they are not just blaspheming against the Son of Man, they're also blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. Or as we read in Hebrews chapter 6, they're crucifying Christ again.

They crucified him once, now they are crucifying him again. In rejecting the ministry of the Gospel through the Church. The Pharisees' rejection of Christ, and more particularly their accusation that he is acting by the power of Satan himself, is a manifestation of the state of their hearts.

And it will be for this reason that they reject the ministry of the Church too, when that comes along. Bad trees cannot bear good fruit. They are a brood of vipers.

And that image is that they are children of the great serpent. That they are the seed of the serpent, rather than the seed of the woman. Jesus draws particular attention to the relationship between the heart and the tongue.

This is a common theme in the wisdom literature, for instance, in the book of Proverbs and elsewhere. Speech manifests the heart. And the themes here might also relate to the healing and exorcism that has provoked this discourse in the first place.

Jesus has healed a mute and blind man who was oppressed by a demon. And it seems that the oppression of the demon prevented the man from seeing and from speaking. In a similar manner, the people who are accusing him of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul, are displaying the failure of their faculties of speech and of perception as a result of their demonically oppressed hearts.

Some of the scribes and Pharisees then ask him for a sign. And Jesus refuses to give any sign apart from the sign of the prophet Jonah. And note the similarity with the challenge of Satan earlier on in chapter 4. If you are the son of God, then do this great sign.

Jesus declares them to be an evil and adulterous generation. And this recalls the language of Moses during the Exodus. In Deuteronomy 32, verse 5, they have dealt corruptly with him.

They are no longer his children because they are blemished. They are a crooked and twisted generation. And again in verse 20 of that same chapter, they are a perverse generation, children in whom there is no faithfulness.

Why are they given the sign of Jonah? Jesus, among other things, is declaring in advance what he is going to do in his death and resurrection. So that when it happens, it will be very clear that it was intended. As we read in John's Gospel on a number of occasions in particular, Jesus said a number of things in his ministry that were not understood at the time.

But afterwards, they were understood to be confirmatory statements that made clear that Christ knew all along what he was about to do. Such sayings encouraged faith later on as they were brought to mind. Jonah's generation was described as adulterous and Jonah was sent to the people of Nineveh, among other reasons, as a sign of God's judgment of leaving Israel and going to the nations, provoking Israel to jealousy by showing others mercy.

The Israel of Jesus' day would experience the same thing. The Book of Jonah is also a sign to Israel of its own judgment of exile, but then its deliverance from that. There is a lot of symbolism in the Book of Jonah, as Jonah's sin leads to the shaking up of the

waters and trouble for the sailors on the boat.

They have to cast Jonah into the sea and then Jonah is swallowed by this big fish. As he prays to God in the belly of this big fish, he is later vomited out on the land. The second half of the Book of Jonah, chapters 3-4, parallel the first two chapters in other ways.

It is the story of two missions of Jonah, the dove. It's a story that brings to mind Ark themes, not just in the fact that it's two missions of a dove, but in other respects as well. God is preparing an Ark for his people in Nineveh itself.

The emphasis upon the cattle and their involvement within all the events, the events of the fasting, that God is concerned for the cattle at the very end of the book. The way that Nineveh is described, the numbers associated with it, suggest a connection between Noah's Ark and Nineveh. God is preparing to cast his people into the sea.

They've caused upset in the region because of their sin and they have to be cast into exile. But God is preparing a big fish of Nineveh to swallow them up. And as they are swallowed up, if they pray to God in the belly of that big fish, they will be delivered.

Likewise, as we go through, we can see that the gourd that provides shade to Jonah also represents the way that the rising kingdom of Assyria in the north provided shade from the Aramean kingdoms and gave Israel the chance for its borders to expand. All of these are things that speak not just to a story of an individual prophet, but to the political situation of that day. And in the same way, Christ is giving a message to his generation.

The Israel of Jesus' day would experience something very similar. It would also experience being cast out. Christ himself will be cast into the sea of the Gentiles, but he will rise up.

And Jesus' whole mission is a sign. He is the sign. The resurrection in particular confirms this.

Jesus is not going to perform just a single great wonder to demonstrate his identity. His identity will be demonstrated by the full scope of his work and the way that that work relates to the destiny of the people as a whole. Christ is the greater than Jonah, but he is also the greater than Solomon, whom the queen of Sheba travelled to see.

He is God's wisdom in person, not just the wisest man as Solomon was. Rather, he is God's wisdom come in human flesh. Note again that it is a Gentile being summoned as a witness against them.

We've seen this in Tyre and Sidon, in Sodom and Gomorrah, and now with the queen of Sheba. All these characters, and the character of Jonah who goes to the people of Nineveh and they repent, whereas the people of Israel do not repent. In all of the witnesses being brought forth, we're having some indication of the way that the story is

heading.

Christ drives demons out of Israel to the wilderness, the place of the evil spirits. But if Israel does not fill the house of the nation with God's presence, things will become even worse for them. It's important to consider the fate of that generation.

They were indeed possessed by more evil spirits than the first. In the 60s, in this outpouring of revolution and rebellion and messianic fervour, they ended up leading to their destruction in AD 70. Their failure to respond appropriately to Jesus' casting out of the earlier demons was, in many ways, part of what led to that crisis.

Jesus' family wait outside, wanting to speak to him. But Jesus makes clear that blood relations are secondary to, and relativised by, the bonds of the kingdom. His truest kinship is with the brotherhood of his disciples around him.

Once again, it's important to notice that this doesn't just pit these things against each other as opponents. While they can be at direct odds with each other, as we see in some Jesus' teaching in these contexts, there is also the fact that Jesus' family relations are largely taken up into and transformed within the life of the kingdom. Note, for instance, that Mary's blessing is not simply on account of some biological connection to Jesus, but because she received Christ, being conceived in her, in submission to the will of God and believed that God would fulfil his word to her.

Mary's blessing is not merely the fact that she bears Christ biologically. She's blessed as the archetypal believer, not merely as the natural mother. We become as Christ's mother when we receive the word of the Lord like Mary did, and we become as Christ's brothers and sisters as we follow him and are faithful to the will of God as he is.

A question to consider. How can the shared life of the kingdom of God transform the way that we relate to the believing members of our own families? At the beginning of Matthew 13, Jesus leaves the house and sits down beside the sea. At this point, a crowd is gathered, or more literally, synagogued to Jesus, and Jesus goes out into a boat, sits down and teaches from there while the crowd is on the beach.

The setting here is probably significant. In the Gospels, the sea plays an important symbolic role. It's associated with the realm of the Gentiles and the world beyond Israel, and a boat is a part of the land taken out to sea.

Maybe we're supposed to pay attention to this particular detail that's mentioned in other Gospels as well. Jesus teaches the people in parables, and many people are unclear about the sort of thing that parables are. Many believe that they are illustrations, something that helps understanding and maybe presents a particular concept in a more vivid form.

Others see them as moral fables with some timeless lesson. But neither of these things

are correct. The parables are parables of the kingdom of God, something that is dawning in history at a critical moment.

And they're things that explain and disclose, but they're also things that bring about changes. Something new is happening in history, and the parables disclose this. The parables themselves are a means by which the kingdom is simultaneously revealed and concealed.

The parables are riddles that expose the mystery of the kingdom to those with the eyes to see and the ears to hear, but they're also things that conceal them to those who do not. Great mysteries are being revealed to those who are able to perceive, and those who have hard hearts and dull ears are unable to see anything. The parable closes it off to them.

And so they're performing this double function. At the same time, they're opening things up to some people, and they're closing things off to others. We find examples of parables at a few points in the Old Testament.

They can function as riddles or prophetic messages. And here they let people in on the secret of the kingdom of God, of what God is doing in Israel's history at this time. They take familiar stories and patterns and images from the Old Testament and reorder them often, yielding greater illumination but also sometimes surprising epiphanies and shocks.

This is not the way that people were expecting the story to go. While many think that the parable of the sower is obvious, Jesus himself explains it, it isn't necessarily so. There's more going on here, and it pays to be attentive to the details.

For many it's a timeless pattern of hearing and the relationship between hearing the word and being saved. It's an illustration of our doctrines of salvation, maybe helping us to understand the doctrine of regeneration and its relationship with the word of God. But while those doctrines may be true in their own place, I don't believe that that's primarily what's taking place here.

The primary place to go for understanding is the Old Testament itself. That's where we first find parables. It's where we find much of the imagery of the parables.

And if we pay attention to Old Testament prophecy and wisdom literature, many of these things will be a bit more apparent to us than they would be otherwise. The seed, I believe, is the word of God that re-establishes the people after exile. In the book of Isaiah, chapter 55, verses 10-13, we read, For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth.

It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall

succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace. The mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress, instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle, and it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. Similar themes are found in the book of Jeremiah, chapter 31, verse 27 and 28. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast.

And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the Lord. God is sowing the word that will restore his people, but it isn't being properly received. Indeed, much of the seed will be wasted and remain in its exile-like conditions.

And the telling of the parable has something of the effect that it is describing. Those who recognise its meaning can perceive that God is finally bringing about the fulfilment of his promises in Christ. He is sowing his word, he is restoring his people.

But the climax of the story won't necessarily look the way that people expected it to. In the climax, Jesus experiences the negative responses that previous prophets had received, not just the positive response of fruitfulness expected. You have both of those things alongside each other.

We find the imagery of failed ground elsewhere in the New Testament. For instance, in Hebrews chapter 6 verses 7 and 8. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

In that context, I believe he is referring to the Israelites who rejected the word of God, which is the same thing as Christ is referring to. These are people that had received all the blessings, had received the sowing of the word of God, and yet had not produced fruit. They had failed in that respect, and they were being prepared for being burned as a result.

They were suffering judgement in that generation. The same imagery of sower and seed is found elsewhere in literature of the same sort of period. We find it in 4 Ezra for instance, chapter 8, verse 41, following.

And then 4 Ezra 9, verse 30, following. Jesus seems to use the imagery of the seed and the sower in a very similar way. The parable of the sower is especially important because, in many respects, it is the parable about parables.

It is in the context of this parable that Jesus teaches concerning his use of parables more generally. It is also arguably the first of the parables, and like many of the other parables, it is a parable about growth. We will find it very difficult to understand the parable of the sower unless we see it against the backdrop of the verses that Jesus quotes from Isaiah chapter 6. The point of Jesus' use of Isaiah chapter 6 is not just to explain non-response, but to provoke faithful response.

Jesus is giving this word of judgement that Isaiah has at the beginning of his ministry to provoke people who hear that not to be like that. Jesus draws a strong comparison between his ministry and that of Isaiah. This is a comparison that is quite pronounced in a number of the Gospels.

For instance, it is developed all the way through Luke, leading up to the climax of Acts chapter 28, where that verse is brought forward again. In verses 25 to 28, This is the very end of the book of Acts. It is a programmatic statement for Acts and for the book of Luke.

It helps to address the question with which the book of Acts begins. Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel at this time? As a more general principle of interpretation, it is important when we hear an Old Testament passage quoted, referenced or alluded to, to consider the context that it originally comes from. The latter part of Isaiah chapter 6 is all about hearing and not hearing.

It ends on a key note about the remnant as the holy seed. It is by God's sowing of his word and the hearing of that word that the promised remnant is planted. Isaiah brings those themes together.

We won't understand the melody, as it were, of Matthew chapter 13 unless we hear it alongside the harmony of Isaiah chapter 6. Those two things played together bring to life what is taking place here. The verses after the verses Jesus quotes read, Then I said, How long, O Lord? And he said, Until cities lie waste without inhabitants, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste. And the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.

And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump. So Jesus is comparing his ministry to previous ministries of prophets such as Isaiah.

But he's also presenting himself as the one who is sowing the seed of the restoration, the seed of the remnant that will restore God's people as the prophets had all promised. In Hosea chapter 2, verse 21 to 23, for instance, we read, And in that day I will answer, declares the Lord, I will answer the heavens, and they shall answer the earth, and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel. Literally, God will sow, and I will sow her for myself in the land, and I will have mercy on

no mercy, and I will say to not my people, You are my people, and he shall say, You are my God.

This is the restoration that was promised, and it happens as God sows a new people. Jesus' statement to his disciples in verses 16 and 17 make clear that this is something happening at the fullness of time. It's not just a timeless message about how people respond or don't respond to the word of God.

Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. But now, in the fullness of time, God is restoring his people by sowing his word.

He's speaking, and in his speech he is restoring his word. The parable is, as I've said, a parable about parables, a parable about the teaching of the kingdom more generally. It's a statement of purpose.

The promised kingdom of God is not, as many kingdoms are, a kingdom of military might and power, a kingdom of political intrigue and skill. It's a kingdom of the word. It's a kingdom formed by the speaking of God to his people, a word that gives life.

It's a kingdom calling for wise and transformed perspectives, people changing the way that they see the world, God's action within it, and their place within it. And its working is not immediately obvious. It's the sowing of a seed, a seed of a word, and that word finding root or not finding root, and the way that it responds or doesn't respond.

And that is how the work of the kingdom is taking place. This is not what we would usually think of as a kingdom. But here Christ is describing a kingdom that does not match our expectations, that surprises us.

And this fundamental surprise prepares us for much that will follow. Jesus' interpretation of the parable, with which our passage ends, highlights different problems behind the non-reception of the seed. Satan can stop people's understanding.

This is the condition that Isaiah describes, people whose hearts have become hard. They can't hear with their ears or see with their eyes. They've become dulled in their perception.

For other people, they fail to persevere through testing. They face the hard situation of being pushed to the limit, and they realise that they're going to be ostracised, they're going to lose their livelihoods, they're going to be pursued, or maybe their lives will be taken. And faced with those prospects, they give up.

They do not persevere through the testing. For others, it's being led astray by the concerns of the present age. The deceitfulness of riches is a very powerful way of

describing how riches can operate.

Jesus has talked about riches elsewhere, in the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, and spoken about how important it is to relate to riches well if we are going to enter the kingdom of God. Reading this parable in its proper context is incredibly important. It's important to see that Christ is declaring something that's happening in the fullness of time through his ministry.

God is establishing a new people, and he's establishing this new people by his word. And there are all these obstacles to receiving this word, this word of restoration. It can be seen in the way that Satan will dull people's understanding or snatch the word away from their hearts.

It can be seen in the way that the cares and concerns of the world, the wealth that we have, and the way that we become preoccupied with it, the way in which we can face persecution and just not stand up to it. All of these things are obstacles, and so people are forearmed against these dangers. This word that Jesus is giving here is part of the sowing that it describes.

The parable of the sower is itself a sowing of the word in the hearts of people so that they will respond as they ought, as they see the different ways that they could respond in an inappropriate way. They are being called to be those who bring forth fruit. Again, the distinction is not found in the reception of the word itself.

Some ground receives the word and yet does not produce proper fruit. The distinguishing feature of the proper reception is the bringing forth of fruit. There is something that must be transformed in people's lives.

It must be something that reveals this new character of the kingdom that has been sown in their hearts, in their lives, in their communities. A question to consider. Parables are, as it were, riddles of the kingdom, and throughout this particular passage there's an emphasis upon hearing and understanding.

We have this repeated expression, for instance, He who has ears, let him hear. Blessed are your ears, for they hear. And then hear the parable of the sower.

And then Jesus' conclusion of the interpretation, As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. This emphasis upon hearing is not just found in Jesus' words. It's also seen in the words of Isaiah the prophet.

Taking this great emphasis upon hearing that is at the very beginning of Jesus' teaching in these parables, how might our more typical understandings of hearing be challenged and changed by what Jesus is teaching concerning hearing here? Matthew 13 involves three cycles of parables, and in the centre section we have the parable of the wheat and the tares as the core parable. There are common assumptions that these parables are

timeless moral fables, or perhaps illustrations of what is true for people in the age of the church. But Jesus is speaking as one fulfilling the prophets, one in the line of the prophets, bringing their missions to a climax.

And it's very difficult to understand what he's saying without taking that into account. The parables are primarily speaking to a first century context, to Israel's experience and situation. Once again, the parables here are about sowing and growing.

The parable of the wheat and the tares is a parable also about harvest. Jesus has already spoken about the harvest at the end of chapter 9. Then he said to his disciples, the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.

And those themes of harvest are ones that continue throughout the chapters that follow. Jesus and his kingdom are initiating a time of division, of judgement. And Israel needs to be prepared for this.

They're going to have to be judged as a result of how they received Jesus himself and his messengers. We often think of Jesus as standing at the beginning of the parables. The one who sets things in motion that will continue for the period of the church age, finally coming to their conclusion in the second coming.

But in most of the parables, the stories are coming to their climax in Christ. Christ is the one who completes the ministry of the prophets. He's the one who comes as the son after the servants have been cruelly treated.

In the context of these parables, Jesus refers to Psalm 78, the opening verses of that. That psalm is a retelling of Israel's history. A telling of Israel's history as one of constant failure and rebellion and disobedience.

Leading up to the establishment of David as king. Jesus is revealing the hidden truth of Israel's history in his teaching. He's telling Israel's history in the form of these parables.

Now the seed is sown in the world, not just the land. And I believe the seed being spoken of here is the diaspora, the scattering of Israel among the nations. The very etymology of the word diaspora involves the notion of sowing.

Israel is sown among the nations so that they might grow in these different parts of the world. Now we often think about the scattering of Israel purely in terms of judgment. But it wasn't just judgment.

We can see in many cases that the Israelites were having influence. That they were gaining prominence and power and speaking for God in various parts of the world. However, as faithful Israelites were growing up throughout the known world, so were unfaithful ones.

It wasn't just Daniels and Esthers and figures like that. It was also unfaithful people. People who were causing trouble and causing the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of God.

Both seemed to be thriving together. And prophets and angels might ask God, why isn't he separating them? Why isn't he removing these tares? However, now the field is white for harvest and the division is about to take place. The cities that Jesus and his disciples go through are being prepared to stand in the judgment.

And it will be worse for those that reject Christ and his disciples than cities such as Sodom and Gomorrah or Tyre and Sidon. The kingdom then is bringing about a sifting process, the initiation of a process of separation. In the parable of the mustard seed that follows, Jesus is once again working with Old Testament background and talking about the story of Israel.

More particularly, he's working with the parable of Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter 17. In that parable, there are two eagles representing Babylon and the Egyptians. The Babylonian eagle snaps off part of this cedar tree, its topmost of its young twigs, and carries it to a land of trade, sets it in a city of merchants, places it beside abundant waters, and it starts to sprout and become a low spreading vine.

Its branches turn towards it and it becomes a prosperous vine. There is then another eagle that comes along representing Egypt. And that eagle causes the vine to move towards it and the vine withers as it does so.

God then declares that at the end, I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs, a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar.

And under it will dwell every kind of bird. In the shade of its branches, birds of every sort will nest. And all of the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord.

I bring low the high tree and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord, I have spoken and I will do it. Within that parable of Ezekiel we have many of the same themes.

We have the idea of sowing, we have the idea of this tree that becomes great and prospers, and this tree compared with all the other trees, we have the elements of the birds coming to take rest in its branches and shade beneath it. Similar language is also found in the book of Daniel in reference to Nebuchadnezzar. The tree is a symbol of a powerful empire or a ruler, one that provides refuge and strength for others.

Nebuchadnezzar is symbolised in the vision. The tree grew and became strong and its

top reached to heaven and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant.

And in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches and all flesh was fed from it. That tree will later be locked down as God judges Nebuchadnezzar.

But the symbolism is there again. Further symbolism that might be in the background of this particular parable is found just two chapters earlier in the book of Daniel where the stone that comes down grows into a mountain that fills the whole earth. Now while Jesus is using the background of Ezekiel, he does not mention a cedar tree.

Rather he talks about a mustard seed. And a mustard seed that eventually grows into a tree and becomes larger than all the garden plants and the birds of the air come and make their nests in its branches. It's this great tree that stands out from the other trees.

It's a very strange way to describe it, particularly since it defies all botanical reality. But that's because this isn't an illustration taken from nature. It's playing off against the image of the cedar.

The cedars like Babylon or the Romans or the Greeks stand out on this horizon. They're these vast trees. And yet Israel seems like this small, measly bush.

It's a mustard bush. It's not actually a tree at all. But yet what Jesus is saying is that it is a tree.

It's a great tree. Great among all the other trees. And it is actually the central tree.

It isn't great by nature. It has the smallest seed of all. Also, not just the smallest seed of all, but naturally it just becomes a bush.

But yet in God's kingdom, it is that great tree. It is the one that fulfills all these promises of this mountain that will fill the earth, of this tree that will give rest to birds in its branches. What is happening with the mustard seed is not natural.

But it is a sign of God's power and God's involvement. God is going to establish His kingdom through a mustard seed, not through the great cedars of the world. The parable of the leaven that follows works with very similar themes.

The leaven, which isn't the same as yeast, it's more like sourdough, is hidden in three measures of flour. Israel, as it's scattered throughout the world, as it's hidden among these different measures of flour, causes the nations to rise up like yeast has that effect in flour. Israel has been hidden among the nations by God, and this is part of God's purpose.

It is part of the means by which the kingdom is established. When Paul and others go on

their missionary journeys throughout the world, everywhere they go, pretty much, there are synagogues. There are faithful Jews who are prepared to hear the message of the gospel.

This is part of how the early church develops. Maybe this is what's being referred to. But this isn't a dramatic process.

It's a gradual process. It isn't glorious. It uses leaven.

Leaven is something that has a lot of negative connotations in Scripture. It might be seen as unclean, but yet this is the means by which God works. Not in a glorious, dramatic way, not through this great establishment of a kingdom on the front stage, but in very silent, hidden, imperceptible ways.

The work of the kingdom is going on in these different places. The parables of the mustard seed and of the leaven are twin parables. As we look through the Gospels, we'll see several sets of twin parables, or even triplet parables.

These can be more readily understood when they're related to each other. They're seldom identical twins, though. The point is not just to repeat what has already been said using a different illustration.

It's not what's going on. Rather, they represent different aspects of Israel's ministry in relationship to the nations. The parable of the mustard seed highlights the smallness of Israel relative to the nations.

The parable of the leaven represents the hiddenness of the work of the kingdom that's being carried out through them. Hiddenness is an important theme in these places. The work of the kingdom is marked by insignificant and inglorious origins.

Note that in the twinning, one parable involves a man sowing seed and its counterpart involves a woman hiding leaven. Both involve an intentional action towards a goal with significant results, but imperceptible processes. And the fact that one involves a man and the other involves a woman suggests to me that we're supposed to see a marriage here.

Not a literal marriage between the two characters of the parables, but the parables themselves are, as it were, a married pair. And as you read them together, you'll understand them in ways that you would not if you read them separately. Matthew says that Jesus speaks in parables to fulfil the words found near the beginning of Psalm 78, which, as I've mentioned already, recounts Israel's history leading up to the establishment of the kingdom of David.

And as the son of David, he's doing the same thing in relationship to his own kingdom. Our section ends with Jesus explaining the parable of the weeds, or the parable of the

wheat and the tares. And he does so by referring to a final judgment that's happening at the end of the age.

I believe as we go through the book of Matthew, it will become clear that the judgment in view is not the final judgment at the end of all things, but it's the judgment that's approaching at the end of that age, at the end of the age of the Old Covenant. As AD 70 and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem leads to the final hammer blow upon those who rejected Christ's ministry and that of his church. A question to consider.

The teaching of the parables is not exclusive to the situation of Israel in the first century and its identity. Rather, they speak to patterns of divine activity and work throughout history. How can we see in these parables the experience of the church? At the end of Matthew 13, Jesus is concluding his body of teaching on parables.

The parables address Israel's history and the way that the kingdom comes. I've noted that we find pairs of parables and sometimes even triplets of parables. They're intended to be read alongside and in conversation with each other.

The first of the parables here is the parable of the treasure. And the treasure found in the field is an unexpected find, in a field that belongs to some other party. The person who finds it must buy the field from an owner who does not know the value of what he possesses.

The kingdom in this parable is valuable above all else. The man who finds it must sell all that he has to obtain it. The treasure of the field eclipses the value of everything else in his possession.

He willingly surrenders all other possessions, priorities and property to get this one field. It's the only thing that matters. It completely changes his attitude to his life and all else is counted as nothing in order that he might gain the kingdom.

It calls for unreserved and complete self-investment. And the purchase of the man is characterised by joy. A joy that utterly overwhelms any sense of loss of the rest of his possessions.

And alongside this parable of the treasure we find the parable of the pearl of great price. It's a counterpart but there are also differences. The parable of the pearl of great price involves a treasure not that's to be found in a field but one associated with the sea.

And now it's a merchant that finds this treasure. The focus in this parable is not primarily on the treasure but upon the finder. In the first parable, the parable of the hidden treasure, the kingdom of heaven is likened to treasure hidden in a field.

But in this one the kingdom of heaven is likened to the merchant in search of fine pearls. The first parable emphasises joy, surprise and hiddenness. But the second doesn't even

though it has seeking as a key element.

The second focuses on the surpassing character of one particular example of a group of things being sought. So he's seeking for pearls and he finds this one particular pearl. A pearl that is of greater worth than any other.

And so he begins by seeking for pearls more generally and he ends up in possession of one particular pearl. The parables have different nuances. They both emphasise the value of the kingdom and the appropriate action that must follow is emphasised.

That this selling of everything to obtain this one thing. But the first one seems to have a focus more upon the land. We can think about the parable of the treasure perhaps as a parable concerning Israel.

There is this great treasure, the treasure of the covenant, hidden in this field, this field of Israel. And yet this hidden treasure of the covenant and the kingdom is not valued by the people who own it. It's not truly recognised for what it is.

But the person who recognises it, whether that's a faithful Jew or whether it's Christ himself or whether it's some Gentile proselyte. That person recognising the true value is willing to make the necessary sacrifice to obtain it. The parable of the pearl of great price may be speaking more from the perspective of a Gentile God-fearer.

Or some other person who's coming upon the treasure of the covenant of Israel. Among all these other nations there is this one particular pearl of great price. And when he discovers the value of the covenant, when he discovers the value of the kingdom of Israel, he's willing to sacrifice everything to obtain it.

And so as we've recognised already, paired parables need to be read alongside each other recognising that they are both similar and different. They have slightly different shades of nuance. They emphasise different facets of the kingdom.

But placed alongside each other they'll often reveal more than if they're read in detachment from each other. The parable of the dragnet follows. And even though the parable of the dragnet is not next to the parable of the wheat and the weeds, there seem to be a great many similarities between them.

Sorting of good and bad, weeping and gnashing of teeth, the angels, the end of the age, division, all these sorts of things. But there are differences. There's no enemy involved in the parable of the dragnet.

There's almost an entire focus upon the negative punishment. We do find background in the Old Testament as well. You can maybe think of Habakkuk 1, verses 14-17.

Here nations and peoples of the Gentiles are compared to fish in the sea. And the

Chaldeans are going through with their hooks and their dragnets and bringing people out. The imagery of the dragnet and the hook here is a negative one.

It's one of actually overcoming or defeating people. Related imagery could be found in Ezekiel 32, verse 3. I will throw my net over you with a host of many peoples and they will haul you up in my dragnet. It's a reference to Egypt in the midst of the seas.

But there are positive uses of the language of the dragnet too and of fishing. In chapter 47 of Ezekiel, verses 9 following. And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live and there will be very many fish.

For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh, so everything will live where the river goes. Fishermen will stand beside the sea. From En Gedi to En Eglim, it will be a place for the spreading of nets.

Its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the great sea. So the dragnet can be used as a symbol both of blessing and of judgment. As in the case of the Pearl of Great Price, as a sea parable, this relates chiefly to the Gentiles as distinct from Israel.

So Israel has gathered a great many people from the nations who believe in or have pledged adherence to the God of Israel. And they are going to be divided too. This is the parable of the dragnet.

Jesus concludes this body of teaching by speaking about the scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven. Once again, Jesus is giving a saying that explains his use of parables. There are three blocks of parables here, each with an explanatory statement.

And this is the one in this particular body. It particularly relates to the disciples who will become teachers in the kingdom. And they are to bring out both old and new things.

Now we can see this maybe as bringing out truths from the Old Testament and maybe bringing out new truths of the Gospel. But it could also be a reference to what Jesus has already spoken about. He has spoken about things that righteous men and prophets long to see and hear.

And also to things hidden since the foundation of the world. The things that the righteous men and prophets long to see and hear are the things that are new that Christ is bringing about through his ministry. But the things hidden from the foundation of the world are treasures that have been there all the time.

The oldest things of all. But yet they've never truly been revealed. So maybe what they're bringing out are not just the new things that are being accomplished by Christ.

But the very old things that are being brought into the light by Christ. When we read the Old Testament as Christians, we're not just bringing out truths that have been known

since time immemorial. We're revealing something about what is old in the light of Christ.

The old treasure that has been hidden is being disclosed. And now people can see its true value. Following this teaching, Jesus spends time teaching in the synagogue of his hometown.

And Jesus has already challenged the primacy of biological family ties at the end of the previous chapter. And here his hometown's presumed familiarity with him and his identity prevents them from seeing him. They just see him as the one that they're familiar with as the son of the carpenter.

They know his family and his relatives. They know his mother, his brothers and his sisters. And they cannot see beyond that.

They cannot see that this man from Nazareth could be anything more than a mere carpenter's son. We should recognize here the ongoing themes of hiddenness that have been in this chapter are once again at play in their failure to recognize who Christ is. Also the themes of division.

People are being divided on the basis of their failure to or ability to recognize Christ. And here in Jesus' own hometown there are people who are hearing but not understanding, seeing but not perceiving. A question to consider.

There are two key parables in this section that speak of selling everything in order to obtain the kingdom. Jesus has already taught concerning our relationship to wealth in the Sermon on the Mount. And here he returns to themes that invite reflection upon economic attachments and commitments and priorities.

How could we reassess our economic values in the light of the teaching of the parable of the pearl of great price and the treasure in the field? Matthew 14 begins with the story of the death of John the Baptist. But it's introduced in a surprising way. Herod hears word of Jesus' miracles and actions and then wonders whether John the Baptist has been brought back to life.

Then we hear the story of the death of John the Baptist. After which Jesus responds to hearing the news of the death of John the Baptist. It's an interesting way to tell us the story.

It highlights the theme of resurrection. Jesus is John the Baptist raised up again. And here we might think of the story of Elijah and Elisha as the ministry of Elisha continues from the ministry of that of Elijah.

Elisha is anointed with the spirit of Elijah. He has the double portion of the spirit of Elijah and continues his ministry completing it. Likewise with John the Baptist his ministry is a

ministry of the desert that is completed by the ministry of Christ in the land.

There are other themes of the ministry of Elijah and Elisha that are in play here. Themes of widespread rejection but also of a remnant. As we have already noted in studying this book, John the Baptist's story is very similar to that of Elijah.

They're both people of the wilderness. They're both dressed in similar garments. John the Baptist is one who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah.

He's the Elijah that is to come. And in all of these ways there is an association between those characters. But here we have a story that brings out further associations.

The story of Elijah and 1 Kings is dominated by a conflict with King Ahab and his manipulative wife Jezebel. And here we have a similar pair, Herod and his wife Herodias, who are in conflict with John the Baptist. Once again there's a manipulative wife who's trying to spur her husband on to destroy the prophet.

There's a further aspect of Old Testament background that might come to our mind at this point. It's a story that has two key women who influence their husbands greatly. In that story Ahasuerus, the king, offers up to half his kingdom to the woman who pleases him, Esther.

Herod does the same thing. Once again it's at a feast. And Herodias is like an anti-Mordecai to her daughter, who's an anti-Esther.

She's someone who represents the polar opposite of Esther. The character of Herodias might also remind us of Zeresh, who spurred Haman on in his attempt to kill Mordecai, the man who wouldn't bow to him. In Esther 5, verses 9 we read, And he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh.

And Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honoured him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king. Then Haman said, Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, It's a very similar dynamic that's playing out here. Haman, we should remember, is an Agagite, a descendant of Agag, and a descendant of Amalek.

Amalek sought to kill the Jews, and Herod is an Idumean, a descendant of Edom, like Amalek. And maybe there's a connection between their two characters. The descendant of Esau is trying to kill the descendant of Jacob.

John then is Elijah. Jesus is Elisha. And Elisha, as one of his first miracles, performs the multiplication of loaves.

In 2 Kings 2, verse 42, 20 loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. And Elisha said, But his servant said, So he repeated, Jesus is a new Elisha, performing that

multiplication of loaves, but on a much higher level. A multitude follows Jesus into the wilderness, where he gets his disciples to serve them food that's multiplied.

He's providing food in the wilderness, like the manna was provided in the wilderness. That's a connection that's particularly explored in the Gospel of Matthew. Each one of the Gospels records this particular miracle.

It seems to be especially important for them. There are five loaves and two fish. The five loaves, perhaps, connect with the five loaves of 1 Samuel, chapter 21.

In that chapter, fleeing from Saul, David comes to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest, and asks for some food for his men. He says, And the priest answered David, Having just heard about the death of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod, maybe we're supposed to connect Herod with Saul. Jesus, upon hearing about the death of John the Baptist, withdraws to a deserted place, and the people follow him.

They're like the men around David as he flees from Saul, and he provides for them, as David provided for his men, with five loaves. There's no mention of the distribution of the fish in this particular account in Matthew, which perhaps is because Matthew wants us to connect it with what happens later on in the Gospel, which is the institution of the Lord's Supper. He looked up to heaven and said a blessing.

Then he broke the loaves and gave them to his disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds, and they all ate and were satisfied. And later on, in chapter 26, verse 26, Jesus breaks the bread and gives it to his disciples, who give it to the crowd. We can maybe see there a pattern for liturgy in general, that Christ breaks the bread that he gives to his church through his ministers.

This is a pattern that's being foreshadowed in the events of the feeding of the 5,000. The gathering up of the bread afterwards, the remainder of the bread, is an event given some significance. Every single one of the Gospels records the number of the baskets that are gathered up, and later on we're asked whether we saw the significance of this.

The 12 maybe suggest the connection with the 12 disciples themselves, maybe it's a connection with Israel. Maybe we're supposed to see that they are sufficient for their ministry, and that there will be enough left over for each one of them. Now one strange detail about this account that you may have noticed is that there are 5,000 men besides women and children.

That's an interesting detail. It's not what you'd expect if you were going to feed a large number of people. You'd expect all the people who are fed to be listed.

But this suggests that there's a numbering according to some different principle. You number men only when you're numbering people for military rank, when you're numbering people for fighting. In the Exodus there is this same language that's used in

verse 37 of chapter 12.

And the people of Israel journeyed from Ramesses to Succoth, about 600,000 men on foot besides women and children. And then later on we're told, and on that very day the Lord brought the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their hosts. And then in 13 verse 18, and the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle, or in fifties.

Now in the other Gospel accounts there are references to being divided into fifties, which maybe underlines this point. There is, as it were, the preparation of a military band within the wilderness. The story of the walking on the water follows this.

And here we might once again see many Exodus themes. The disciples are struggling in the water while Jesus is up on the mountain. And when evening comes he's there alone, but they are struggling with the waves and the sea which is all against them.

And in the fourth watch of the night, just before the dawn, he comes to them walking on the sea. They are terrified, thinking it's a ghost, but he tells them not to be afraid, that it is him. And then Peter asks to go out on the water.

Now there are a number of details that we've probably already picked up on that trigger associations in our mind. Perhaps we've thought back to the story of the Red Sea Crossing, where they walk through the water and it's in the last watch of the night that they are finally delivered. As the dawn comes, the Egyptians are drowned.

Then as that event is recounted later on in scripture, in places like Psalm 77 verse 19, we read things like Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters, yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. So what's taking place here might recall the event of the Red Sea Crossing and the Exodus.

Just as those early references to the feeding in the wilderness might remind us of the manna and other elements of that particular event. But I think the greatest thing we're supposed to associate this with is the event of Jesus' death and resurrection itself. We've just seen the institutions, as it were, of the Lord's Supper prefigured.

And now we have what comes next, going out into the darkness, struggling in the darkness, and this battering of the winds and the waves, this testing time. And Christ seeming to be gone. Christ then comes walking on the water.

They think it's a ghost as he comes just as the morning watch is about to dawn. And then he greets them saying, not to be afraid that it is him. And in all of these ways we're seeing some anticipation of what's going to happen at the time of the resurrection.

Their response at this point is to worship him and to declare that he is truly the Son of

God. And that will be their response as well when the resurrection occurs. Peter's stepping out onto the waves and coming towards Christ partly anticipates what he will do later on in his ministry to the Gentiles.

But his faith here is faltering. And while it exceeds that of the other disciples, he still fails and he needs to be delivered by Christ. Matthew 15 verses 1-20 is an objection story with three scenes.

Jesus engages first with the Pharisees and the scribes in verses 1-9, then with the people more generally in verses 10-11, and then finally with the disciples in verses 13-20. Jesus accuses the Pharisees and scribes when they ask him about his disciples not washing their hands. He accuses them of undermining the commandment of God through their tradition.

There's an ongoing theme in the Gospel of Matthew of law keeping and breaking. Jesus seeks to fulfil the law and this is not just a focus upon every nitty gritty detail of the law in just the letter. It's about fulfilling the deep intent of the law.

As we've seen just earlier in his teaching on the Sabbath, Jesus is concerned to fulfil the purpose of rest, not just to obey some commandment that's narrowly focused upon external observance. Jesus contrasts fulfilling with making void. The Pharisees make void the law.

They act in a way that undermines the deep intent of the law. Rather than actually serving to honour parents, they seek to find some way to circumvent God's purpose in the commandment. They are not fulfilling the spirit, they're using the letter and a perverse distortion of the letter to undermine the spirit.

This whole section is bookended with statements about cleansing hands when eating. Jesus is dealing with the objection but within a far more fundamental challenge to the Pharisees and the scribes and their form of religion. Tradition is to be judged, as Jesus teaches here, by scripture.

And the problem for the Pharisees is primarily their hypocrisy. The way that they are focusing upon external observances that hide the impurity of the heart. And the purity of the heart is absolutely integral for Christ.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. The point of this passage is not primarily an argument against food laws, but rather against the Pharisaic use of the tradition. Even the Levitical law highlighted that what came out was the real problem.

Things were impure because they emerged from flesh, not because they came in and defiled persons who were already pure. Once again Jesus is challenged here concerning the behaviour of his disciples as he was at the beginning of chapter 12 concerning their Sabbath practice. And Jesus answers a question with a question.

This is a rhetorical practice that Jesus employs on a number of different occasions. It's a way of throwing the challenge back to the people who've thrown it at him. And here Jesus is emphasising that the Pharisees and scribes have no basis upon which to make this claim to him.

They have no authority from which to make it. As far from being those who are upholding the law and in position to judge others concerning it. They are those who are concerned with undermining the law.

Of avoiding rather than observing its intent. Jesus underlines the importance of the commandment to honour parents with the citation of Exodus chapter 21 verse 17. In addition to the citation of the fifth commandment.

That those who dishonour father and mother should be put to death. This is the severest penalty. And yet they're undermining the spirit of that law entirely.

Trying to find some escape clause. Some way to avoid it. And the use of the Corban vow to defraud one's neighbour.

In this case parents from what is due to them. Is something that cuts loose love for God from love to neighbour. Which should be its necessary corollary.

Jesus quotes Isaiah chapter 29 verse 14. And maybe we should pay attention to the context of that verse here. As usual when we're reading quotes from the Old Testament and the New.

We need to consider what comes around the quote that's used. Not just the quote itself. And here I think that wider context can maybe be seen as part of the condemnation of them.

That Jesus is going to perform all these wonders, all these signs. And rather than actually responding to them. There will be forms of judgement upon them.

Jesus does not directly answer the Pharisees question at this point. He simply levels a counter accusation. He fundamentally challenges the grounds on which they are making the accusation.

They are falsely claiming authority as arbiters of proper adherence to God's law. While violating it themselves. Jesus teaches again here that what comes out of the mouth is what really matters.

The importance of the tongue is that it can manifest the heart. Now this is speech but he also includes other things. But the tongue is symbolic of the place where things emerge from the heart the most.

We should probably beware of seeing this simply as a light dismissal of the food laws.

Rather than a disclosure of their true rationale. The point here I don't think is that Jesus wants to just abrogate the old food laws.

You have that sense in Mark to some degree. But I think there's more going on. Rather the concern is to understand what they're really about.

What really makes the logic of the food laws work? Is it about avoiding external impurity? Or is it about symbolizing something more about the pursuit of internal purity? Jesus is fond of highlighting the radical antitheses that one encounters for instance in the prophets. Pitting the external practice over against its internal rationale and purpose. So mercy versus sacrifice.

The point of such an opposition is not that sacrifice shouldn't be made or should be negated or abrogated. The tradition isn't being rejected wholesale. Rather Jesus is showing the proper integrity of heart and act that should exist.

He speaks about these people as those who are not the planting of God that will be uprooted. You can maybe consider this in light of the parable of the wheat and the tares just a few chapters earlier. He presents implicitly the Pharisees as tares here.

And as religious authorities they're supposed to be guides to the blind. But they are actually like blind leading the blind. Peter speaks for the disciples asking for explanation of Jesus' challenge to the authority of the Pharisees.

And Jesus then addresses the original point of the confrontation and the challenge. There's a loose relationship of Jesus' list of defiling things that arise from the heart with the sixth to the tenth commandments. The commandments from murder to covetousness.

And there's an emphasis then upon the internal posture that is ultimately foundational to all true law observance. We've seen in Jesus' teaching in many points that he's about the fulfilment of the law. And the serving of its true intent.

Not the doing away with the ritual and external observances. But to the fulfilment of the true intent that will make those ritual external observances have their proper place and purpose. Jesus ends with a reference back to the challenge that was given first in verse 2. Which has the effect of tying the whole section together.

It also provides some sort of rationale that's more explicit within the book of Mark for Gentile inclusion. Even though they may not be observing these symbolic commandments, they are observing the true reality of the heart. The incident that follows with the Canaanite woman approaching Jesus to heal her child is one that has caused many problems for people.

Who have felt that the character of Jesus as displayed in this incident is uncaring and

unloving. I don't think that's actually the case. I think that a careful reading of this particular incident will help us to see what's truly going on.

There are four requests made to Jesus. First of all by the woman. Then by the disciples who have been troubled and pestered by the woman.

Then by the woman again. And then by the woman again. She's rebuffed the first time with silence.

Then there's a statement made to the disciples about the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And the fact that Christ is sent only to them. Then there's the statement about the children's food.

And this isn't the first time or the last when Jesus presents obstacles to someone so that they can prove their faith. Note that Jesus doesn't send her away as the disciples request. What he does is present an obstacle instead.

He declares that he's been sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And that's not something that is just dismissive. It's not just something that is untrue either.

He has been sent to them in particular. And there is a sense in which this obstacle is a real obstacle. It's not just one that's made up for the sake of things.

In chapter 10 verses 5-6 Jesus says, Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. This is the particular remit of his calling. This is who he's focusing upon.

And he speaks in the harshest terms it might seem of not giving children's bread to the dogs. Now it's quite possible Jesus is quoting a proverb here. And that this particular statement should not be seen as Christ's own words but him repeating some statement that might have been current at the time.

And the woman counters in terms of the proverb itself. Not treating the proverb as a final rebuff but using it as leverage to gain Christ's action. Some have suggested that we should see behind this incident and the interaction that precedes it, some relation to the Gentile mission that comes later on in the book of Acts.

Perhaps that's the case. The gospel will go to those outside of the house of Israel. Perhaps the most instructive parallel for understanding this incident however is found in Matthew chapter 8. Where Jesus is approached by the centurion who wants to have his servant healed.

Once again it's a Gentile requesting for the healing of someone else. And Jesus in both cases gives a discouraging response. When he responds to the centurion he says, Shall I come and heal him? The point being, do you expect me to come and heal him? And the

centurion responds, Lord I am not worthy to have you come under my roof but only say the word and my servant will be healed.

Once again there's a discouraging response given and a persistent answer to that response from Christ. That demonstrates in both cases great faith. In both of these stories the Gentile then goes on to make a statement that is profoundly illuminating.

For the centurion it's a statement about authority and the power of Christ's word. And for the Canaanite woman it's a different sort of statement. It's a statement about the extent of God's gifts and that they can overflow beyond their initial intended recipients.

And Jesus in response to the faith of the centurion says that he has not found anyone in Israel with such faith. And then later on when he's talking to the Canaanite woman he makes a similar sort of statement. O woman, great is your faith.

These people are set forth not just as people that Christ grudgingly lets go through, but rather as people that Christ presents obstacles to, but whose faith perseveres and persists and receives a reward. Jesus presents these then not just as exceptional cases, but as examples that are held forth of faith for everyone. When we read the story of the Canaanite woman this is a story that provides an example for us to follow.

Not just someone who slipped through and managed to get something that wasn't intended for her, but rather someone who demonstrates the claim that faith has upon God's good gifts and the way in which a persevering faith can receive from God's hand things that might seem initially to be denied. A question to consider. In the Gospel of Mark the woman is described as a Syrophenician, whereas here she's described as a Canaanite.

What connotations and significance might there be in describing her as a Canaanite woman? Why do you think that Matthew uses this particular term? The concluding half of Matthew chapter 15 begins with Jesus performing a series of healings on a single occasion. He goes up on a mountain, a site which could be chosen for orientation to God. It's where you'd go to have communion with God, to pray or something else.

And he sits down and people come to him and bring him people for healing. The outcome of the event is that people glorify God. This is the heart of the purpose of the healings.

Very often when we're reading through the Gospels we can think that with the conflicts with the religious leaders that what really matters about the signs is establishing credentials and authority and a demonstration of power. But that's not the main thing at all. It's about God coming near to his people and his people drawing near to him.

And that's exactly what we see in this particular incident. This event provides the context for a miraculous provision of food to the crowd. Having healed and taught the

people and led them to glorify God, Jesus does not want to send them away hungry.

And in an event reminiscent of the earlier feeding of the 5,000, Jesus repeats the pattern of the Lord's Supper. In verse 36, he took the seven loaves and the fish and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples and the disciples gave them to the crowds. Already in reference to the feeding of the 5,000, I noted the way that this is representing a church scene in part.

The disciples are receiving the bread from Christ, the bread that makes us think of the institution of the Lord's Supper later on. And they are passing it on to the people, the people that have been gathered around and under their leadership. This is preparing us for the later ministry of the church under the teaching and the guidance and the rule of the apostles.

This seems to occur in a largely Gentile region, particularly emphasised in the book of Mark. And it's suggested in part also by the coming of the Canaanite woman to Christ. Jesus is feeding not only Jews but presumably many Gentiles too.

And we must now think back to the conversation with the Canaanite woman. Gentile God-fearers are feasting with the lost sheep. And so the dogs that many would dismiss are now eating at the same table with the Jews.

There are 5,000 in the earlier account connected with Israel's military ordering, the 50s that they were divided into. And 12 baskets are gathered up afterwards. They're fed with 5 loaves and 2 fish.

Here we have 4,000 maybe connected with the 4 corners of the earth. And there are 7 baskets gathered up. The word for basket is different.

The feeding of the 5,000 is the primary act and miracle. But the Gentiles are also blessed with the Jews. There are leftovers, leftovers for others.

There's a superabundance, more than enough for others beside Israel. 5 loaves, 7 loaves, makes 12 loaves altogether. Israel was represented by 12 loaves of the showbread.

And maybe we're supposed to see a new Israel, a new people of God being formed here. There are 12 baskets, then there are 7 baskets. The 12 baskets are connected maybe with the 12 disciples.

Also with the symbolism of Israel more generally. This is the establishment of a new Israel around the meal table of the Messiah who provides for his people in the wilderness. After this, the Pharisees and the Sadducees come together to test Jesus.

It's interesting, these were rival sects within Judaism. And yet they're united in their

opposition to Jesus. Suddenly they find that they're friends in this particular endeavour.

They both oppose and resist Jesus. And so they can come at him together even though they're coming from different sides. Nothing brings enemies together like a greater enemy.

They ask for a sign but Jesus has already given them more signs than they would know what to do with. You can maybe think back to Isaiah chapter 29 verse 13 that he referenced earlier. The Lord said, That's exactly what's happening here.

They're asking for signs but they've been given a multitude of signs and just not seen them. They're being bamboozled by Christ. Their wonders are just leaving them befuddled.

They may be able to read the weather from the sky but they can't read the signs given from heaven in the events of their own day. Jesus describes them as an evil and adulterous generation. This harkens back to the words of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 32 verses 5 and 20.

And again. Just as Deuteronomy chapter 32 warns, God sent his word not to part of the nation of Israel but to the Assyrians and to Nineveh. And as he did that he showed grace to people who were not a people and brought to jealousy his own people.

This is the same thing that Christ threatens here in part. The sign of Jonah will be seen as the gospel goes out to a different people and they will be provoked to jealousy. Jesus warns about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees which his disciples don't understand.

But the point is that teaching is like leaven which when hidden in hearts produces loaves of a particular character. Jesus is forming a new set of people as loaves, cutting off the old leaven of the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees but introducing the new leaven of his words and his spirit. Now we need to recognise that leaven is not the same thing as yeast.

Leaven is part of the dough of the old bread that is taken and put into the new bread to cause it to rise in a sort of sourdough form. And that continuing tradition is one part of the bread being passed on to another. It's generations of bread and that generational character is like a tradition.

And the point of cutting off leaven is to cut off the tradition, to break with the past, to make this cut with the former pattern of life. Leaven then is passed on as a tradition from loaf to loaf and the disciples need to make a clean break with the Egyptian loaves of the scribes and the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Jesus challenges them to pay attention to the miracles that had just occurred and the numbers associated with it.

We may find this very difficult to understand. The numerology of such events just seems opaque to us. But Jesus clearly wanted his disciples to see meaning in those events.

Those events were signs. They weren't just great works of power. They were great works of meaning as well.

Five loaves for five thousand. Seven loaves but only four thousand fed. Some have suggested that this might be an anticipation of the feeding of three thousand at the day of Pentecost.

Seven loaves should feed seven thousand but there's three thousand left over. And maybe that's an anticipation. I'm not sure.

I'm less convinced by that but it's a possibility some have raised. Jesus' teaching concerning leaven and loaves and these other themes can draw our mind back also to the teaching of the parables in chapter 13 where many of these themes are also present. Jesus is teaching in a way that challenges us to recognize the tradition and the way that it forms us.

When you've been taught by a particular person it's as if there's part of their dough that is placed within you. Something that has formed them that has their character and it becomes part of you and you need to be very very careful what you take into yourself. And so cutting off the old leaven of wickedness, the old leaven of false teaching, the old leaven of the traditions that lead us away from God is absolutely imperative.

Because if you take that on it will eventually determine your character. There is a flip side to the warning of course. In the book of 1st Corinthians we see the church described as a loaf.

And a loaf that is formed of many different people were all one loaf. Now Christ's forming of a new loaf is formed in part through the gift of a new pattern of life, of new leaven that Christ has placed within us. His words and his spirit and as a result we take on a new character, a character of a loaf for God's glory.

And so it matters a lot the way that we live as bread. We're supposed to think also maybe of the relationship between the other themes of growing, of wheat and tares and these other ways in which those symbols maybe feed into the symbolism of bread and yeast. There's a process here.

God is making bread for himself. And then think how that might relate to our celebration of the Lord's Supper which concentrates the life of the church in the celebration of a shared eating of a loaf which we all are. We are one loaf and so we share in one loaf.

A question to consider. What might be learned about our gathering together in worship from this passage and its various elements? In the second half of Matthew chapter 16 is

one of the strongest declarations of Christ's identity within the Gospels given by Peter as he confesses that Christ is the Son of God. Jesus asks his disciples who men say that he is and there are a list of prophets given in response.

Elijah or maybe John the Baptist who has come back or maybe Jeremiah or some other of the prophets. The association with Elijah can be seen back in Malachi. At the end of Malachi that promise that Elijah will come before that great day of the Lord.

Maybe Jesus is that promise coming to pass. Maybe John the Baptist was only the start of the mission and there needs to be another coming in the spirit and power of John the Baptist to complete it. Maybe in the same way as Elisha finishes the ministry of Elijah.

And Christ could be that one. Other prophets seem to be mentioned. No one seems to mention Moses here which is interesting.

He is the great prophet that is to come like Moses but that is not mentioned at this point. Why is Jeremiah mentioned? Jeremiah is a righteous sufferer and martyr. He's led as a lamb to the slaughter in Jeremiah chapter 11 verse 19.

He's a prophet who preaches against the temple. Maybe Christ is coming in that mould. When Peter declares Christ to be the son of the living God, Christ responds by giving a symmetrical statement.

You are the Christ, the son of the living God. You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church. There is a symmetry between those two statements.

What does it mean that Christ declares Peter to be the rock? First of all this is something that is not exclusive to the book of Matthew. We find a similar statement in John chapter 1 verse 42. He brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said you are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas which means Peter. There are various theories about what it means for Christ to call Peter, Peter.

Why is he called the rock? Why is he associated with this? Maybe we can look back at Isaiah chapter 51 verse 1 to 2 for some hint of what it could mean. Listen to me you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn and to the quarry from which you were dug.

Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you. For he was but one when I called him that I might bless him and multiply him. Abraham there is the rock.

He is the rock from which Israel was drawn and hewn out as a nation. In John the Baptist teaching in Matthew chapter 3 we've already seen what might be an allusion back to this. When John said that God could raise up from the stones children for Abraham.

It was most likely that his hearers would think back to this chapter from Isaiah. Peter like Abraham is one who stands at the head of a people. As Christ forms his church he forms it with Peter as the leading one of the disciples.

Christ is going to build a church. That's interesting seeing the interplay of the language of an assembly. The church is not so much a building as an assembly of people like a military assembly.

Christ is going to establish a new assembly but he's going to establish it as a building. It's a building and also an assembly of people. We can think about a military assembly.

We can think also about the building of a temple. These two things go alongside each other. Within the epistles this interplay is explored in much more detail.

We see the way that Paul on the one hand will talk about Christ building a body. On the other hand talking about him building a building. Or of the building being knit together as if by sinews.

This language of the body, this language of the house. The way that the people are described as living stones. Or built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

We're building a house but we're also building a people, an assembly of people. Jeremiah uses some sort of language of building people in places like chapter 12 verse 16, 18 verse 9, 31 verse 4, 33 verse 7 and 42 verse 10. So this does have some sort of precedent in the Old Testament.

The military connotations of an assembly might also be worth looking into here. Maybe we're supposed to think back to Israel encamped around Sinai. God forming a people in that context.

And there the tabernacle itself is supposed to represent Sinai and the people at Sinai and also a body. The tabernacle is described in many ways that recall the formation of a body. Beyond this background I think there's a particular passage that may be especially important for understanding what Christ is declaring here to Peter.

In the book of Jeremiah chapter 1, Jeremiah is called for his mission. Reading from verse 9. And the word of the Lord came to me saying, The word of the Lord came to me a second time saying, And they shall come and every one shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem against all its walls all around and against all the cities of Judah. And I will declare my judgments against them for all their evil in forsaking me.

They have made offerings to other gods and worship the works of their own hands. But you dress yourself for work, arise and say to them everything I command you. Do not be dismayed by them lest I dismay you before them.

And I behold I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar and bronze walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you for I am with you declares the Lord to deliver you. Paying attention to this passage we may be seeing a number of the elements that we find in Matthew chapter 16.

God promises to give to Jeremiah the power to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. It's similar to the power that is given to Peter to bind and to loose. There's a similar pairing there and that's given to Jeremiah through God's placing of his words in his mouth.

So that Jeremiah might act with the authority of God's word as he bears God's word upon his mouth. Other things to notice, there are the references to gates, the gates that are threatened in the case of Jerusalem. And then also all these people bringing themselves against the gates of Jerusalem.

These various kings and rulers that are conspiring to break down those gates. And the way that Jeremiah himself is set up, set up like Peter is set up as a rock. Peter is set up as a rock, Jeremiah is set up as a fortified city, an iron pillar and bronze walls.

God declares that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. Here he declares that they will fight against you but they shall not prevail against you for I am with you declares the Lord to deliver you. And I believe that paying attention to this it will help us to unlock the meaning in part of the statement that he can bind and loose.

In its core meaning it's much the same as what's given to Jeremiah. And what Jeremiah is given is the power of God's words upon his lip. It's not just a blank check of authority, rather it's God giving him his word, his revelation so that with that revelation he can transform the world.

And God has called Jeremiah, God calls Peter. And Peter is going to be the one who brings forth the word of God in the most powerful way. He's going to be the one who preaches the sermon on the day of Pentecost.

He's going to be the one who brings the word of God to the Gentiles. He's opening doors and he's closing doors as well. The judgement upon Jerusalem, the judgement upon the Jews who reject Christ.

Peter is the one who pioneers in both of those respects. And we should take the singular you seriously. Peter is not just addressed as the spokesperson of the disciples at this point.

Although the other disciples later on have the same power given to them in chapter 18. No, the point is that he has an authority as the one who's at the head of them. The one who's going to lead them in this new stage of the kingdom.

The father has revealed the son to Peter. It's usually the other way around. We usually speak about the son revealing the father.

But Peter is the one who's going to bring forward this revelation to others. We might notice that Paul uses the paradigm of Peter's experience and the experience of Jeremiah in Galatians chapter 1. Galatians chapter 1 verse 11 following. And then later on.

But when he who had set me apart before I was born, referring back to the story of Jeremiah, and who called me by his grace was pleased to reveal his son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone. And then in verses 7 to 9 of chapter 2. ...worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles. And when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised.

Note there the parallel between Peter's experience and Paul's experience. Paul is seen as representing to the Gentiles what Peter represents to the circumcised. Peter is the one who has been explicitly commissioned with this ministry, above all the other apostles.

He is the head of the apostles. He is the first among the apostles. He is the one that stands out, the most prominent apostle with this ministry.

And Paul is his counterpart to the Gentiles. And that relationship between them is expressed by expressing Paul's experience in the same sort of language as Peter's is. And also in the fact that Paul takes, as Peter does, the paradigm of Jeremiah as the paradigm for understanding his call.

Further to this, we might note that this is the only place within Paul's letters that Peter is referred to as Peter. Everywhere else he is called Cephas. And Peter being described as a pillar here, connects with the language of rock.

A pillar is something that holds up an edifice, just as the rock of Peter is the rock upon which the church is built. That initial building, that establishment, as Jeremiah is established as a fortified city, so Peter is established in a similar manner. The keys of the kingdom that are given should bring our mind back to Isaiah 22, verse 22, where similar language is used of Eliakim, the son of Hilkiah, who is given authority over the household of David.

And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open and none shall shut, and he shall shut and none shall open. The authority within David's house is something that is given to Peter.

The authority that he has is as a steward of the house of David. David, of course, being Christ. Now it's very easy to read this as an event that's focused upon Peter, but it's Christ who's going to build his church.

Peter is going to be the one who is the steward, particularly. He's going to play a pivotal, redemptive, historical role, but Christ is the one who's going to establish his church. He's going to build this congregation of people.

The power of the keys can be connected with the power of teaching. It's the power that Jeremiah has, the power of the word of God to open things up, to open up the ministry to the Gentiles, to open up the ministry to the Samaritans, to open up the ministry of the day of Pentecost. That is the authority given to Peter.

And God gives him the keys by giving him his word. This is not some blank check of authority. It's not some ongoing Petrine office.

It's not the way that the Catholics have often understood this as the role of the Pope within the church that continues. Rather, it's the ministry of Peter as a pivotal figure in redemptive history. He is the rock, as Abraham is the rock.

He is the rock, as Jeremiah is established as a fortified city, as one who has the power to open up a new period of redemptive history. We might also think of Matthew 23, verse 13, where there are people who close up the kingdom of God to others. The scribes and the Pharisees, as they do not teach the people, they end up closing the kingdom.

Peter is the one who is going to be opening it up. And he's going to be bringing judgment upon those who are unfaithful, but he is going to be opening things up. He is exercising an authority here that is also ascribed to the church later on.

In Matthew 18, verse 17 following, There am I among them. These are two places in the book of Matthew where we find the expression of binding and loosing. Also, where the church is referred to.

These are not common places in the book of Matthew. But yet, the church is used in different senses. In the story of chapter 16, in reference to Peter, it's the church universal.

Here it's more the church in a particular context. The building of the house upon the rock might also make us think about Christ as the Davidic Messiah. We've already had the key of the house of David and the way that that's related to Eliakim.

And then Peter has that key. He's the steward of the house of David. He's the one under the king, the Messiah, who's going to open things up for the Messiah.

That building of the house is something that's committed to the Messiah. It's something that the Messiah would do according to promise. And now Christ is going to build that house.

He is going to be the one who fulfills the promise of the Davidic Messiah. After this grand

confession, however, they are instructed to keep these things quiet. It is not yet the time for this secret to be generally known.

In fact, it will not be properly revealed until after the death and resurrection, which reveal the true character of Christ as the Son of God. He is not the Son of God in the sense of a military leader, in the sense of a Davidic power who's going to rule over the nations without suffering. Rather, he is the suffering servant.

He's the suffering king. He's the king like David during the coup of Absalom. And perhaps in Christ's rebuke that follows to Peter, we might recall that earlier event.

As David rebukes Abishai, who seeks to strike Shimei, David said, It's very much the similar expression that Christ gives to Peter. Peter is as Abishai. We see him doing that role later on as well, as Christ has to prevent him from striking with the sword when Christ is challenged in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Peter here is playing the role of Satan. He's not actually being possessed. Maybe Jesus is saying in part, get back in line, Peter, get behind me.

Follow me. Don't try and lead me. Peter's challenge here is also a challenge that recalls Satan's challenge in chapter 4, verse 10, when Christ says something very similar in his rebuke of Satan.

The parallel there is between the promise of glory without suffering. And there it was from the mouth of Satan. And here it's from the mouth of Peter.

And the similarity should be recognised. We are reaching a transition point in the narrative. The earlier transition started with the ministry of John the Baptist and leading to the temptation of Christ in the wilderness after his baptism.

And now we have a similar cluster of events. We've had the death of John the Baptist. Now we've had the witness of Peter.

And now we have the temptation of Christ. And soon we'll have the transfiguration, which parallels with the baptism. These are far more pronounced in the parallelism in the book of Luke.

But it is also present in Matthew. Peter is as a stumbling stone. Maybe we're supposed to think back to Isaiah chapter 8, verse 14.

Christ is a stumbling stone for many people in Israel. But Peter can be as a stumbling stone to Christ, the one who presents this temptation of glory without suffering. Suffering is absolutely essential to Jesus' identity and his vocation as the Messiah.

There is no glory without suffering. And Jesus summons his disciples to follow him into suffering. They must take up their cross.

Why the cross in particular? It's a symbol of, as it were, being living dead. You've taken that cross and there's no way back. You're walking towards your execution.

You must deny yourself. Peter will later on deny Christ, but this is a denial of himself that he's called to. All those things that tie you to pursuit of your own life and its own maximization, those things you must cut off.

You must give those things up in order to find your life as you follow Christ. A question to consider. Here we are called to take up our crosses and follow Christ.

The cross is often seen as Christ's suffering for us in a way that can exclude the concept of our suffering with Christ. How can the teaching of Christ in Matthew about our taking up the cross fit in with his teaching about the fact that Christ is suffering for us, that he goes to the cross on our behalf? In Matthew 16 and 17 we've moved to a turning point in the narrative of the gospel. If baptism initiated the first phase of Jesus' ministry, the transfiguration initiates in part the second.

Jesus announced the kingdom at the beginning of his ministry and now he announces his forthcoming death. A great shadow has come over the scene and we are being prepared in these ominous statements for this great movement towards Jerusalem at which Jesus will die. In the final verse of chapter 16, Jesus declared that some of those standing there would not taste death until they saw the Son of Man coming in glory.

The presence of this statement before the transfiguration is common to all of the synoptic gospels that record this event. But yet it does not seem to be a fulfilment of the statement in total. It would be strange to speak about some not tasting death before they saw this thing when no one actually tasted death before some people saw that thing.

Rather I think this is an anticipation of something that will be revealed more generally later on. What Peter, James and John are seeing here is a sneak preview, as some sort of trailer of what is going to happen in the future. In the book of 2 Peter 1, verse 16, Peter writes many years later, heard this very voice born from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.

And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you do well to pay attention, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of scripture comes from someone's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God, as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Now the problem that faced Peter when he was writing this letter was that many of the other apostles had died. Many of those who were standing there here in Christ at the end of chapter 16 of Matthew had already passed on.

And Jesus had said that he would do these things, that they would see the kingdom, before some of them had tasted death. And it seems as if the clock is ticking. Peter is still alive, but he seems to be hastening towards death.

And so somehow this promise has to be fulfilled. Now what Peter does at this point, I think, helps us to understand the connection between the transfiguration and Jesus' earlier statement. He points to the events of the transfiguration as were a full dress rehearsal of this later revelation of Christ's glory.

That they have seen Christ's glory on that mountain. And they know that it's there. It's just a question of when it's going to be revealed to the world more generally.

To understand the event that's being referred to here, we should go back to Daniel chapter 7. In verses 13 and 14. I believe that the event that Jesus refers to in saying that some will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom, I believe that's referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. But this event of the transfiguration anticipates that later event.

It's the revelation of the glory of the last Adam and the second man placed on the mountain. There are a number of details here that should make us think back to the story of the Exodus. The appearance of God in that glorious theophany to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Where Moses' face shone in that transfigured glory. But there's a difference between Moses and Jesus here. Moses went up on the mountain and his face shone.

But his face shone with a reflecting glory. In the story of Christ going up on the mountain, the glory comes from Christ himself. The glory is not a reflected glory so much as Christ's own proper glory.

On the Mount of Sinai, there is this glorious appearance of God in a theophany. There is the plan given for the tabernacle. There is the gift of the law.

And here Peter wants to build tabernacles for Elijah, for Jesus and for Moses. There is also the establishment of the high priest and the glorious garments of the high priest. Christ's garments shine with him.

It's not just Christ but it's his glorious garments. Christ is being revealed as the glorious high priest on this mountain. And he's also being revealed as God's glorious revelation.

As we look through the Old Testament, there are many stories where God appears in glory to his people, to his prophets and to others. We see it in the beginning of the book of Ezekiel. We saw the heavens opened and saw visions of God.

And Ezekiel's description of the throne chariot vision of God is one in which we see this

human-like figure but the language is elusive and it can't quite capture or describe what he is in fact seeing. We have descriptions of some features of this figure but we never see the face. We never have a direct description.

Same thing with the vision of Isaiah in the temple in chapter 6 of his prophecy. In that chapter, the Lord is seen high and lifted up the train of his robe filling the temple. Moses sees the back of God on the Mount of Sinai.

In all these cases, God is revealing his glory in the glorious angel of the covenant perhaps but no one sees the face completely. I believe what we see in part here on the Mount of Transfiguration is the face of God's glorious theophanic presence being revealed. And as we read back through the Old Testament, we know who this person is.

When Moses sees the glory of God on the top of Mount Sinai when Isaiah sees the glory of God filling the temple when Ezekiel sees the throne chariot of the Lord they're seeing Jesus. They're seeing the Son in his glory. And in the book of John, this is particularly emphasised as he can speak about Isaiah's vision and say that Isaiah said this when he saw his glory, his referring to Christ.

And so this theophany, this event of the Mount of Transfiguration helps us to read Old Testament narrative to understand that all these events in the Old Testament are events of the revelation of the glory of Christ but we only see that retrospectively. Once the face has been revealed, everything else is known. God gave the law to Moses on the top of Mount Sinai and on the Mount of Transfiguration, God declares the gift of his law the gift of his word in Christ.

This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him. As Hebrews chapter 1 declares And the Mount of Transfiguration is precisely a revelation of this truth.

It's on the Mount of Transfiguration that we see that Christ is the great word of the Father. It's on the Mount of Transfiguration that we see that he is the radiance of the glory of God. It's on the Mount of Transfiguration that we see that he is so much more superior to the angels.

It's on the Mount of Transfiguration that we see that he is the one who fulfils all these revelations of God in the Old Testament. He is the high priest. He is the one with the glorious garments.

He is the one who will sit down on high once he has made atonement for sins. And as Christ reveals himself in these glorious high priestly garments on the Mount of Transfiguration we begin to understand as he moves towards Jerusalem that he is not going to Jerusalem under compulsion. He is not going to Jerusalem as one who is weak and forced by circumstance.

But he is going to Jerusalem as the great high priest committed to completing his

mission committed to doing his great work and then sitting down at God's right hand having completed it, having wrought atonement and deliverance for his people. Moses and Elijah stand alongside him. Moses, the one who gave the law.

Elijah, the one who is seen as this great prophet, the paradigmatic prophet. They are the great witnesses. They are the wilderness forerunners.

Moses went before Joshua as Joshua entered into the land. Elijah went before Elisha as Elisha led this conquest in miracles and signs of the nation of Israel. And Jesus is the one who goes and completes this great exodus work.

He is the greater Joshua. He is the greater Elisha. He is the one who will lead his people into the truest and most complete rest.

And these forerunners in the wilderness prepare the way for him just as John the Baptist did. Jesus tells his disciples to keep the vision under wraps until after the resurrection. There are things that can only be known properly in their proper time.

The significance of the transfiguration only becomes apparent from the vantage point of the cross and resurrection. Until those times it might seem this vision of glory detached from suffering. A vision of glory that would nullify the importance of suffering at this point in Jesus' story.

But the transfiguration and its association with Jesus' teaching concerning his future suffering, they cannot be separated. They belong together. To understand the transfiguration we need to see the suffering.

To understand the suffering we need to see the transfiguration. The disciples ask about their understanding of the future. They believe that Elijah was to come first.

And Jesus has been speaking about the resurrection and that seems to come at the end of all things. So what about Elijah that was to come? Jesus says that Elijah has come and they understand that it is John the Baptist. John the Baptist is the one who came in the spirit and the power of Elijah as we see in the declaration of Gabriel to Zachariah in the temple.

He's the one who dresses like Elijah. He's the one who has the conflicts that remind us of Elijah with Herod and Herodias like Ahab and Jezebel. When Jesus reaches the bottom of the mountain he finds that his disciples have failed to cast out a demon.

Their failure in this regard maybe could recall the story of Moses descending down Mount Sinai and finding that in his absence Aaron had failed dismally. He had given in to the people and they had built a golden calf. And that fashioning of the golden calf leads to great judgement upon the people.

Now the failure of Jesus' disciples at this point is nowhere near the same magnitude. But they are judged in a way that recalls the judgments of Moses upon the unfaithfulness of the people. O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? This is the language of Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 5 and 20.

Jesus declares to them that if you have faith like a mustard seed it would be sufficient to tell a mountain to move from here to there. And that mustard seed maybe draws our mind back to chapter 13. The mustard seed is the smallest of all the seeds but it will grow into something great.

The point here is not just the faith being small in and of itself. It's the fact that that faith can grow. What does it mean that faith can move mountains? In the context of the eschatological visions of the Old Testament there are often mountains being moved.

Mountains and hills being brought low and valleys being raised up. In Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 23 to 25 In Zechariah chapter 14 verse 4 to 8 In the days of Uzziah the king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come and all the holy ones with him.

On that day there shall be no light, cold or frost. And there shall be a unique day which is known to the Lord neither day nor night. But at evening time there shall be light.

On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea. It shall continue in summer as in winter. And then finally in Revelation chapter 6 verse 12 to 14 When he opened the sixth seal I looked and behold there was a great earthquake.

And the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood. And the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up.

And every mountain and island was removed from its place. Maybe what Jesus is referring to is this great event in which things will be moved and the whole order will be transformed at this culminating eschatological event in history. And their faith will be part of that.

Even if it may be like a small mustard seed now, it can grow to a great tree and participate in that event in the future. A question to consider. Looking from the vantage point of the Mount of Transfiguration it could be argued that the glory of Christ is the very centre of the story of Scripture both Old and New Testament.

How would you make this case? The narrative concerning the temple tax at the end of Matthew chapter 17 is a peculiar one. The tax in question seems to be the temple tax because of the amount that was paid, also because the logic of Jesus' arguments suggests that God is the one who is levying this tax in some way. It's a tax that is rooted in the teaching of Moses.

In Exodus chapter 30 verses 11 to 16 there's a law concerning this tax that is given. The Lord said to Moses, This is later used for the temple. For instance in 2 Kings chapter 12 verse 4 or in 2 Chronicles chapter 24 verses 4 to 7. Jesus responds to the levying of the temple tax with a teaching about sons and strangers.

The sons are those who belong to the house and what is within the house belongs to them. They will inherit. Jesus has also taught earlier about the way that the priests are exempt from the law of the Sabbath.

As they are engaged in divine service the law concerning the Sabbath does not apply to them in the same way. And that his disciples were in a similar position. The sons have an access and a privilege that outsiders do not.

Jesus is the son and the people who are his people share in that privilege of sonship. He could exploit his status, he could insist upon exemption, but he doesn't. He submits to the tax so as not to cause scandal.

However, through the miracle of the fish with the coin, he does so in a way that demonstrates his freedom and his liberty. He is provided for by his father through the creation itself in a way that symbolizes the Gentiles. He need not insist on his rights as he serves a father who loves to provide and will not abandon his children.

There are also far, far more important things than money. And picking a fight over money is not really fitting. Paying an unnecessary or even oppressive tax doesn't worry the free sons as much as slaves and the strangers scabbling for security.

Our urge often is to insist upon our rights, our privileges, our exemptions, our status. And Jesus challenges that. We can depend upon God.

God will provide for us. And even in certain circumstances we can allow ourselves to be defrauded, to have someone take our tunic or to make us walk the second mile. Because we know that God is the one that we depend upon.

God is the one who will reward us. God is the one who we look to for provision. Our urge to insist upon our rights, then, is placed into a distinctively unworthy category.

This is not what we are about. We are people who are willing to pay what is required from us. Indeed, we are happy to go over and above, to be those who are imposed upon.

If we can avoid causing scandal, if we can avoid placing obstacles before people, we will go ahead and do that. We will be people who do not force our own rights, do not insist upon our privileges. The money taken from the caught fish by Peter the fisherman pays for the tax.

Peter has been commissioned as a fisher of men. And as I've observed in the story of the

Gospels more generally, the fish are very much associated with the Gentiles. This provision of our Father is one that can be provided through the creation itself, through fish.

It can be provided through the Gentiles. It can be provided through all these different people that we would not expect. But God is the Lord of all, and we can depend upon Him.

He is a good Father that we look to and we can trust. And as a result, we do not feel that we need to fight all these unnecessary and unseemly fights about money. God will provide all our needs according to His riches in Christ Jesus.

And Jesus talks here and in the passage that follows about stumbling blocks. These are obstacles that we set up. These can be things like hypocrisy or abuse, division or hatred.

Those things which, attending our teaching that is good, can cause people to fall astray, to be those who reject the Word of God on account of something in us or something that we have done. Because we have not adorned the way of Christ. Rather, we have been those that have been an obstacle within it, that have discouraged people from putting their trust and their lives in Jesus' hands.

And as we do that, we are judged with the sharpest judgment that Jesus has in the Gospels. There are many occasions where there is necessary offense and obstacles. Jesus often speaks about Himself and His mission as an obstacle, as a stone in the way, a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.

He is someone who presents all sorts of obstacles for the people who are unfaithful. Things that purposefully make the way of unrighteousness or unfaithfulness or disbelief less pleasant or easy. He is someone who presents all these riddles and difficulties and problems and frustrations.

And yet, we are not to provide those sorts of things unnecessarily. The Temple Tax isn't one of the ways that the Jewish leaders are undermining the Law of God. There will come a time when the Temple is overthrown, but for now, faithfulness requires honoring it.

You don't want to cause scandal in this thing. It's not the most important thing. Refusal to pay the Temple Tax would cause people to stumble.

It would give the wrong message. It would be something that might cause people to turn astray from Christ, not to listen to Him. They would see Him as someone who is opposed to what the Temple represents in its fullest sense, rather than as the one who is fulfilling its true meaning.

And so Christ is prepared to forgo His privileges as a Son, to forgo His advantages and His status and His exemption, to be one who does not cause stumbling, who does not

cause some weaker brother, some weaker person, to turn away from the path of righteousness or to reject the message of the Kingdom. There are so much more important things than insisting upon our rights in such situations. This theme of scandal continues into the next chapter.

And the question there is who is the greatest? The disciples are jockeying for position, and this is a typical human desire. We want to be exalted over others. And Jesus' response to them is to show a child.

The Kingdom of God does not work in the same way. The Kingdom of God is not about competitive jockeying for honour and privilege and status. The child challenges us to humble ourselves, not to be people who vaunt ourselves over others, who have a strong sense of our superiority.

We are not players of the competitive game of honour that utterly consumes other people's attention and concern. Rather, we recognise our dependence and our unworthiness, and to resist the pursuit to exalt ourselves over others, we must take that posture of the child. Greatness comes through loving service of others, putting others ahead of ourselves.

Greatness also requires a welcoming and a receiving of the weak, a valuing of the weak and a concern not to be an obstacle or stumbling block to them, even in those things where we do have rights that we could appeal to. We are warned in the strongest of possible ways against putting an obstacle in the way of the weakest. Children are highlighted here.

They are representative of the wider group of weak, independent people. But they are important in their own right. They are not just symbols of something that they are not.

Receiving children means paying attention to and honouring the people who cannot give us anything in return, who might threaten our status, rather than raising it. If you spend time paying attention to and valuing and considering the needs of and protecting children, it is not necessarily going to give you status. Often the people who are engaged in that sort of activity lose status.

They are not seen as powerful power brokers in society. They are not seen as the sort of people with influence and weight. The way that we treat children and the weak is absolutely key.

It is a critical indicator of the life of the Kingdom. We are being called to follow Jesus' example here. Jesus surrenders his rights for the sake of people who have nothing to offer, nothing to commend themselves to his attention, no status that he can benefit from.

And Jesus teaches this again and again in his teaching, that we are to be people who

give attention to those who can give us nothing in return, to invite the people who are the outcasts to our feasts, to invite those who have no honour to return to us, to pay attention to the child, to the outcast, to the stranger, to the widow, to the orphan, to the people on the margins of society. And Jesus stresses the importance of dealing most radically with the obstacles to the weak and to the children. This is a connection to Jesus' earlier teaching on adultery in the Sermon on the Mount.

The importance of dealing radically with sin in order to protect not just ourselves but others from stumbling. If there is something that is causing us to sin, we must pluck it out even if it is our eye or our hand. The fact that there are angels in God's very presence who are interceding for the weak is something that reminds us that they may appear weak but God, who has more power than any other, pays attention to them.

He has charged some of his angels to take special concern for them, to ensure that they are never overlooked or forgotten. This is a recurring theme in the wisdom literature and in the law. God sees the orphan and the widow.

The weak are noticed by God himself. The one who gives to the poor and cares for the poor lends to the Lord. And there is a danger that we have of a Christianity that is unmindful of the weak, that allows the weak to be collateral damage for the achievements of the strong.

In Revelation 18, verse 21, there is the recurrence of this image of a millstone and something being cast into the sea. In that passage, it is the fate of Babylon the Great. Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence and will be found no more.

Why does this city receive such a terrible fate? Because they have abused the weak, because they have preyed upon the children of God, because the people that God attends to, those marginalized people, those people who are dependent upon his care, those people who have no power or honor or glory of their own to offer, they have been abused and mistreated, and God will judge all who act in such a manner. Jesus here gives the lost sheep parable that is more familiar to us from Luke chapter 15. Christ isn't a savior who tolerates collateral damage.

A few weak people sacrifice for the sake of the strong. No one in the kingdom of God doesn't matter. The Good Shepherd will leave 99 strong sheep for the one that is lost.

The weak, ill-favored, blemished sheep, whatever sheep it is, even if it has nothing to commend it, is of concern to the Good Shepherd. This challenging passage has a peculiar and powerful relevance to many situations in our own time where we are prepared, perhaps, to sacrifice for the sake of the benefit of the powerful people who are made in the image of God, people who are these lost sheep that God cares for, children

who have angels in God's very presence who are interceding for them. God cares about the weak, but so often our concern for the strength of our communities, for the power of particularly gifted preachers or teachers or authorities, we're willing to sacrifice a few weak people for that.

And Christ teaches that this is utterly opposed to the principle of the kingdom. The principle of the kingdom is that the child is in the center, the weak, the dependent, the one without honor, the one without status. And if we are those who will sacrifice them for our gain, our gain as the strong or the powerful or the influential, we have utterly rejected his kingdom.

Rather, we are to aspire to be like them, to be those who give up the gains of status that others play, to give up that concern with honor and supremacy, and to be those who put others before ourselves. A question to consider. The sort of unnecessary obstacles that we set up for other people walking the way of the kingdom is a chief concern of Christ in this passage.

And maybe we should think about the inverse of these obstacles, the ways in which we can make the way of the kingdom a lot easier to walk for people. We don't want to make the way of the kingdom easier than God has made it, but we do not dare to make it harder. What are some very practical ways in our various situations that we can make the path of the kingdom easier for others to walk? Also, how can this teaching of Christ in this chapter be related to Paul's teaching concerning the strong and the weak in places such as his letters to the Corinthians and the Book of Romans? The second half of Matthew chapter 18 is a passage dealing with the importance of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Sins against us within the body of Christ need to be considered in the light of brotherhood. And we have to deal with our brothers. When your brother wrongs you, you can't just let it fester.

You have to interact with your brother day by day, and you have little choice but to relate to your brother. And our relationships in the body of Christ should be the same. There is an imperative to uphold and establish peace between us, and to heal any wounds that might exist.

We confront each other in order to sort things out swiftly. And Jesus gives here a procedure that is designed to avoid any sort of premature escalation of situations to conflict. Many people seem to approach this as if the earlier stages are unfortunate prerequisites for really dealing with the problem, finally being done with people that have wronged us and bringing them to the point of being cast out.

Yet Jesus' teaching here is very clearly designed with the end that we might win over our brother. That's the optimal outcome. We care about our brothers and sisters, so we very

much wish to win them back, if at all possible.

The point of this is that we are not the ones that want to see things escalate. Every form of escalation is a result of the resistance of the other party, of their opposition, not something that we seek to bring about ourselves. This begins in private, and it's an important thing to give people a chance to climb down.

It's very hard to climb down from something that we've said that is wrong or hurtful in public. We very often feel that desire to stick to our guns, to stick to what we have said, to save face. And dealing with things in private gives people an optimal context in which to repent for what they've done, to set right wrongs.

To take back, perhaps, some of the words that they have said. And it is also a way of avoiding gossip and rumours and seeds of bitterness. We are going to deal with this directly, and we're going to deal with it quickly.

We take the step of approaching people, rather than letting anything fester. And we approach them in a personal way. This is us going to them.

We're not sending someone else on our behalf. We're dealing with this personally, and in a way that gives them the ideal situation in which they could repent and set things right. A healthy society needs a minimum of law, but litigiousness is a sign of people who cannot adequately resolve their own disputes.

And so we do have to take these things to other people at certain points, but we draw out that process. We don't go straight to the most extreme authority. This may be a particular problem for us, where we can always appeal to the crowd.

We can always appeal to some other parties to intervene and to come into our situation and cast their judgement upon it, particularly as we have access to the internet. Resisting the power that that gives us, and dealing with things closer to home, dealing with things in a way that gives people the opportunity to stand down, to repent and to set things right, without putting them to a public shame, or putting their feet to the fire so that they have no choice but to back down. That's not what we're trying to do.

Rather we seek to establish peace where at all possible. We bring witnesses along on that second occasion to test the words of all. Now, no testimony is being given yet, but the witnesses introduce that implicit warning of it, that this may come to something more.

And at this point we want people to establish the words. We don't want false rumours. We don't want a sort of he said, she said situation.

We want the words to be established and true. We want to know exactly what was said, who stands where, and how things can be resolved, if they are possible to be resolved.

Finally, we bring things to the church, and if they refuse to listen to the church, we don't associate with them as brothers anymore.

The point of all of this is that we are peacemakers. We are people who seek reconciliation. We are people who deal with things quickly, and always in a way that seeks to avoid unnecessary escalation.

And here we should note the importance of being in a situation where we are relating to each other deeply and in a sustained fashion. It's very easy to be a person that never needs to forgive if you're not relating to people as brothers and sisters. It's very easy to avoid forgiveness if whenever you fall out with someone, you just go to the next church in town.

We need to relate to people in a sustained way, and it will form in us the virtue of forgiveness. This is something that doesn't come easily. It's very easy to cut off connections with people.

It's very easy to avoid the sort of connections that might really impinge upon our will, that really might make us vulnerable to being wronged by others. But yet we're called to put ourselves in that position, and that's in part how we will learn what it means to forgive. We should remember that Jesus' teachings don't operate in isolation from each other.

His earlier teaching about not wanting to be a stumbling block, and about the importance of humility, is still in play here. What is our concern when someone sins against us? Is it primarily the assertion of our rights? Or are we concerned for the spiritual health of our brother, and the church of which we are both members? Are we trying to restore peace and establish harmony between people? Or are we more concerned about ourselves, and our own rights and entitlement from our brother? Are we concerned about restoring the lost sheep? Or, in this case, restoring the lost brother? And this is the concern that should be animating our practice at this point. Jesus talks again about binding and loosing here, once again in reference to the church and the authority that's given to it.

He declared a similar statement with Peter a few chapters earlier. God uses the words and actions of his people to effect his work in the world. This isn't an absolute power, a sort of blank cheque that allows the church to act in whatever way it wants, with the assurance of complete divine backing.

No, the point is that Christ works authoritatively through his church, and that where his church is faithfully active, its words and actions can have the force of the proclamation of the words of Christ by his spirit. Peter's question to Christ that follows is perhaps one that reveals the hearts of many of us. How many times should I forgive my brother if he sins against me? This is something that many of us have dealt with, people who have

again and again sinned against us.

And should it be up to seven times, seven strikes and you're out? Is there some sort of limit to this? And yet Jesus says up to 70 times seven. That's a strange number to give. Why that particular number? If we look back in the very early parts of the Bible, in Genesis chapter 4, there is a reference to 70 times seven.

So if Cain was seven times, then Lamech is 77-fold. This is the line of Cain. This is the line of the brother killer.

And what Christ is calling Peter to be is the exact inverse of the line of the brother killer. Rather, he is the one that seeks to win over his brother. If Cain is going to be avenged seven times, and Lamech 77 times, then Peter is one who's going to be forgiving his brother, not just seven times, but 77 times.

He's going to express the inverse of vengeance in extreme forgiveness. But there's more going on here, because in Daniel chapter 9, verse 24 following, God establishes his own pattern of forgiveness. 70 weeks, or 77s, are decreed about your people and your holy city to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place.

God is going to forgive the sins of his people. He's going to restore them. And he's going to do it after 77s.

This is the time of restoration. It's the restoration from exile. It's the year of the Lord's favour.

70 times 7, 490, it's connected, it's a mega jubilee. Ten times that jubilee number, 7 7s. God is restoring and forgiving and establishing his people, after all that they have done, after all the ways that they have rejected and despised and mistreated him, in all the ways that they have turned their backs and gone to serve other gods, in all the ways that they have committed spiritual adultery, in the ways that they have mistreated their neighbours and despised the image of God in their brothers, in all these ways that they have wronged him, God is going to restore them, in 70 times 7, and bring them to life in his presence.

Now what Christ is teaching Peter, among other things, is that that must provide the paradigm for his exercise of forgiveness. Not the behaviour of Lamech, the descendant of the brother killer, who replaced the 7 times of Cain's vengeance with 77 times of his own. It's the inverse of that, and indeed it's the pattern that God himself has given.

70 times 7. Peter then must extend the pattern of God's own forgiveness of his people to others. And once we've appreciated this, Jesus' parable that he proceeds to give makes so much sense. Because God is the great king that has forgiven the incalculable debt

that his people owe to him.

He has given them that relief, 70 times 7. And yet, there are so many of them who want to hold their rights against their neighbour, to insist upon getting their pound of flesh. And God says that they're not to do that, rather they're to extend the forgiveness that he has given them to their neighbour. We are a people who are called to have a life founded upon and driven by forgiveness.

We don't seek our own rights, but seek to set things right. We seek to restore broken relationships, to win back the lost brother, rather than to assert our rights over him. God makes us active participants in his giving and his forgiving.

God, for instance, has given us the Holy Spirit. He gives the Church the gift of the Holy Spirit. But he gives each one of us, as members of the Church, gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The point is that as we exercise our gifts, we're representing that one gift of the Holy Spirit. And as I exercise my gifts and you exercise yours, we are giving to each other that one gift that Christ has given to his Church. We are representing that thing that belongs to all of us.

God makes us active participants then, in his giving, and likewise in his forgiving. And those who resist this cut themselves off from the grace that he has given us. As he gives us his Spirit, as he gives us his forgiveness, what he is doing is giving us the capacity to extend the same to others.

To take the grace that has been given to us and show that grace to people who need it every bit as much as we do. We are in a cycle of grace that has been opened up by the bountiful, liberal gift of God. A gift beyond all measure.

A gift beyond all value or compare. And we are called and privileged with the possibility of extending this. Of being people who give to others what has been given to us.

We have been given freely and bountifully. And this blessing is so that we can give it to others. That we can share in that.

That's the gift that we have been given. God does not just leave us as paupers who have been given some bounty that we can enjoy. Rather, he has entrusted us with his gifts.

That we might be those who extend gifts of forgiveness to others. We can proclaim God's forgiveness to others. It's one of the things that the Reformers recognised, along with the Church, beyond the Reformers.

The recognition that we can declare Christ's forgiveness to our neighbour. Christ has forgiven us and he calls us to be those who declare with the authority of Christ. The forgiveness of all who truly repent.

That we might be sources of security and assurance for those people who have troubled consciences. That they come to God's throne and we can declare, as people who act in Christ's name, that they too are forgiven. That he holds none of their sins against them.

And this teaching concerning the unforgiving servant is the absolute inverse of what should characterise the Church. A question to consider. How does this teaching develop the earlier teaching concerning forgiveness in the Sermon on the Mount? In the first half of Matthew 19, Jesus leaves Galilee and enters Judea and is immediately tested by the Pharisees concerning his teaching.

Jesus is asked by the Pharisees to weigh in on the debate between schools of legal opinion of the day, between Hillel and Shammai. The difference is related to the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24, verse 1, following. When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house.

The school of Hillel had a very extensive list of things that could be included under the some form of indecency in the wife. Whereas the school of Shammai held a far more restrictive understanding. They're trying to test him.

We should bear in mind that John the Baptist had just lost his life for speaking out against the divorce and remarriage of Herod. The Pharisees knew that Jesus, if he spoke out on this issue, would be placing himself in dangerous political positions relative to the Herods, but also taking a controversial view on the meaning of the law that would put him on one side or another of a pretty fractious debate. And they cunningly thought that this would give them some sort of leverage over him.

So there are two things going on here. An attempt to entrap Jesus in a dangerous political statement, and also an attempt to get Jesus to take a side in a divisive Jewish debate on the meaning of the law. Jesus does not answer their question directly.

Rather, he challenges them concerning the biblical teaching. Where do we find Moses' actual teaching regarding divorce and marriage? If we start with Deuteronomy chapter 24, an obscure case law, we're going about it all wrong. Rather, we must begin at the very beginning.

It begins with Genesis chapter 1 and 2. God made them male and female, and a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. That is where we find the teaching on marriage. What Deuteronomy chapter 24 does is come in as an allowance for the sake of the hardness of the heart of the people.

It allows them to divorce their wives, but it's a departure from the fundamental intent of

marriage, which is lifelong union, what God has joined together, let no man separate. And this allowance, this concession, is not a command concerning divorce. It's a falling away from that thing that should give us a clear perspective of what marriage and divorce truly are.

That divorce is an undermining of God's fundamental intent concerning marriage. That two people should become one flesh in an indissoluble union. The difference between a concession and a command is very important.

A concession is an accommodation to human weakness and sin, a recognition that in our fallen state human beings are imperfectible, and good laws will make allowances for the sinfulness and the immaturity of people in their societies. Good laws are not councils of perfection. They must deal with the reality, the messy reality of sinful human lives.

And the law that Moses gave is an example of such a law. It's a good law for a hard-hearted people. But it is not good that people are hard-hearted, nor is a concession given to a hard-hearted people a good north star by which to guide our understanding of marriage and God's values concerning it.

Among many other things, for instance, parenting is an exercise in the establishment of justice and the ordering of a just society. And parents will know that there are a great many suboptimal and even bad behaviours that they may have to accommodate or mitigate in their children because their children currently lack the wisdom or the good character to act as they would in some ideal world. And the law that Moses gives in Deuteronomy chapter 24 is an example of this.

Good laws are accommodated to the societies and the persons for which they are designed. They are informed by the deeper and the absolute moral law, but they are accommodated to particular circumstances and persons. If you allowed your teenagers the same liberties as you do your toddlers, it would not be a good thing.

Rather, you need to give certain liberties to your toddlers that you don't give to your teenagers because they still have a lot to learn. When the Pharisees respond to Jesus, Jesus highlights the problem with their response. They ask about what Moses commanded, but yet they are like teenagers who are reminding their parents of all the things that they allowed them to get away with as toddlers.

But yet as teenagers they are supposed to have grown up beyond those things. They don't need the same allowances. They don't need the same concessions.

They should be mature enough to know how to act themselves. Moses' concessions concerning divorce allowed for divorce, but they did not approve of it. It was an accommodation to the sinfulness and the imperfectibility of human society, not a practice that was to be viewed in any respect positively.

We might think of the practices of slavery or polygamy in a similar light, practices that were permitted and regulated, but never celebrated or encouraged. These practices were never God's good intention for humanity, but tolerated for a time as an accommodation to sin, weakness, immaturity and imperfectibility. To find out what is really commanded, what God really wants, we have to look back further to God's creational intent for humanity.

And so Jesus joins Genesis 1 and 2 together to highlight the permanent unity that was always God's intent for marriage. This is different and distinguished from laws that are accommodated to the hardness of human hearts. Now Jesus' teaching more generally draws us back to these two great horizons, the horizons of the original creation and of the future restoration of all things.

And this has the effect of significantly reframing the question of divorce. The Hillites and the Shammaites both approach the question of divorce primarily within the horizon of the Mosaic body of laws and fail adequately to consider the horizon of God's creational intent. The result is a loss of our sense of the way that divorce undermines God's intent for humanity.

Divorce is a tragic accommodation to human sinfulness, not something that is positively allowed. Jesus may here contrast Moses and God. Moses is the divinely inspired prophet administering the moral law in a particular historical situation, but God is the author of the timeless moral law.

There's a sort of legalism which can snatch at all sorts of allowances that are given in a law accommodated to human sinfulness and imperfection, rather than pursuing the righteousness that it should direct us towards. Such allowances excuse us from the higher standard of the divine righteousness. Note that Jesus doesn't teach that Moses was wrong to allow for divorce under such circumstances.

Such allowances were made on account of people's sinfulness and hardness of heart, but they were not themselves sinful allowances. The Old Testament law provides us with a number of conditions in which divorce is treated as permissible, and I believe that the New Testament does not just abrogate those. Accommodation to the reality of human sinfulness and weakness really is necessary for good law.

Whether it's serious abuse, desertion, adultery, or some other sort of sin or failure, divorce may be appropriately permitted. We should also recognise that in such circumstances, we can't abstract the specific action of divorce from the broader failures of permanent exclusive union that might have precipitated it. While the act of divorce is an act of very grave moral weight, a purposeful act that ends a marriage, the one who initiates it should not be treated as if they bore the entire weight of the blame for the failed marriage.

What Jesus' teaching does then is not to delegitimize the teaching of Moses, or even to suggest an alternative legal code to replace it. Rather, what it does is relativize it. The law of Moses and all other legal codes that are necessarily accommodated to human sinfulness are not the North Star of righteousness.

Where necessary accommodations to this sinful age exist, they are signs of how estranged we have become from God's good purpose for humanity. Because we are a hard-hearted and a sinful people, God permits divorce in the case of adultery. But lifelong, permanent and indissoluble and exclusive unity was always his intent.

We see the same thing in 1 Corinthians 7, where, where at all possible, a couple are supposed to pursue reunion, to pursue reconciliation and forgiveness. Now that will not always be possible. There will be situations where it is wise to divorce.

Divorce in itself is not a sin, but it is a sign of how badly things have gone wrong. And where at all possible, we should be people of the kingdom, people who pursue reconciliation, restoration, healing, setting things right that have gone wrong. This teaching can all be very troubling for us.

We live in a society in which both divorce and serial extramarital relations are rampant. It's a very hard teaching today, just as it was in Jesus' day. We would like God to tell us that it is okay to divorce under conditions X, Y and Z, but that isn't what we are told.

Rather, we are given the original intent of creation as the standard of our measure, with the concessions appearing more clearly for what they are against that background. Tolerated, but not positively validated, ways of negotiating human rebellion against God's purpose in marriage. The fact of God's creational establishment of marriage is a measure by which we must consider divorce.

We may break faith with and reject our prior vow in the self-contradiction of divorce, but not in such a way as places us beyond the bounds of God's grace. And the Church is bound both to uphold the institutions of marriage and to present God's grace to those in the tragic situation of failed marriages. The possibility of a calling back to the abandoned task of marriage to a particular person can often be there.

Sometimes, however, the conditions for this don't exist. And the difficult question of whether someone should, not just can, get married again, is one that people will often struggle with. There is some gospel to be seen in Moses' law.

God is not allowing people to slip beyond the reach of his grace and restoration, even in the messiness of their compromised lives. God can speak his law even into the lives that have been tangled up by sin and failure, by things that have gone wrong. God can still speak his grace into those situations.

Divorce and remarriage don't cause people to slip off God's map. But yet, that truth must

always be held alongside the other truth, that this was not God's intent from the beginning. The disciples are startled by the toughness of Jesus' teaching.

If marriage is really this serious, it would seem to be a trap that you don't want to get caught in. If you have to stick with your wife under all these circumstances, and you can't just abandon her for various reasons, then it's maybe not something that you want to get in. Jesus responds with another startling teaching.

He talks about those who become eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. Now, there are many different types of eunuchs. Some are born eunuchs, you can think of intersex persons particularly, people who can't bear children, people who may even, in some extreme cases, have indeterminate sex.

Then there are those who have been made eunuchs by other human beings, castrated and made to serve in particular capacities. And Jesus talks here about a further type of eunuch, those who have become eunuchs for the kingdom. When we think about eunuchs, probably what we think of first is their giving up of sexual pleasure and partnership.

But in Jesus' day, what was probably most prominent was the fact that they gave up progeny and legacy. They committed themselves completely to the cause of the kingdom that they aligned themselves with. So if a eunuch served a particular king, they were completely personally invested in serving that kingdom, because their entire hope and destiny for the future lay upon the destiny of the kingdom.

They had no children to bear their name after them. What they were going to leave behind was the kingdom itself. In speaking about those who have become eunuchs for the kingdom of God, Jesus is likely talking about people who have given up the prospect of having marriage and children to commit themselves completely for the kingdom of God.

Now this isn't the same thing as singleness. It's not just a statement about how good singleness is as a thing in itself. Rather, it's about people who have given up marriage for the sake of throwing in their lot completely with the cause of the kingdom.

You can think about Paul as an example of this. As one who did not take a wife, or maybe was widowed and did not take another wife, in order that he might serve the kingdom of God completely. One can also imagine people being a bit shocked by Jesus using the example of eunuchs as associated with the kingdom of heaven.

Eunuchs were seen, among other things, as unmanly, as those who had been quite literally emasculated. We should not miss the scandal of the association that Jesus is drawing here. The people who would serve his kingdom would often seem unmanly to other people of their day.

They were not playing the games of honour that people of their day were playing. They were peacemakers, rather than men who were constantly looking for chances to prove their manliness in war. They were people who would turn the other cheek when offended, when their honour was attacked.

And what man will not defend his honour? They were defined by suffering, rather than by the infliction of violence and power. They were people defined by service of and concern for the weak, rather than mastery over others. They were people who forgave, rather than pursuing vengeance.

And in this particular example, they were also people who were prepared to give up having children, and give up having marriages, for the sake of serving their Lord, by following him to the final unmanly indignity of the cross. While Jesus very clearly extols manly virtues in certain other contexts, and calls for his disciples to express and display some of these virtues, and we see these things celebrated elsewhere in scripture, we should never forget the scandal that his teaching presented to men of his day, and to men of our own. After this teaching, children are brought to Jesus to be blessed.

The disciples rebuke those bringing the children. Children are distractions from the business of men, and they lack honour and status, but yet Jesus pays attention to them. He places a child in the midst of his disciples and says that they need to be made like that child.

Once again, Jesus is challenging some of the reigning values, particularly among men of his day, values that constantly privileged the strong over the weak, men over women, adults over children. Jesus, without denying or undermining the differences between these groups, radically reconfigures the orders of value that lead people to exalt one group over another. Not only does he welcome such children, he declares that to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.

A question to consider, looking at our own societies and our churches, an outside observer would probably not be led to believe that the exemplary society that we hold up above all others is one in which children are at the centre. What are some of the ways in which we can reform the lives of our churches and societies so as more fully to express Jesus' teaching at this point? The end of Matthew chapter 19 to the beginning of chapter 20 focuses upon Jesus' response to a young man asking what good thing he must do to obtain eternal life. This man is a rich man and he turns out to be unwilling to follow Christ at the expense of his riches.

Peter Lighthouse has observed that this passage is divided into two sections, one beginning and ending with a reference to eternal life. In verse 16, the young man asks about what he must do to have eternal life and in verse 29 we are told that they will inherit eternal life. The second part involves a discussion of the first being last and the last first.

It begins with the statement in verse 30 of chapter 19 but many who are first will be last and the last first and then it ends with the statement in verse 16 of chapter 20 so the last will be first and the first last. Note that there is a reversal of the order there. In the first one it's the first will be last and the last first and in the second it's the last will be first and the first last.

It brackets that whole section. It bookends it and stresses its unity. The first half focuses upon wealth and rewards and the second half continues some of those themes to a degree.

The first begins with Jesus questioning why the young man asks him about what is good saying that no one is good but God alone and then the complaining workers are asked, literally, is your eye bad because I am good? In both cases someone is being identified as good. The parable answers in many respects the earlier question and addresses the issue of wealth. Many people have misread Jesus' discussion with the rich young ruler.

The idea for many is that Jesus is highlighting the futility of seeking righteousness according to the law. He's driving the man to despair of his righteousness, of his good deeds and to get him to come to Christ for hope of salvation. But this is not actually how the story goes.

We would need to read a very great deal into the passage to see this particular connection. Rather, Jesus teaches that keeping the commandments is necessary for entering into eternal life. The twist is the way that this is understood.

Jesus' initial response to the question is, if you would enter life, keep the commandments. And then Jesus responds to the follow-up question, which ones, by highlighting the second table of the law in particular. You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, honour your father and mother, and love your neighbour as yourself.

The young man's response is not to despair of his righteousness. Rather, he says, all these I have kept. What do I still lack? Jesus' response to this is not so much a suggestion that it is impossible to keep the law, but a challenge to a different kind of law-keeping.

Jesus did not mention a few key commandments the first time around. He didn't mention commandments 1 to 4, and he didn't mention commandment 10. He didn't mention the commandments concerned with loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

And he didn't mention the law concerning covetousness. What does the man lack? Whatever he lacks, it would seem to rest with those other commandments that were not mentioned. Jesus' statement to him should be seen against the background of those commandments.

What must he do? He must sell what he possesses and give it to the poor, and he must go and follow Christ. The first instruction is one that fulfills the tenth commandment. How do you fulfill the commandment not to covet? Well, in the book of Deuteronomy, in chapter 26, that commandment is fleshed out.

And it's fulfilled not just in the negative act of not desiring or envying something that belongs to someone else. Rather, it's fulfilled in something deeper than that. It's fulfilled in the act of celebrating what God has given to you, being thankful, of showing charity and generosity to others, and of expressing contentment with what you have.

And what Jesus is suggesting to the young man here is even more radical. It's expressed in being willing to give up what you possess, giving it in charity to others, and having contentment in that fact. And then he calls him to follow him.

Now that commandment should be seen over against the other great commandment, the greatest commandment of all, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. What does it look like to fulfill that commandment? Well, it looks like following Christ, relating to him as your Lord and Master. As Jesus teaches throughout the book of Matthew, the law is fulfilled in a deeper level by this following of him, by this obedience to him.

And by forms of practice that are not just negative practices of avoidance, of not actually killing and not actually committing adultery, but positive ones of resisting and establishing different forms of positive alternatives. It's seen in the way that rather than just avoiding covetousness, the rich man fulfills the law concerning covetousness by being prepared to give up what he has, by giving to others in charity. It's seen in the person who, rather than just avoiding murdering the person he's angry with, reconciles with them.

It's seen in the person who, rather than just avoiding stealing, gives and shows generosity. As this rich young man leaves, Jesus expresses once again the danger of riches, those things that weigh us down, that tie us to something that prevents us from serving and following our true Master. You cannot serve both God and mammon.

If you find yourself devoted to riches, you will find yourself unable to follow Christ as he calls you to. This makes us uncomfortable, and it really should. We want to be assured that Christ would never ask such a thing of us.

Now, Christ does not ask this more generally. However, if he did, we would have to submit. Wealth is a power that can prevent us from entering the kingdom, and Jesus teaches this in no uncertain terms.

Wealth is something that can master us, and we, living very prosperous lives for the most part, should be very fearful. It's something that we can become enthralled by. It's

something that can dictate the course of our lives, our values, our commitments.

Even if we are poor, this can be something that drives our concern. That is something that prevents us from throwing ourselves wholeheartedly into the service of our Saviour. It is only with great difficulty that those with riches can enter the kingdom of heaven.

As Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. If you want your heart to be invested in the kingdom of God, then invest your treasure there as well. Be someone who is committed to that.

Now, this is exactly what Jesus is teaching the rich young ruler. Invest his money in serving the poor, and he will find, as he invests his money in serving the poor, that that's where his heart will go. But as long as that treasure lies elsewhere, as long as that treasure is caught within the affairs of this world, that is where his heart will be.

And until he deals with that primary location of his heart, by relocating his treasure, he will not be able to enter the kingdom of God. After Jesus has taught this, Peter pipes up and, speaking for the rest of the disciples, draws attention to the fact that they have given up everything. What is their reward going to be? They have done pretty much what the rich young ruler was asked to do.

And what is their reward? Jesus makes clear that there is a reward for them. They will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. The twelve will exert authority within the kingdom.

Now, Judas is among them at this point, but it's referring to the twelve as a group. And Jesus extends the statement to say that everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for his namesake will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life. Here Jesus presents something of an answer to the original question of the rich young ruler.

And it's seen in an act of renunciation. People must give up to enter the kingdom. They must give up all these things that they were formerly attached to.

And that act of surrender is something that will lead to them inheriting eternal life. This is a terrifying teaching for us, but it should not be sugar-coated. We are called to renounce things, to deny ourselves, to take up our cross, to be those who are willing to be stripped of all our possessions, our attachments, in order to enter into the kingdom.

This does not mean that we'll be permanently bereft of these things. They may be returned to us, but they may be returned to us only after we have surrendered them, only after we have given them into God's hands. Those who want to save their lives will have to lose them.

And following on from this discussion of rewards, Jesus goes into a parable, a parable

bracketed in statements about the first being last and the last first. This parable of the workers on the vineyard is one that has a number of different stages to it. As we're going through it, we naturally sympathize with those who are called first.

And as they are being paid at the end of the day, it starts with the last people to be called, the last people to be commissioned to work on the vineyard, and then gradually moves to the payment of those who came to the vineyard first. And they're scandalized because they do not get anything more than those who came last. And we can often feel scandalized for them too.

One of our basic moral instincts is equal pay for equal work. And yet they do not receive equal pay for equal work. Those who worked for a long time receive much the same pay as the people who worked just for a couple of hours.

How does this parable relate to what has gone before? Well, perhaps we could relate it to the rich young ruler and the disciples. The rich young ruler is someone who observes the path of the law in many ways. He is someone who probably has social standing and respectability.

He's an observant law keeper, all these sorts of things. And the disciples are people who come along later. They're people who are fishermen.

They're a tax collector. They don't have the same social status. But yet, they will receive the same payment.

God will reward them as if they had been faithful law keepers throughout their whole lives. Perhaps that's something of what's going on. For me, a more likely explanation is one that relates it to the story of Israel more generally.

Israel is the vineyard. The people being called to work on the vineyard are prophets and righteous men and all sorts of other people. And the disciples come along at the end of the line of that in many ways, late on in the day.

And yet they receive the same reward. And then people called after them. Even though they may not suffer the heat of the day and the difficulties of the situations that martyrs and prophets that have gone before them experienced, they will receive the same reward.

This payment that God gives as the owner of the vineyard is not according to the merit of the work that they have done. Rather, everyone who works on the vineyard gets the same reward. The disciples may have given up many things, renounced many things.

But they remain continually concerned about pecking orders. And the difficulty of self-denial and the desire to get what's due to us can persist even when we've given up many things. And Jesus' parable here challenges that at the root.

There is a reward for following Christ. There is a reward for going out into the vineyard. But that reward does not follow the same pattern that we are accustomed to in human wages.

Rather, it's given to every single person that serves on this vineyard. Every single person receives that same payment. Someone like Peter might want to be assured that he's going to get special treatment.

They've gone out, they've faced the heat of the day, they've faced the difficulties, they've stood with Christ in tough situations. Shouldn't they be rewarded accordingly? And yet, out of the goodness of God, people who have not suffered in the same way, who have not experienced the same difficulties, will experience the kindness and generosity of the owner of the vineyard. Everyone who renounces their possessions and their family and all these other things that attach them to this age will be rewarded.

But they will be rewarded in a way that foregrounds the generosity of the owner of the vineyard, not the merit of their labours. A question to consider. Jesus calls the rich young ruler to an act of great generosity.

And the owner of the vineyard is later on defined by his generosity. How does the practice of generosity enable us to overcome some of the issues that Jesus is highlighting and tackling here? In Matthew chapter 20 Jesus gives the third prediction of his death. And it's important that Jesus declares his death beforehand.

It is not an accident or fate overtaking him unawares. Jesus predicts in very clear detail what will happen, who will be the participants and what exactly they will do. Jesus is going up to Jerusalem.

He's ascending to the place where he will be condemned and crucified. He will be condemned by the chief priests and the rulers of the people. He will be given to the Romans, to the Gentiles and they will crucify him.

They will mock him and they will scourge him beforehand. All of these things are predicted in very great detail. When the disciples look back on this they will see that these events happened according to God's determined plan and according to Christ's foreknowledge.

Christ knew what he was doing. He did it purposefully. At this point however there's a jarring note as the mother of James and John comes with a request to Christ.

The wife of Zebedee in stark contrast with everything that Jesus has just taught asks for a place of honour for her two sons. James and John are present but their mother makes their case for them. It might be worth bearing in mind at this point that their mother is almost certainly Jesus' aunt and they are his cousins, his first cousins.

So this is in part a family privilege that's being requested. They are of course two of the three closest disciples, part of that inner group that follow Christ to places where the other disciples do not go. With Peter they were on the Mount of Transfiguration.

They have had privileged access in certain respects and they now want this privileged status. They want these two thrones on either side of Christ or these honoured places in the banquet, feast of the kingdom. But they do not know what they're asking.

If they want these places they will need to drink the cup that is placed before them. They will indeed one day do this but the very way that their request is being made makes clear that they do not understand what it is that they are requesting. They do not know the path that it requires.

Later on we do see two people, one on the right hand of Christ and the other on the left, but it's found in verse 38 of chapter 27. Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. What it means to be on the right and the left of Christ is to suffer with him.

That is the path that must be taken by those who want the honour of the best seats in the kingdom. Now the disciples will be called to follow that route after their Lord but at the moment they're still not clearly understanding this. They've heard Jesus declaring his death once more and they've still not got it.

They're still thinking in terms of the fervour of messianic expectation that this Davidic king is going to come, he's going to set up his kingdom and there's going to be a situation in which they're sitting on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Now while this is clearly part of the picture there is much more going on that they do not truly appreciate. When the other disciples hear this they're indignant but more as those who wanted such honours for themselves than as people who truly opposed the principles that impelled James and John to make the request.

Jesus teaches here about the contrast between the characteristic of Gentiles in authority and the form of authority that should be characteristic of his kingdom. The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over others, they seek to get dominance over others, they seek superiority and status and influence and all these sorts of things. It's a self-serving attempt and it isn't as if there's no honour in the kingdom of Christ.

There is honour but it is not obtained through jockeying for power. Rather it's found in the way of humility and of service. Jesus previously taught his disciples by placing a child in their midst and saying that the kingdom of heaven belonged to such persons.

That that was the example to imitate. And here he does the same thing, he has to repeat the lesson because they've clearly not gotten it. Here he teaches that it should not be that way among them, not be the way that it is among the Gentiles.

Rather whoever wants to be first must be the slave, whoever wants to be great must be the servant. The way that honour is achieved within the kingdom of God is through service, is through humility, is through not vaunting oneself over others and seeking status over them, not jockeying for power as James and John were trying to do, but in serving others. Jesus then gives himself as an example.

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. Now the meaning of this particular expression has been debated. Many have seen this as Jesus expressing his humble service, his menial service of his people.

But I don't think that's quite what's going on here. What is the service in question? Are we thinking about Christ assuming a position of a servant relative to a master in a sort of lowly manward service? Or are we thinking about Christ as one who's carrying out a charge, as one who is commissioned as an agent with a ministry, not as one to be surrounded by a retinue of attendants and other people that are serving him as a typical Gentile lord. Rather, Christ came to perform the task of the Isaianic commissioned servant, the servant of Isaiah, not to get a status for himself.

The focus here then is not straightforwardly upon Christ as a humble servant of man, but upon Christ as one on a mission from his father. Now he's not gaining status for himself, he's not pursuing honour in the way that the Gentiles do, he's not pursuing honour through domination. However, nor is the accent upon menial service.

Christ is on a commissioned mission from his father. He is one who has been sent. He's been commissioned, he's been given a task, he's a go-between, he represents the father as he acts.

And so when we read that expression, the Son of Man came not to be served, the point is not to say the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many, but the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. The point being that Christ did not come to gain dominance as a king, to have people that he could lord it over. No, he came on a mission from his father, and that mission was to give his life as a ransom for many.

Recognising this matters because often we use the concept of servanthood to undermine or to empty out the concept of lordship. Christ is the Lord, but he is also the servant. Now what does it mean that Christ is the servant but also the Lord? He's not a lord like the Gentiles, lording it over others, trying to dominate over others and get a retinue of attendants and people doing his bidding.

That's not the sort of lord that Christ is. But Christ is a servant in the sense of one commissioned from his father, as one sent by his father, as one representing the authority and the rule of his father, as one who is faithful to his father. And he's also one who acts towards mankind in a way of care and concern.

He gives his life as a ransom for many. It's an act of love, it's an act of humility, and in that way he's not lording it over people. But in that act of love and concern, he does not become the servant of the people that he is ministering to.

Rather, he is acting in his father's authority as he shows a humble concern for humanity in need. His humble work towards humankind does not make him the servant of humankind in the way that he is the servant of his father. Rather, he is commissioned and sent by the father and he blesses and he humbly ministers to mankind.

In the same way, Christian ministers are not called to just be servants of all in the sense that they exercise no real authority within the life of the church. Rather, the point is that as ministers of Christ, they should exercise their authority in a way that's characterized by humility. Not vaunting it over others, but using that authority to build others up, to take menial positions relative to others.

Not because they have no authority, not because they have no honor, but because honor in the kingdom is found in faithfully ministering Christ, in humility, and in self-denial. As we better understand this, it will protect us from the trap that many people have fallen into, in using concepts like servant leadership, in using one aspect of that to negate the other. Rather, if we understand servanthood in the way that scripture presents it, where the servant is not merely someone who's performing a menial role, but the servant is someone who's commissioned and sent, who's a representative, who's a go-between, who acts with the authority of someone else.

Now, that is not something that is just menial service. Just because someone can perform menial service doesn't mean that they're apt for this sort of servanthood. What Jesus teaches in such places is not a denial of genuine authority.

Rather, it's the way that true authority should be exercised in the kingdom. Not as vaunting over others, not as lording over others, but as exercising a true authority in a way that is humble and meek, that seeks to build up others and not take advantage over them. Leaving Jericho, Jesus is followed by a multitude of people, excited by this bold new prophet and teacher and potential messiah.

The blind men call out to him as he's going by as the Son of David. Son of David, have mercy on us. That request is one that Jesus finally answers.

The crowd is trying to shut them up, to ignore them and to pass them by, but they insist and Jesus opens their eyes. Perhaps we are to see these two characters playing off against James and John. James and John, this pair that do not truly see, the disciples who do not truly understand what it means for Jesus to be the messiah, what that calling actually entails, and these two blind men who have their eyes opened, their physical sight drawing attention perhaps by contrast with the disciples continuing blindness regarding the true nature of Jesus' mission.

A question to consider. One of the consistent features of the New Testament is what has been called the transvaluation of values or code switching. The way that terms that have a particular resonance and significance for us are shifted in their meaning.

So the poor become rich in the kingdom of God. Or we can think about the ways in which those who are going to be masters or great among people need to become the servants of all. There is a reversal of the typical order that we associate with things.

Strength can be made perfect in weakness. There is freedom to be found in being slaves of Christ. If we want to save our lives, we must be prepared to lose them.

If we want to be exalted, we must humble ourselves. There is always a danger, however, in using this language of emptying out one term or other of their proper meaning and not exploring the true tension and the true paradox of what is being taught. What are some concrete ways in the practice of leadership and authority within our communities that we can understand the relationship between leadership and authority and service without emptying one or the other of those terms of their force? As Jesus draws near to Jerusalem in Matthew chapter 21, he arrives at the Mount of Olives at Bethphage and sends two of his disciples ahead of them to find a donkey and a colt and to untie them and bring them to him.

For such a lowly beast of burden, it's interesting how significant a role the donkey plays in the history of Israel's kingdom. It seldom is the centre of the story, but it does play a common role within the story of the kingdom at pivotal historical moments in its establishment and in prophecies concerning it. At times it serves to reveal or to highlight identities and destinies of key protagonists and at other points it plays a part in setting in motion key events.

The story of the kingdom begins with Saul searching for the donkeys of his father. In Genesis chapter 49 verses 10 to 11, Jacob prophesies concerning the tribe of Judah, speaking about binding the foal to his vine, the donkey's colt to the choice vine, connecting the tribe of Judah with the donkey from the very beginning of its story. As already mentioned, the story of Saul focuses upon a quest for donkeys and he is told as one of the first signs of the kingdom that donkeys have been found.

And the whole episode concerning Saul ends with a conversation with his uncle about the lost donkeys in 1 Samuel chapter 10 verse 14 to 16. And there's an association with donkeys and mules and ruling kingship. We first see this in Genesis chapter 49.

It's also seen in the book of Judges, Judges chapter 5 verse 10, verse 4 of chapter 10 and verse 14 of chapter 12. When David is sent to Saul by Jesse, he is sent with a donkey and with other signs associated with the kingdom, the signs that Saul himself was given in chapter 10. In 1 Samuel chapter 16 verses 1 and 2, David escapes from Jerusalem after his son Absalom's coup and Zeba brings two donkeys for the king's household to ride

upon.

And there's an ironic twist as Absalom the pretender ends up hung from a terebinth tree by his long hair when his mule goes beneath it. The association between Davidic rulers and donkeys or mules is seen most markedly in 1 Kings chapter 1 verses 28 to 40. And in that chapter, the fraught situation of royal succession and who's going to take David's throne when he dies is resolved in large part as Solomon is distinguished as the true heir to the throne through a triumphal entry into Jerusalem on King David's own mule.

So the donkey or the mule or the king's steed is associated with peaceful rule while the horse is an animal of war. There's a different sort of triumphal entry that we see in the case of Jehu who's secretly anointed by Elisha and goes over a carpet of people's garments that they have stretched out before him in 2 Kings chapter 9 verses 1 to 13. Jehu, however, is not a meek ruler riding on a donkey.

He's a furious and bloody charioteer and horseman. He kills Joram of Israel and Ahaziah of Judah. He tramples Jezebel under his horse's feet as he enters Jezreel.

And then in chapter 10 verses 18 to 28, he cleanses the Temple of Baal in the most bloody of manners. When the prophet Zechariah foretells the coming of a new king to restore the people's fortunes, he's identified by his riding of a colt, the foal of a donkey. And the character of his rule is distinguished from that of the warmongering regents with their royal charges.

In Zechariah chapter 9 verses 9 to 10, This is a powerful prophecy. And it's a prophecy whose words ring within this resonance chamber. Of all these references to the king and his donkeys and the way in which rule is demonstrated through horses, donkeys and mules and other symbolic beasts, this recalls the blessing of Jacob over his son Judah and some of the most glorious and tragic episodes in Israel's history.

The coming king is the true bearer of Judah's scepter. He's the one who will establish the kingdom. He's greater than Saul who sought for the donkeys, and he's the true son of David.

He will realise the unfulfilled promise of Solomon, who fell short of his name in calling to be the prince of peace. His coming will not be like that of the violent Jehu. The chariot and the horse and the conflicts to which they belong will be cut off, and the nations will be granted a gentle word of peace.

And so Christ comes into the city in a way that's deeply symbolic. This is an action that's carefully considered. Jesus is engaging in a symbolic action that displays kingship, but kingship of a very particular type.

And he comes into the city and goes to the temple. His action in the temple interrupts the affairs of the temple. He drives people out.

He overturns tables. There are lots of allusions to scripture in these sections. He speaks about the way in which a house of prayer has been made into a den of thieves, a den of robbers.

And what does he mean by this? A robber's den is a place to retreat for brigands to protect themselves from the consequences of their violence. It's a place of safety and security and refuge for brigands. And Jesus is teaching that for the Jews of his day, the temple has become just that.

It's become a place to claim refuge from the consequences of their sins. It's like the people of Jeremiah's day. The temple, the temple, the temple of the Lord are these.

They take confidence in the fact that they have this building. It's a sort of talismanic security against the judgment of God. And yet God is going to come to the temple.

He's going to inspect his temple and he's going to purge it. The promise of Malachi is going to come to pass. The Lord whom you seek is suddenly going to come to his temple and he's going to purge and test.

He's going to come to the threshing floor, which is associated with the temple, and he's going to clean it and cleanse it. And Christ comes as foretold by John the Baptist. Now this is a cleansing in preparation for a later judgment.

There's a judgment upon the temple that will fall in A.D. 70, and this prepares for that. It's supposed to be a house of prayer. It's supposed to be a place of prayer for all nations.

That's what it was originally established to be by Solomon. And now it has failed in that regard. It's actually serving the exact opposite purpose, a place not of holiness but a place to excuse wickedness, a place to shield people from the consequences of their wickedness.

Jesus cleanses the temple and then the blind and the lame come to him in the temple. We've already discussed themes of entry into Jerusalem in conquest and victory and triumph, something like the story of Solomon as he's about to be established as king, or the story of Jehu as he goes into Jezreel with judgment, and Jehu cleanses the temple of Baal in a very bloody way. Jesus is coming into the temple, and he's coming in in a way that maybe reminds us of some other stories.

And those reminders can be given to us in the way that he treats the blind and the lame. In 2 Samuel 5, David conquers Jerusalem. The taunt of the Jebusites concerning the blind and the lame is a crucial part of the story of David's original conquest of Jerusalem.

The fact that Jesus enters in triumph into Jerusalem, and then enters into the house, the temple itself, and there he heals the blind and the lame who come to him, suggests that

he's playing out this story of David once more, but in a way that involves ironic reversals and fulfillments. As we noted earlier, in 2 Samuel 16, verse 1, Ziba brings two donkeys to David for himself and his household. He brings the two donkeys to David in a similar location as the two disciples find them.

In riding in on two donkeys then, Jesus is symbolically reversing the departure of David from Jerusalem. As the greater son of David, he is re-entering Jerusalem. You can also see it as a reversal of God's movement out of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 8-11.

Once again, children epitomise the true behaviour and character of the kingdom. They greet Jesus with hosannas, and they express the joy and the delight that should be characteristic of the kingdom, the welcome that they give to Christ. The judgement that follows this upon a fig tree is a symbolic judgement upon the temple and upon Jerusalem.

In Mark's account, it frames Jesus' action within the temple. The fig tree represents Israel and its leaders and their failure to produce fruit. And the reference to the mountain should also be considered in this context.

It's not any old mountain that Jesus is referring to. It's the mountain that is exactly opposite. This mountain, the mount of the temple, that that is going to be removed and thrown into the sea.

It's going to be part of this new order. The old mountains are going to be removed and put out of place, and a new world is going to be established. No longer will they worship upon that mountain or upon some mountain up in Samaria, but God's worship will occur all over the world.

That mountain of the temple will be cast into the sea, the sea of the Gentiles, and not one stone of its temple will be left upon another. A question to consider. How might the laws for a leprous house in the book of Leviticus help us to understand Jesus' action within the temple? The second half of Matthew chapter 21 occurs on the day after the triumphal entry, after the cursing of the fig tree.

We should notice the movement back and forth between the mount of olives and the temple mount. Jesus here is back in the temple and being asked concerning his authority, but then he returns to the mount of olives later on. And that movement to and fro between these two mountains is significant.

The mount of olives is the site from which judgment is declared upon the temple mount. The movement between the two mountains then has a theological import. Jesus has entered the city like a king and has declared judgment upon its temple, has healed within the temple, and there are people gathering around him and behind him, and he is the head of the new movement.

And so the chief priests and the leaders of the people, the elders, try and trap him. They ask him concerning his authority. If his authority is from man, it can be dismissed.

If his authority is claimed to be from God, they have other grounds to move against him. And so Jesus answers their question with a question, and yet the answer to the question that Jesus asks them is the answer to the question that they have asked him. John the Baptist was sent by God, and his prophetic ministry was one through which God authorized and bore witness to his son.

So Jesus traps those seeking to trap him, as he does so on several occasions, by asking a question in response to a question. And had they answered that question, they would be caught in the position of recognizing John the Baptist's witness to Christ, and yet they knew that they couldn't just dismiss John the Baptist as a prophet, because the people knew that he was a prophet. And so they're caught in a dilemma, and that dilemma is one that shows Jesus' cunning and wisdom as he deals with some of these serpents.

Jesus is wiser than the serpents. Having responded in a shrewd way to their opening gambit, Jesus gives a further parable that serves to put them on the defensive. He asks them about two brothers and the vineyard, and one of the brothers starts off being committed to go out on the vineyard and then ends up failing to do so.

The other originally expresses disobedience and unwillingness, and then turns out to do so. Israel may be the vineyard here, but I'd be wary of putting too much weight upon this identification at this point. It would seem to be a fair identification to make, but I don't think it's the primary point of the parable here.

The vineyard is more incidental to this parable, unlike the next. Both of the sons are disobedient in some respect. Neither of the sons is fully obedient, but neither is fully disobedient either.

Peter Lighthouse observes that this puts the chief priests and the elders in a difficult position. The parable of the tenants that follows is an important one to read in the light of Israel's identity as the vineyard. Such an identification is found in the Old Testament in places like Isaiah chapter 5 and Psalm 80.

In Isaiah chapter 5 we read, And he hewed out a wine vat in it, and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste, it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up.

I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. And he looked for justice, but behold bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold an outcry.

And then in Psalm 80, verses 8 following. You brought a vine out of Egypt, you drove out the nations and planted it, you cleared the ground for it, it took deep root and filled the land, the mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the river.

Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit, the boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it? Turn again, O God of hosts, look down from heaven and see, have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted. And for the Son, whom you have made strong for yourself, they have burned it with fire, they have cut it down. May they perish at the rebuke of your face.

But let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the Son of man, whom you have made strong for yourself. Then we shall not turn back from you. Give us life, and we will call upon your name.

Isaiah's parable focused upon the failure of the vineyard to produce good fruit, but Jesus focuses upon the wickedness of those working within it. The fruit seems to be there, but the workers are rebellious. And so the master is sending his servants, the prophets, and finally his own son, and all are being rejected.

And Jesus, we should note, foretells his own death within this parable. They will see the Son, and they will seek to kill the Son when he is sent to them by the Father. That reference to the Son being seen as he arrives is one that should draw our minds back to Genesis chapter 37.

They saw him from afar, and before he came near, they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits.

Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what becomes of his dreams. The workers on the vineyard are therefore being compared to the brothers of Joseph, those who attacked the beloved Son of Israel. Once again, as with the preceding parable of the two sons, Jesus presents this parable as a question, a question that the elders and the chief priests are asked to answer.

And in answering this question, they are brought to a position where they must judge themselves, and they condemn themselves in their answer. Now it's important to consider what they would have seen in this parable. They would have seen the wicked tenants as some other party, the party of the Romans, for instance.

They are oppressing the vineyard of Israel. They are the ones that are preventing God from getting its fruits. But the trap is about to be sprung.

Jesus gives a verse that interprets the parable. And this verse makes clear that the parable is about the chief priests and the scribes themselves. The verses in question come from Psalm 118, verses 22 to 23.

Now that's in the context of the oppression of the servant of the Lord. He's calling out to God for deliverance. All the nations are surrounding him.

And he calls to God for salvation. The key words are found in these verses. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

This is the Lord's doing. It is marvellous in our eyes. And this verse is used on a number of occasions in the New Testament, with reference to things such as the resurrection.

In Acts 4, verse 11, This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. And then in 1 Peter, chapter 2, verses 4 to 8, As you come to him, a living stone, rejected by men, but in the sight of God, chosen and precious.

You yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture, Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame. So the honour is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence.

They stumble because they disobey the word as they were destined to do. In Acts 4 then, the apostles are using these verse to refer to the resurrection of Christ, the vindication of the rejected stone. In 1 Peter, chapter 2, the rejected stone is the cornerstone of a new building that's being erected.

It's the new temple that God is building. There is a wordplay here between son, Ben, and stone, Eben, and the fact that the builders are associated with the religious leaders. This helps to explain that the chief priests and the elders are the ones in view.

It brings the temple themes to the forefront. Christ is the rejected stone and becomes the cornerstone of a new temple. Christ brings this point home by a statement that alludes to Isaiah 8, 14-15, and Daniel 2, 44-45.

Then in Daniel 2, verses 44-45. So Jesus is orchestrating a number of different Old Testament verses and prophetic witnesses to the kingdom, and to the establishment of a new temple, to the rejection of the Messiah, and to the way that the Messiah will be

vindicated. He's bringing these all together into a powerful statement that springs the trap upon the chief priests and the elders of the people.

He is the rejected son. He is the one that was put to death by the wicked bind dressers. And he is the one that will become the base of a new temple that's going to be built.

He has declared judgement upon the old temple, and he will be the one who is the cornerstone of the new. The riches of the Lord's vineyard will be given to another party. They will be given to a faithful party that will bear the fruits that are supposed to be borne by it.

It should be noted that this is not a claim about Israel itself being dispossessed, but about the wicked tenants of the chief priests and the scribes. Their places will be taken by the Twelve, who are the true tenants of the vineyard of Israel now. And this looks forward to fruit from Israel.

The vineyard isn't abandoned. It's given into different hands. A question to consider.

How do the two parables that Jesus gives here reflect back upon the earlier question about authority? How do they expose the true character of the authority with which Jesus acts, and challenge the authority of those who are questioning him? In Matthew 22, Jesus continues his confrontations with the Jewish religious and political leaders, and a number of different sects and parties challenge Jesus at this point. We start to get more of a sense of the politically, religiously, and socially fraught situation into which Jesus was speaking here. The parable of the wedding feast follows on from the parable of the wicked tenants.

It's still concerned with questions of authority that have been raised in the preceding chapter. The son is the royal bridegroom, and the invitation being sent out is an invitation to a wedding feast, presumably to various officials and rulers. And the way that the servants are mistreated by those that are being invited is quite extreme.

They are even killed in some cases. They're being invited to a wedding feast, and they're killing the people bringing the invitation. This seems fairly extreme.

But it's important to remember that this is a political event. It's the wedding feast of the son of the king, the heir of the kingdom. And as such, it's a rejection of the son, and an act of treason and insurrection.

Many see the destruction of the city that's referenced as AD 70. But given the second half of the parable, with the further set of invitations, Peter Lighthouse has suggested that it refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. It's different from the parable as we find it in Luke chapter 14, which comes in a very different context, and does not have a number of the details that we have here.

For instance, it's not a king in Luke's account. And there's not the second half with the part concerning the wedding garment. It suggests to me that these are two independent parables, and should not be seen to be referring to the same thing.

Luke's account is given in a different context, and we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus, as a teacher that's going around from place to place, would repurpose illustrations and parables, and change them in different ways for different purposes. I think that's probably what we're seeing here. We should observe how many details the parable of the wedding feast shares in common with the parable of the wicked tenants, which precedes it.

There's a son, there are servants being sent out, the servants are being mistreated, etc. All of this serves to indicate that the two parables should probably be read alongside each other, as belonging together and helping to illuminate each other in different ways. They're not twins, as we've seen elsewhere, but they certainly do illuminate each other and serve a common theme.

For many readers who see the destruction of the city as being the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the second set of invitations are the ones sent out to the Gentiles, and to others perhaps like the tax collectors and the prostitutes. That's not necessarily the case. We can maybe see it as one that's given to Israel as it's brought back to the land, and certain people, including the tax collectors and the prostitutes, are invited in, and there's a rejection of the old Israel that was sent away into exile.

There's a second inspection that occurs at the end of the story, the inspection of the clothing of the guest at the wedding feast. In Revelation chapter 19, we have a reference to wedding garments, and it talks about the bride making herself ready. It was granted to her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure, for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

And here there's an inspection of wedding clothing. The man without clean garments is dishonouring the king, and presumably willfully so. There's a sorting process here as the king inspects the guests, and there's a warning about presuming upon election.

Many were invited. Israel's story is a story of many being invited, but only a few proving worthy. People were destroyed as a result of their rejection of the prophets, the servants that were sent, and even those that seem to come at this point prove themselves to be hypocrites, to not have the deeds that conform to the wedding feast that they've been invited to.

So there's a warning about presuming upon election, and there's a reframing then of the concept of election. We see this reframing of election, for instance, in chapter 24, verses 22, 24 and 31. For instance, in verse 22, And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved, but for the sake of the elect, those days will be cut short.

In verse 24, For false Christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. And then finally, And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. This develops the previous parables challenged the security of the status of Israel and its leaders.

Israel may have presumed upon its covenant election that God had chosen Abraham and them in Abraham, but this notion of election, many being called but few being chosen, is an unsettling of that concept. Jesus is redrawing the concept of election within this and the previous parable. After Jesus gives this parable, the Pharisees join with the Herodians to trap Jesus.

The Herodians no longer enjoyed power in Jerusalem and Judea, but supporters of the Herodian dynasty presumably still operated there. And we also know from the narrative of the Passion that Herod was in the city over that period. In this and the following two challenges, what we see is a challenge to Jesus' authority and the jockeying for power that exists in Jerusalem at that time, with different parties vying for dominance.

Tax for Caesar was a deeply fraught political and religious question. To pay the tax was a seeming acknowledgement of its legitimacy and the legitimacy of the Romans' authority in the Holy Land. And the denarius itself probably had blasphemous statements of Tiberius Caesar being the son of God.

One way or another, it seems, Jesus is caught. Either he aligns himself with the tax rebels and revolutionaries against Rome, or he will seem like a compromiser with Rome. And his answer to the question, however, is a profoundly shrewd one.

First of all, he asks them to produce a coin. And this isn't just visual aid, it's something more than that. They must reveal one of the coins to be in their possession.

The Jews have their own coinage, but they clearly have one of these coins, these coins with a blasphemous statement, an image on it, they have one in their possession. And Jesus' answer is an incredibly wise one. Perhaps one thing we should observe is that it is an ambiguous statement.

To some it might seem to be saying, give Caesar what's coming to him. To others, pay your taxes. But there is a logic to it.

If you have this blasphemous object in your possession, why not give it back to Rome? There's a willingness in Jesus' teaching to be dispossessed of such items. The opposition between God and Mammon may be playing out here. In Jesus' teaching concerning the temple tax as well, Jesus just does not get into fights about paying money.

The concern for money that the Pharisees and others display is a result in part of the fact that they serve money, that they are in bondage to the love of money. But there's

probably more going on. First of all, there are Jews to be paid, both to Caesar and to God.

And Jesus' statement suggests that we need to recognise both and distinguish between them. The coin is Caesar's. And so the tax isn't just an arbitrary imposition.

It's something that is for services given. What did the Romans ever do for us? Well, the aqueduct, the sanitation, the roads, the irrigation, medicine, education, wine, public baths, safety and public order, all these sorts of things. And the expectation that you render back to Caesar something in exchange for that is perfectly reasonable.

That doesn't mean a legitimization of everything that Caesar is doing. Rather, the sense of giving back can indicate a sort of non-investment in that whole economy. That you're giving back, you're not actually participating in the same way, you're not investing yourself in this.

You're invested in the Kingdom of God, so you're prepared to give money back to Caesar. Jesus escapes a trap, but he also makes some important theological points. He treads a line between compliance and resistance.

Rendering to God what is God's places clear limits upon what you give to Caesar. Caesar can't be given worship, for instance. Other people have seen some sort of opposition between the image of Caesar on the coin and the image of God on human persons.

You don't render persons and ourselves to Caesar. Now I think that's a bit of a strange reading, but it's possible. And it certainly is something that's true in principle.

Our section ends with a challenge from the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection. They present this strange case based upon the practice of the Levirate Commandment. The commandment that when a man died, his brother would marry his widow in order to raise up seed for him.

And so this is a convoluted story of some really strange, bizarre situation that arose when a woman ended up marrying seven brothers after each other, after each one died. Now there's a much less extreme version of this scenario in Genesis chapter 38 with Tamar, Ur, Onan and Shelah, and also Judah in that situation. Each one of them are involved with her in some way.

And we might well ask, in the resurrection, whose wife is she? Jesus' answer challenges the idea that resurrection is just a sort of revivification, a return to an extension of our existing forms of life. We will be like the angels. The angels don't marry.

They're a non-procreating living host, and they endure, they don't die. However, marriage is given to fulfill the calling to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and also to sustain the human race in response to the reality of death. There is a presumption

here that marriage is ordered, in its very institution, towards procreation.

And when procreation is no longer an end, marriage ceases to exist. The Levirate Law is dealing with the problems where marriage fails to raise up seed. It's dealing with the problems of marriage in the face of death.

And marriage, more generally, is dealing with a pre-eschatological situation where there is still a need to fill the earth, where there is still the reality of death to deal with. Whereas in the resurrection, there's a new principle of life. There's a new principle of generation, or rather, regeneration.

No longer marriage. We are not born to a husband and a wife in the regeneration, in the event of the resurrection. Rather, we are reborn from the grave.

And as a result, this new principle of regeneration leads to a completely different form of society. We can maybe see the Law of the Levirate against this backdrop. In Deuteronomy chapter 25, the Law is about raising up seed for the dead brother.

There's a sense in which the dead brother is being raised up through offspring, being born to his wife through his brother. And that principle of resurrection is part of the Levirate commandment. Although it's resurrection in the context of a society that's shaped by the reality of death.

Jesus then appeals to God's statement to Moses in Exodus chapter 3, that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And it seems to be a strange argument for the resurrection. But it seems to me that the point is, he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Not he was. God is defined in some way as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. As the covenant God.

The God who is not just the God who was the God of those people, but the God who is. And as a result, there is the assumption that they have some continued existence to him. Indeed, the action of the Exodus is being done in part on their account for their sake.

And so there's the presumption that they live to God with the implication that they will one day be raised bodily. A question to consider. What does Jesus teaching in response to the Sadducees have to teach us about the purpose of marriage? And also how the reality of marriages here and now in this age might be transposed into the reality of the new creation and the resurrection.

At the end of Matthew chapter 22, the challenging of Jesus by the religious and the political leaders continues and then is concluded. The Pharisees present the third question to test Jesus here. And perhaps we should recognize some similarities with

Satan's testing of Christ early in the gospel.

These questions are malicious tests, not honest and innocent questions. They gather together against the Lord. And that language should remind us of the second Psalm.

Bear in mind the conversation that follows where it is the anointing of the Davidic king that is at issue, the Davidic Messiah. And the Pharisees gathering together against Christ is similar to the nations gathering together against the Lord and his anointed in that Psalm. They are hoping that Jesus is going to choose some particular law that reveals an imbalance in his teaching.

Perhaps the greatest commandment is you shall not commit adultery or maybe remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Whatever Jesus answers, he will seem to tread on some toes and open himself up to some criticism that he has unbalanced teaching. But Jesus' answer once more is incredibly shrewd.

The greatest commandment, and there is a greatest commandment, is the summary commandment of the Shema. Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

And that statement is the greatest commandment. In this commandment the entire law is encapsulated and the second great commandment arises from it. These two commandments sum up the entire ten commandments and all the other attendant commandments.

The law is not just a collection of 600 plus miscellaneous laws. It's a system of truth and justice summed up in the call to love God and neighbour. These positive commandments that lie at the heart of all these negative restrictions.

You can think about the two statements that Jesus references in their original context. In Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 4 to 5, the statement about loving the Lord your God, that comes immediately after the gift of the ten commandments or the repetition of the ten commandments in chapter 5. And it's the beginning of all that summary material. All the material that follows from it and helps to flesh out what that commandment means.

Leviticus chapter 19 is where the law concerning loving your neighbour comes from. And there that commandment comes at the end of a list of other commandments. You shall not oppress your neighbour or rob him.

The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind. But you shall fear your God.

I am the Lord. You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great.

But in righteousness shall you judge your neighbour. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people. And you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbour.

I am the Lord. You shall not hate your brother in your heart. But you shall reason frankly with your neighbour lest you incur sin because of him.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people. But you shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.

Now reading that list you probably noticed that it sums up most of the second table of the ten commandments. We have the first table summed up in loving the Lord your God and the second table summed up in loving your neighbour as yourself. And all of the law and the prophets flow from these two great principles, these positive principles at the heart of everything.

And now we should see that this is antithetical to the way the Pharisees approached the law. The Pharisees seemed to approach the law just as a miscellaneous series of commandments. They do not have a sense of its inner motion and its inner purpose and dynamic.

Rather it is something that is just a set of legalistic binding commands and nothing more. There is no sense of the love that lies at the heart of it. And what Jesus teaches here is that there is a logic to the law and that logic is love for God and neighbour.

And we will not truly understand why Jesus dumbfounds the Pharisees until we realise just how powerfully his teaching here undermines their entire approach to the law. These commandments express the positive truth at the heart of all the thou shalt nots. And those positive truths are the whole subject matter of the law and the prophets throughout the entire scriptures.

It is these principles that stand in the dead centre of everything. Everything arises out of these. Jesus poses a challenge in response to the Pharisees' challenge to him.

And his challenge is about the Christ referencing Psalm 110. It is a Davidic Psalm in which David refers to the Christ as his Lord. Which makes no sense at all if the Christ is merely his son.

And the Pharisees clearly don't have a way of thinking about this. They don't have a category within which this would make sense. The Christ seems to be more than merely the son of David according to the flesh.

There is obviously some theological problem here. How do we deal with this? And at this point the Pharisees are completely unable to answer him. They're stuck.

They're dumbfounded. They're stumped. In chapter 23 we see Jesus moving on to speak to the crowds and to his disciples.

Jesus began in chapter 5 by gathering his disciples around him and then the crowd around them. And now he's speaking to the same sort of group. This reminds us then of the Sermon on the Mount.

This is the final great message of the Gospel of Matthew. And the Sermon on the Mount is the first great message. And as we look at this message more closely we'll begin to observe ways in which there is a symmetry between it and the opening sermon.

What we have here is something binding the book together. That there is a unity to Jesus' message and the teaching that he goes through has a logic and an order to it. And Jesus' entire teaching has been leading to the point that he reaches in this chapter.

This chapter will sum up the entire message of his teaching. And Matthew really does focus upon Jesus' teaching to a greater degree than most of the other Gospels. In this message having overcome the challenges of the religious and political leaders.

Jesus speaks to the crowds and the disciples concerning them. He has also just spoken of the fact that the Christ, who he is, will sit at God's right hand. With all of his enemies being placed under his feet, being made his footstool.

Christ is the true King and now he speaks concerning the false shepherds of Israel. Jesus' challenge throughout this chapter is focused upon the false shepherds of Israel. Not upon the flock of Israel.

The false shepherds are the wicked vine dressers. They are the people who dishonoured the King who invited them to the wedding. The flock of Israel are like the sheep without the shepherd.

They are like the vineyard that is going to be given into the hands of those who will produce its fruit. The Pharisees currently sit in Moses' seat and much of their teaching is correct and legitimate and should be followed. But their lives are full of hypocrisy and their vision of the law is burdensome and oppressive.

They are ignorant of the true liberating intent at the heart of the law. They have all these commandments that they speak in terms of but they are ignorant of justice, mercy and faith. Those principles at the heart.

They do not recognise the way that love is the binding truth behind all of the law, the glue that holds everything together. And so they just have these burdensome commands. They lay heavy burdens upon the people.

Not like Moses in whose seat they sit but like Pharaoh, the one who Moses stood against.

They are concerned with the praise of men and with social status. They love the markers and the honorific titles of the religious authority.

The special seats that they are given, the special titles and names that they enjoy. And there is some exaggeration and satire here no doubt. Much as in the earlier descriptions that Christ gives of people sounding a trumpet before them when doing their charitable works.

But the new shepherds that will take their place must not follow such an example. The ministry of Christ's body must be characterised by humility. The point isn't to dismiss all titles.

We see the apostles using titles on occasions. No, the point is not so much a strict denial of the legitimacy of all titles or respect of ministers of Christ. No, it's about the nature of that ministry.

It's a ministry that is honoured but it's honoured precisely in the practice of self-effacing ministry in Christ's name to others. It isn't exalted over others. It's a ministry performed by brothers, not by those who are over us.

Personality cults and cults of church office have no place in the kingdom. Honour comes in a completely different form from that which the Pharisees seek. Those who seek to exalt themselves will be humbled.

But the flip side of this reveals the true character of ministry in the kingdom of God. The one who humbles himself will be exalted. This is what Christ himself does.

And this whole passage emphasises the uniqueness of Christ. Christ is the one who sits at God's right hand. All of us are under the Christ.

All of us are ministers of Christ. We're sent by him and we are responsible to him. And all true ministry flows from and points to Christ, not to itself.

If our ministry is pointing to ourselves, then it is a false ministry. It's not a true ministry of Christ. A question to consider.

How do we see Paul applying some of Jesus' teaching here in places like 1 Corinthians 1? Jesus' public ministry began with blessings and the Beatitudes. And in chapter 23 of Matthew it ends with woes. These blessings and these woes can also be mapped onto each other as we'll see shortly.

Peter Lighthouse observes that they can be divided into woes upon the Pharisees for their effect upon others, woes upon them for the handling of God's truth and the law, woes upon them for their neglect of purity of heart, for the purity of the flesh, and then finally woe upon them for the treatment of the prophets. First of all, their effect upon others.

They shut up the kingdom of God against others.

Secondly, they prey upon widows. Third, they trap Gentiles as proselytes. And then their handling of the law.

First, they purposefully distort the law and use legalistic circumventions to neglect the intent of the law. Second, they show an utter failure for the deeper purpose of the law and reduce it to detached and nitpicking commandments. They will tithe the smallest spices but they forget justice, mercy and faithfulness.

Third, they neglect purity of heart. And under this, Jesus accuses them first of their assumption that mere external cleansing suffices for purity without dealing with the deep issues of the heart. Second, they are like whitewashed tombs.

They look pleasant but they contain and they convey impurity to others. And the final charge is that their fathers killed the prophets and that they are continuing in the murderous ways of their fathers. And then we should note that these woes can be matched onto the Beatitudes as their counterparts.

First, blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And that corresponds with the woe upon the Pharisees who shut up the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. Here on the one hand you have those who are poor in spirit who are receiving the kingdom of heaven and the Pharisees who close the kingdom of heaven to other people.

Second, blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. And the contrast is with the Pharisees who devour widows' houses. They destroy the mourners.

They pray upon the mourners. Whereas those who mourn in the kingdom of God will be comforted. Third, blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.

And then they travel on sea and land to make converts and make them children of hell. They will inherit hell. And so they are trying to inherit the earth.

They are trying to bring in the Gentiles. But they are making them inheritors of hell, not those who will inherit the earth. Fourth, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied.

And the Pharisees are marked rather by the perversion of all righteousness. The way that they hunger and thirst to find some way out of righteousness. Hungering for any way they can circumvent God's purpose.

Fifth, blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy. The Pharisees tithe mint and anise and cumin and forget the weightier matters of the law. Justice, mercy and faithfulness.

The weightier matters of the law. Those who show mercy shall receive mercy. Those who understand and practice the law in that merciful way will receive the mercy of God.

Sixth, blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God. And this contrasts with the Pharisees who cleanse the outside only and don't deal with the heart. They are not pure in heart, they are just cleansing the surface.

Seventh, blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God. The Pharisees on the other hand appear beautiful on the outside but are full of dead men's bones and uncleanness. The sons of God will be raised up on the last day.

They will be those who are marked out as the children of the living God. But yet the Pharisees are characterized by deadness even when they are still living. Eighth and finally, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

However, the Pharisees are the sons of those who persecuted the prophets. Jesus talks about the way that those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, those who are persecuted for his name sake, are those who are continuing the ministry of the prophets. And just as they were persecuted by the fathers of the scribes and the Pharisees, so the disciples of Christ will be persecuted by their children.

Various books of the Bible are introduced, concluded or otherwise framed by contrast between blessings and woes. We might think of Psalm chapter 1, blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners etc. Or perhaps we think of Proverbs chapter 9 with the contrast between the appeal of lady wisdom and the woman folly.

Or Leviticus chapter 26, the blessings and the curses. Or Deuteronomy chapter 27-28. Matthew is framed in a similar way.

Jesus' ministry begins with blessings and ends with woes. And that bookends the entire teaching between. And that teaching of the body of the book of Matthew is repeatedly recognisable beneath the surface of this section.

Jesus isn't just making some new points here. Behind every one of his statements we can recognise a specific conversation, teaching or action that Matthew has recorded. He is summing up his entire public ministry to this point and declaring condemnation.

The next few chapters will lay out the sentence. To whom are these woes directed? They are directed to a specific group of people, to the religious leaders. The blessings of the Beatitudes on the other hand are directed to the faithful disciples of Christ.

These blessings and woes then are not just general blessings and woes but distinguishing markers placed upon two different groups. Looking through them we will

see the way that they refer back to the earlier teaching of Christ. First of all the effect of the scribes and the Pharisees upon others.

They shut up the kingdom of God. They don't open the kingdom of God to others. They close people off from it.

They enslave them with heavy burdens. The second challenge is that they prey upon widows. In the other synoptic gospels, in Mark and Luke, this is connected with the widow's mite.

And that story often taken as an example of sacrificial giving to follow. Rather it's a story of judgement. It's a story of how people who give everything that they have are being destroyed by this.

The false shepherds are fleecing the flock, causing them to invest in something that is going to be torn down as a result of their sin. They trap Gentiles as proselytes. You can think about Jesus' ministry and the way that he has set forth Gentiles as examples of faith.

The Canaanite woman, the centurion. And rather than ministering to Gentiles as we've seen Jesus do, the scribes and the Pharisees are making them children of hell. Then in the challenges to their use of the law.

First of all, their use of casuistry and legalistic circumventions to neglect the intent of the law. We can think back to Jesus' conversation concerning the negation of the fifth commandment. The way that they will purposefully circumvent the law through legalistic gerrymandering.

In challenging the Law, their utter failure to regard the deep purpose of the law and reducing it to detached and nitpicking commandments. We can think about the conversation concerning the greatest commandment. The small stuff matters.

Tithing those small spices is not something to be neglected. But it only makes sense in the light of the most important things. All of those details must point back to the core reality.

The reality of love for God and neighbour. And where those things are forgotten, the little things just become burdens. And things that distract and detract from the purpose of the law.

Next, concerning their approaches to purity. First, their assumption that mere external cleansing suffices for purity without dealing with the issues of the heart. Reminds us of the conversation about handwashing.

And the way that Jesus challenged them specifically at that point concerning the nature

of true purity and also true pollution. What truly makes a man's heart unclean? It's not external things, it's what comes forth from the heart. That's what really makes people unclean.

And then second, they are like whitewashed tombs. They look pleasant, but they contain and they convey impurity to others. And there we can see Jesus' teaching in the background.

Avoid the leaven of the Pharisees. The hypocrisy that characterised their teaching. And that leaven is that hidden thing at the heart.

It's that thing that's introduced to the new batch that causes it to rise. It's that thing that's passed on from generation to generation. A poisonous tradition.

A tradition that destroys people. That has that internal impurity as a transmission from one generation to another. And they must avoid the leaven of the Pharisees.

They must recognise the death that exists at the heart of that religious system that they represent. That legalistic approach that they are taking. And finally, their fathers killed the prophets and the way that they are continuing in their ways.

All while covering this up by decorating the prophets' tombs. Jesus then goes on to develop this point further. As he does in the Sermon on the Mount.

Where he directly connects his disciples with the prophets as those persecuted for righteousness sake. He's taught concerning this in the story of the wicked vine dressers. The wicked tenants.

All these servants that are sent, that are killed. You can think also of the way that the servants are treated in the story of the wedding feast. Again, these are the prophets that are sent.

And now the son has come and he is going to be killed too. The Pharisees will prove themselves to be the sons of the murderers of the prophets. By continuing in their actions as they murder the emissaries of Christ.

They will murder the disciples. They will crucify the disciples. They will cast them out of synagogues.

And the entire blood of the martyrs. The whole history of the martyrs. From Abel's blood that called out from the ground at the beginning of Genesis.

To the blood of Zachariah in 2nd Chronicles 24. Is going to come on that generation. In Genesis chapter 15, God declared that the sin of the Amorites was not yet complete.

With the assumption that when it was complete, Israel would enter into the land. God

gave Canaan into the hands of the Israelites when the sin of the Amorites was filled up. And now, the leaders of the Jews are filling up the measure of their wrath.

And their city is about to be destroyed. The kingdom is about to be given into the hands of other parties. Of tenants who will give the fruits of the land to the Lord.

To the disciples who will sit on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel. Jesus here is a new Jeremiah. He declares judgment upon the house.

He declares that there is no peace when others are saying peace, peace. And he finally, he laments over Jerusalem. And in that lamentation we can hear the voice of Jeremiah.

The weeping prophet. The one who stands over Jerusalem and sees it in its destruction. Jesus anticipates the destruction of Jerusalem.

And weeps over it just as Jeremiah does. Peter Lighthouse has observed the way that the story of Matthew follows a pattern. It begins with themes of Genesis.

The genealogy. The Genesis of Jesus Christ. And then giving his connection with Abraham.

Joseph who is the son of Jacob. Who leads his people into Egypt after having dreams. And then people being led out of Egypt.

The themes of the Exodus coming at various points in those earlier chapters. Particularly in Jesus' baptism and his time in the wilderness for 40 days. And then in chapters 5 to 7. All these themes of the Sermon on the Mount that point to the law being given.

Connect us with the story of Sinai in the revelation there. A new law being given. A new understanding of the law.

And then the disciples are sent out. There's the mission of the twelve. A preparation for conquest.

A spying out of the land. An entrance into the land as they are sent to the cities. And the cities will be judged according to the way that they respond.

And then there's the parables of the kingdom. The wisdom of Solomon in chapter 13. And then as we move through we've seen all these different themes tracing through Israel's history until we arrive at this point.

And there's the expectation of the end of Judah and Babylonian exile. There's the statements of Jeremiah. There's Ezekiel coming to the foreground at various points as well.

There's Babylonian exile. And then as we end the book it will end on the theme that is

the theme of the final verse of the Old Testament in the Hebrew ordering. It will end with 2 Chronicles chapter 36 and the decree of Cyrus re-entering the land.

Building the temple and God's presence being with his people. Now what's the point of all of this? Christ is playing out the history of Israel. Christ is the son of Abraham.

Abraham played out the history of Israel in advance. Christ is playing out the history of Israel as its Messiah. The one who sums it up in himself.

He is the one who brings it to its destiny. And as we follow the story even further we'll see what shape this takes. A question to consider.

One of the problems for many people's understanding of Christ as they see him in the Gospels and in his teaching and in his practice is that the Jesus they believe in is not crucifiable. Yet the Jesus that we see in these chapters would seem to be crucifiable. Looking at the conflict between Jesus and the religious and political leaders in the last few chapters summed up in this final chapter of condemnation.

How can we better understand the motivations that people might have for crucifying this man? A passage in Matthew 24 begins the Olivet Discourse. Once again there's a change in locality. And in the story of the Passion Week there's common movement between the Temple Mount and the Mount of Olives.

This happens regularly throughout the week and the juxtaposition of the two mountains seems to be important. The Mount of Olives stands over against the Temple Mount and is the place from which judgement is cast upon the Temple Mount. There's a reference to the Mount of Olives in Old Testament prophecy in Zechariah 14 verses 3 and following.

And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley. So that one half of the mountain shall move northward and the other half southward. And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains for the valley of the mountain shall reach to Azul.

And you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come and all the holy ones with him. From such a passage we can see an association that already existed between the Mount of Olives and the Day of the Lord.

A further thing that's extremely important when reading this passage is to recognise the backdrop of the rest of the Book of Matthew. Throughout the Book of Matthew it's imperative that we recognise just how imminent judgement is presented as being throughout. It's just on the horizon.

In Matthew chapter 10 verse 23 Christ declares that it will not have finished going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. In Matthew 16 verse 28 some

standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. Matthew chapter 23 verse 36 all these things will come upon this generation.

The parables are similar. They anticipate judgement that's very near at hand. This is coming upon the people within that generation.

They should be braced for it. And yet many Christians read these passages as if they were referring to some far distant event. The end of the world itself rather than the end of the old covenant order.

And that's how I will be reading these passages and hopefully help you to understand how they can be read in such a way. Many do struggle to read them as referring to anything that has already happened in history. Partly because they don't really grasp the way that biblical imagery works.

But also because the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 just does not seem like a suitable contender for the events being spoken about by Christ in these chapters. It just seems so grand a description of what's about to happen. That the fall of Jerusalem is just a minor event to a backwater nation in the very far distant past.

Why should we care about it? Yet as we understand it properly we'll see that it is an event of the most immense importance. It's something that stands as a turning point in the middle of human history. It represents a remarkable change and shift.

The chapter begins with the disciples showing Jesus the beauty of the temple. And then Jesus declares its imminent fate. After which they come to him later on and ask what would be the sign of his coming and the end of the age.

Jesus begins actually by not answering their question. Rather by giving things that aren't signs of his coming. To ensure that the disciples don't jump at false positives.

So there will be a number of unsettling events that will occur before his coming. But none of those should be interpreted as a sign that his coming is just about to occur. There will be false prophets and false Christs within and without the church.

Famines, earthquakes and other natural disasters. But these are just the beginning of birth pangs. The birth of a new world order still isn't taking place.

There will be a major covenantal upheaval in the order of the world. But that still waits the future. There will be persecution and widespread falling away among self-declared disciples.

The disciples will be brought into the most extreme tribulation. And that tribulation, that time of testing will reveal men's hearts and cause many to wither. We pray that we will be delivered from temptation.

Because when we're put into that time of testing, we really have to be proved. We have to have wisdom as serpents. And we have to have courage and faith that is of a greater scale than that which we usually need.

This time will also be disorienting in other ways. There will be treachery and betrayal within the church. People will sell their neighbours out.

They will sell out fellow Christians to the authorities. And there will also be apostasy and falling away. Many people who crumble under pressure.

The gospel will be spread throughout the whole world. Now the world in question is the Roman world. It's not the globe as such.

It's the Roman world. Every single part of the empire, that world order, will receive the message. And it's at this point that the stage is set for the climactic act.

Christ's judgement tarries while the Gentiles are being brought in. And then it falls. After this, an actual sign of Christ's coming will occur.

And that sign is the abomination of desolation that Daniel foretold in Daniel 9 verses 24-27. That from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time.

And after the sixty-two weeks an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood.

And to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed. And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week.

And for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator. The abomination of desolation is the abomination that provokes the desolation of the temple.

Not desolation itself as an abomination. Abominations are typically performed by Israel itself. It's the perversion of the bride, the sin of the bride, not just the sin of the nations.

In the Old Testament we can see this in the sin of the sons of Eli, or the idolatry of the nation in Ezekiel's day, or the action with the golden calf. The abomination of the temple is caused by flagrant sin and or apostasy. And the temple is the marital chamber, the place where God meets with his bride.

And now that bed is defiled as it were. I think a clue here is found in reflecting upon the words of the previous chapter in verses 34-36 and verse 38. Therefore I send you

prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barakaya, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing. See, your house is left to you desolate.

Reflecting upon the abomination of desolation, it seems to me that it is the filling up of the blood of the saints. Once that time has come, once they recognise that that condition has been met, they should flee to the mountains if they are in Judea. The one who was on the housetop should not go down and take what is in his house, they should flee.

And this is because the city is about to be destroyed, and if they don't flee, they will be destroyed with it. This is a reminder of the story of Sodom. Jerusalem is about to face a similar fate, and there is going to be this time of great testing and tribulation.

They are going to be pushed to their absolute limit. It is only because of the elect that God spares them, that He does not push them beyond that limit. He preserves the elect and cuts the days short.

And at that time, there will be all sorts of people leading others astray. False Christs, false prophets, even performing great signs and wonders. And they are to be prepared for this, they are to recognise the dangers in advance and to take action without hesitation.

The coming of Christ and judgement will be like a lightning bolt. It won't be something that comes in gradual stages, it will be sudden and swift and devastating. And they must be prepared, they must take that action when they have that window of opportunity.

Indeed, this is something that we read that the church did do. The church did escape, and it was saved from suffering the full devastating force of the destruction of Jerusalem. Where the corpses, there the vultures, or perhaps the eagles, will gather.

Some have suggested that this might be a reference to the corpse of the rebellion of Israel. And the eagles of Rome preying upon the corpse of Israel. I think that's a fairly likely interpretation of these words.

A question to consider, within this chapter we have descriptions of tribulation that's going to come upon the disciples of Christ. Tribulation that's going to test them to their very limits. And if it were not for God cutting that time short, they would be tested beyond their limits and they would fall too.

We have a number of references to it within the book of Matthew, a number of examples of it. How can we think about the time of testing and its purpose for the church? What are the purposes for which God might bring us into a time of testing? And what might be worked out through it? The language of the second part of Matthew 24 is arresting to us. It seems so extreme and cosmic that many people can't imagine it relating to anything other than the destruction of the entire universe on the last day.

But it needn't be. If we look in the Old Testament and we're familiar with Old Testament language, we'll see many examples of this sort of cosmic language being used to speak of events in history. In Isaiah 13, verses 6, 9-11 and 19 we read I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant.

And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them. So this arresting cosmic language in this passage refers to the fall of Babylon, an event in history. But it's using the symbolism of stars and sun and moon.

These represent rulers. If we spoke about 50 stars falling from the heavens, people would know what we meant. Now, that cosmic imagery is more prevalent within the Old Testament and within the imagination of the ancient Near East.

But we have it too. We have it on our flags. We put stars on our flags.

We put moons on our flags. We have suns on some flags as well. They represent authority.

They represent power and things that are secure in the heavens. And those heavens being destroyed or rolled up, that's a sign of the world order being removed. Similar language can be found in Isaiah 34, verses 3-4.

Again, the destruction of Babylon. All their hosts shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree. Further examples of such language can be found in places like Ezekiel 32 or Joel 2 and 3. One of the things that we should be alert to here is that the fall of Jerusalem is being described in the same sort of language as the fall of Babylon.

It's become associated with that pagan city. Jesus then moves on to discuss the coming of the Son of Man. Now when we think about the coming of the Son of Man, we think of a downward movement from heaven to earth.

That tends to be the way that Christians think about this concept. But it is the coming of the Son of Man into heaven itself that is in view here. And the background for this is once again in Old Testament prophecy.

If we know our Old Testaments, much of this is not hard to read. It makes a lot of sense.

Jesus, throughout the Gospels, speaks like a prophet.

He uses the language of prophets, the illustrations, the symbolism. He uses the practice of prophets in a way that associates him with characters like Elijah and Elisha. He uses the parables of prophets.

And here he uses the apocalyptic symbolism of prophets. In Daniel chapter 7 verses 9 to 14 we read, As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool.

His throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.

The courts sat in judgment, and the books were opened. I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire.

As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came one like the Son of Man. And he came to the Ancient of Days, and was presented before him.

And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one, that shall not be destroyed. The sign of the Son of Man in heaven, the evidence of the Son of Man in heaven, the fact that we can see that he is in heaven, is the vindication of the exalted Son of Man by the dispossession of the wicked tenants.

This is the sign that he has been given the kingdom. They are removed from office. Christ also shows his power by using the Romans as his means of doing this.

And the result of this is that all the tribes of the earth will mourn. This is language that looks back to Zechariah chapter 12, verses 10 following. It's still focused on Israel, the tribes of the earth, or the land.

This is not the world in general, it's the land, and it's Israel, the tribes, that are in view here. And all of this is about establishing the new age of the kingdom. It's not about just the end of the world, it's starting something new.

The angels, or literally the messengers, are then sent out to gather from the four winds. This is a new beginning. It begins with a trumpet blast.

It's a new year of jubilee. And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who

are lost in the land of Assyria, and those who are driven out to the land of Egypt, will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem. That's Isaiah chapter 27, verse 13.

And Jesus is using the same sort of language here. He's also using the language of Deuteronomy chapter 30, verses 1-4. With all your heart, and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you.

And he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. God is going to gather all his children together.

It's going to be from four winds of heaven. It's going to be all the scattered Israelites who believe. It's going to be all of the Gentiles who believe.

We see that in Matthew chapter 8, verses 11-12. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. While the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness.

In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Bear in mind the way that Jesus is picking up the same language here. He speaks then of the fig tree that's been connected with Israel earlier, in the sign of the cursing of the fig tree.

They will see these signs if they're faithful, and they will recognize that the time has come. And he assures them once more, this generation will not pass away until everything occurs. Including the sun and the moon being darkened and all these sorts of things.

All of that is going to take place. Heaven and earth may pass away, but his word will not pass away. Many people have wondered whether Jesus is a false prophet.

And that he makes all these predictions about the end of the world and they don't actually come to pass. And so the early Christian movement is about learning to live with the fact that their founders' prophecies did not occur. But they did.

They occurred in AD 70. And he's not a false prophet, but he's in the tradition of prophets like Jeremiah, who prophesied the destruction of the temple and the exile. Jesus is speaking with the same sort of language.

And once we understand the language that he's using and the world in which he's speaking, it makes sense. What he predicted came to pass. And he emphasizes the absolute necessity of watchfulness.

He gives the example of Noah and of Lot. Everything seems to be going on as it always

has and then suddenly everything changes. In a single day your entire world order, which you thought was so absolutely rock solid, completely collapses.

And he uses this illustration of these people out in the field, or these people in a bed, or working in a particular context. One taken, another left. For many Christians this has been associated with the rapture.

That the rapture is taking certain people up to heaven and those who are left are going to face the tribulation. That's not what's being referred to here. Rather, one taken is taken in judgment.

Being taken is to face destruction. We should also maybe think of Matthew's attention to pairs and binaries coming in here. There is a distinction between the watchful and the unfaithful servant.

And maybe we are supposed to see that in the distinction between the one taken and the other left. That there are two different ways. You don't want to be taken.

So how are you going to ensure that? Well, by being watchful, by being the faithful servant that Jesus talks about. Christ will come as a thief in the night. They cannot predict the time of the Son of Man's coming.

But the signs will be there for the watchful and faithful servants, which they are called to be. If they are paying attention, they will recognise that his hour has come. And Jesus knows that many of his disciples will start to doubt.

His followers will start to wonder, well, 30 years have passed and we've not really seen any sign of this. We're all dying out and he said it would happen in this generation. But there seems to be no evidence.

And so many would doubt at that point and maybe fall away. And we have evidence of that in places like 2 Peter. That that is a burning question at that stage in the church's life.

But it happens in that generation. Christ's word is fulfilled. And we can find this hard to understand because we think of this fall of Jerusalem as an event just in a backwater country within the Roman Empire.

But that's not what it is. It's the final collapse of the old covenant order, leaving the new covenant order to come into its own. The order of the kingdom.

Now they will no longer go to Jerusalem to worship. Its temple has been destroyed. There is no longer atonement to be found there.

Rather, they will go to Christ. He will gather his elect from the four winds of heaven. Jew and Gentile alike will be brought into the kingdom.

And this is a new world order that's set up. The whole of the existing world order. A world order centred upon Jerusalem and what God was doing with that people has been changed.

And now something new has started. The church has been established in unrivalled significance as the place where God is working out his purposes. And that is established through the events of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70.

This is not a minor event. It's a radical change. A question to consider.

The attitude of the disciples in the run up to the destruction of Jerusalem should be ours too. Our worlds too will face their final reckoning. What are some of the ways in which Jesus' description of the sudden and devastating and unforeseen collapse of the world order and the watchfulness that shall characterise his disciples should inform our relationship to the world order that we inhabit in our own days.

Matthew chapter 25 contains three great judgement scenes. The first one is the parable of the ten virgins. Why virgins? Well, maybe because this is a marital event.

The bridegroom is coming. He's going to return for his bride. And the virgins would be associated with the bride.

They would be the sort of bridesmaid. And here I think they symbolise those associated with the bride of Jerusalem. And the five and five pattern continues the one taken and another left pattern that immediately precedes it.

It underlines the binary division that Matthew often draws our attention to. Why are there ten of them? Perhaps we could think of it in terms of the ten lampstands of Solomon's temple. There's five on the right.

There's five on the left. And the virgins represent the bridal character of the people which is represented by the temple itself. They bear their lamps out to meet the bridegroom as a sort of unveiling of the bridal glory within the temple.

It's a presentation of that glory to the bridegroom who's arrived. It might be connected also with the previous parable of the wise and faithful servant which might be the faithful high priest who has to act within the house of his master. And there's a cry at midnight and there's a shut door.

That reminds us of Passover. It's the event where God delivers his people in the middle of the night and there's this terrible judgement upon those who are not faithful. And those who are left outside of the door suffer a terrible fate whereas those within the house who are safe are blessed.

We should also have in mind Exodus chapter 27 verses 20 to 21. Keeping oil for the

lamps was the continual duty of the Israelites. And it was like the fourth day associated with the heavenly lights but paralleled with the first day when the lampstand itself was fashioned.

The lamp going out was associated with loss of vision, prophetic and the eyes of judgement. And we've seen this in 1 Samuel chapter 3 verses 1 to 3. That parallelism between the eyes of the high priest, the light of the word of the Lord being heard and then also the lamp in the temple. Oil is light bearing liquid.

It's associated with anointing which is associated in turn with light bearing in places like Zechariah chapter 4. And elsewhere in scripture we see oil associated with the spirit who produces faith in us which prepares the people of God to bear God's light. We might also think about the contrast between the characters that's drawn here. We should pay attention to the adjectives that are used.

It's faithful and wise versus wicked, wise versus foolish. Faithful versus wicked and slothful. Each description accents something different about the aspects of character that we should be attending to.

It's not just good and bad. It's wise and foolish. It's people who are prepared, people who are ready and people who are not.

People who have gotten the resources that they need in the time for the judgement and those who are taken by surprise and unawares and unprepared. The foolish versus wise opposition should also be explored deeper. We can see that in places like Proverbs chapter 9 with the contrast between the woman folly and lady wisdom.

Here we can also maybe think back to the wise and foolish builders in the Sermon on the Mount and the way that many of the same themes come up there. The way that they will be inspected. I never knew you.

For those who say Lord, Lord we did all these things in your name. And yet they are workers of wickedness. Here being prepared for Christ requires faithfulness, diligence, vigilance but also wisdom.

The wise person sees what lies ahead and makes provision and preparation for it. And this is one of the things that the disciples of Christ are challenged to do by this parable. They do not know what time the Lord will return in judgement upon them.

And so they must be prepared at all times. They must be ready to leave at a moment. And that will be a matter of keeping their lamps prepared.

Tending the lamp of the Spirit within them. This could be connected to the life of the church more directly by recognising that Christians are lamps and the church is a lampstand. This is one of the significances of the tongues of flame at Pentecost and the

vision that we see in Revelation chapter 1. We have been anointed with the oil of the Spirit and set alight by that Spirit.

With tongues of flame we are burning as a candlestick, as a lampstand, as individual lamps within the temple of God. And it's important that we tend to the life of the Spirit within us. We do not quench the Holy Spirit.

We seek to tend the flame of the Spirit by regularly returning to the replenishing oil of the Word and the sacraments. The next parable is a story of a man who departs for a long journey and he entrusts a great deal of his property to his servants. Talent should not be presumed to mean talents in the sense that we often use that term.

We often think of talents in terms of our skills and abilities and it's not unrelated to that but that's not what the term means here. It's a large sum of money and it's to be used for trade. They seem to be given these gifts of talents on the basis of their ability.

The more competent and able the more will be entrusted to their hands. And God-given responsibilities and opportunities for service are important and we must make the most of these. That's one of the points of this parable.

The importance is to be found ready for judgment. The time of testing will reveal the work of people. This is something that's discussed on various occasions within the New Testament where we see that people who are unfaithful find that their work in the day of testing is destroyed and things for which they may have been responsible fall to other more able and responsible and faithful parties.

Those who are faithful share in the joy of their master. And we should remember a talent is an immense sum of money. Two talents might be an entire lifetime's wages for a regular worker.

A modern equivalent would be something like two or three million dollars. This man is leaving an immense treasure in the hands of his servants and expecting them to have something to show for it at the other end. He's expecting them to prove themselves faithful and diligent and capable of using his resources well.

Luke's parable is different. It's a story of a returning king. The king leaves these great treasures with people and then goes off for a long journey where he defeats people who were not willing to be reigned over by him.

And then he returns having gained the kingdom and then gives these gifts to his faithful servants. Luke also has an equal distribution at the beginning but very different results from their trading. Matthew has different distribution at the outset.

When the man in Matthew's parable returns it's after a long time. For some this suggests that this parable relates not to AD 70 but to the end of all things. I'm not sure that's the

case though.

The extra responsibility seems to be within this world and the long time could relate to the 40 years. 40 years can be a very long time to live through. Especially when you might be spending almost the entirety of your life waiting for this thing to be fulfilled.

Here we might see parallels between the faithful servants and the faithful and wise servant of chapter 24 verse 45. The unfaithful servant, the final servant however, is lazy and indolent. He doesn't think that there's anything personally that he has to gain from acting as a faithful steward of his master's wealth.

He ventures nothing. He is merely concerned not to lose what has been entrusted to him. And importantly his behaviour was based upon a particular perception of his master.

He sees his master as a hard man. A man who is more concerned with judgement, not a generous master. A master who wants to get whatever he can.

A master who is concerned with condemnation. A master who is concerned with penny-pinching and all these sorts of things. A miserly master.

While the faithful servants ventured and took risks on the basis of a belief in their master that he was someone who was a good master who would entrust responsibility to those who were faithful. The unfaithful servant, on account of his false perception of his master, did not venture anything. He did not put the money to use as a faithful steward and so it's taken from him and given to someone who will make use of it.

The wealth entrusted to the sterile service of the unfaithful servant is handed over to the most fruitful and faithful servant. And the language of final judgement occurs here again. As God judges in history I think we should also see that related to final judgement.

Judgements in such things as the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah, the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, and the ways that individuals could be caught up in these things, relate not just to historical events but also to eternal destinies. The historical judgement is as it were bringing forward an anticipation of that greater judgement that awaits us. And being alert for these specific judgements in history prepares us for that final judgement at the very end.

In the same way as being prepared for our death, prepares us for a greater death that belongs beyond that. A question to consider. The unfaithful servant in the parable of the talents seems to have a religion merely concerned with preserving what he has, rather than doing anything with what has been entrusted to him.

It's also related to a vision of his master, a vision of God. How might we fill out this portrait of the unfaithful servant? And how might we avoid following his example? Along

with the parable of the wheat and the tares and the parable of the dragnet, the parable of the sheep and the goats that ends chapter 25 of Matthew is one of the great separation parables of Jesus' ministry. Arrayed before the exalted and enthroned Son of Man is a great judgement scene.

The nations being divided by the king as a shepherd divides the flock between sheep and goats. Sheep being sent to the right, the place of blessing, and the goats to the left. While this is commonly described as the parable of the sheep and the goats, that analogy isn't really explored within it.

It's just an introductory metaphor perhaps. And what we're focusing upon is more a judgement scene that is less of a parable than a straightforward description such as we have in Matthew 7 concerning those who say Lord, Lord, etc. Despite being very familiar, this parable does raise a number of questions.

Perhaps one of the most obvious ones concerns its relationship with the rest of the material of the Olivet Discourse. While it occurs at the very end and the climax of the Olivet Discourse in Matthew, where Jesus is speaking about coming judgement upon Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of Man in judgement in AD 70, it does seem difficult to fit into that limited frame. A number of commentators have maintained that there is some sort of temporal hiatus or break located at a point between the earlier part of the discourse and the later.

So the former part deals with the events of AD 70 and then the later part with the end of all things. Arguments for this have sometimes appealed to the idea of eschatological telescoping. So when you have a telescope you can pull it out and then you can bring it back in.

And there's a way in which future events foretold by prophets can correspond to each other with earlier events anticipating far greater later events. Now this is something that we see in the prophets concerning, for instance, prophecies of a new covenant. At certain points those prophecies seem to have an original referent to the return from exile.

And so that's the new covenant. But there's clearly a greater new covenant brought in by Christ. And so there's looking forward beyond that original event foretold by the prophet to something greater that fulfils that even more.

You can think about the same thing with the way the Exodus plays out. There's an original Exodus event but that Exodus anticipates a greater Exodus. And at certain points we see some of these prophecies that have elements that do not seem to rest finely upon their initial referent.

They seem to point beyond it to anticipate something even greater. Perhaps such

prophecies could be thought of as great clouds of promise from which an initial shower comes. But they do not yet fully discharge themselves of the full weight of the rain of blessing that they have to give that awaits something more.

And here I think we might encounter one such occasion. This parable or this discourse refers to AD 70 and the events immediately after that. But it also looks forward to something greater and I think something that is at the very end of all things.

A second question concerning this concerns the identity of the least of these to whom Jesus refers. And many people are divided between a universalist and a particularist reading of this expression. So universalist readings find in the least of these a reference to the poor more generally.

So Benedict XVI for instance wrote that Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. Love of God and love of neighbour have become one. In the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself and in Jesus we find God.

Now this is a reading that has a long history within the church. A reading that is honoured in part by the fruit that it has borne. It is something that has inspired and encouraged many people to remarkable practices of the works of mercy.

And so particularist readings by contrast tend to see in the least of Jesus' brethren a reference to the disciples and the emissaries of Christ. They are the ones that Christ has sent out as his missionaries, as those who bring his name to different places. But this reading seems to undercut the support the passage has traditionally been seen to give to the church's ministry to the poor and particular identification with and concern for the poor.

Now I think the particularist reading is the right one. The reference to Jesus' brethren in the context of Matthew's gospel is most likely to refer to disciples or to people who respond positively to the gospel. Jesus has already spoken in this book of his identification with the disciples that he sent out.

In chapter 10 verses 40 to 42 Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. And the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward.

And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple. Truly I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. We should also observe earlier in that same chapter, in chapter 10 of Matthew, Jesus sends out the twelve in a way that identifies with them and also uses a test of hospitality.

The way that the cities and towns of Israel respond to them as a test by which they will

be judged in the final judgment. And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay there until you depart. As you enter the house, greet it, and if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it.

But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.

Whether or not there is a large temporal hiatus, a gap between the events of AD 70 and the events of the end of the world, for instance, the end of Matthew 25 seems to involve a widening of the lens of discourse. The passages that precede it are focused upon the judgment of Israel and Jerusalem. But here is the judgment of all the nations that is in view.

The Son of Man is enthroned. He is the ruler not just of Israel, but of the whole world. This is a reordering of the cosmos and of the entire order of the nations, not just of Israel.

The identification between Jesus and his emissaries was first spoken of in the context of the disciples' mission among the towns and villages of Israel. And this parable seems to envisage the expansion of this into a broader mission among all of the nations of the world. Now that already took place in the events of the book of Acts.

And I think we have some anticipation of this in the book of Revelation where there are seven churches in Gentile cities that correspond, I believe, to the city of Jerusalem, which is the focus of the book. So there is the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, but there is also judgment upon Gentile cities. So I think we are seeing at least the initial fulfillment of Matthew chapter 25 in AD 70 and the events around that.

There is going to be judgment upon Gentile places along with Israel. Like the towns and the villages of Israel, the nations will be judged by the hospitality or the hostility that they show to the poor brethren of Jesus. The mission to the nations is in continuity with and is an escalation of the disciples' earlier mission to Israel and it will lead to a similar judgment.

Now although it has been suggested that the particularist reading of the least of these, the identification of the least of these with the particular disciples of Christ and the missionaries of Christ, challenges the ministry to the poor that the passage has inspired, I don't believe that that need to be the case. The key element of this parable that we are in danger of forgetting is that Jesus comes incognito and the sheep entertain him unawares. Think about the example of Abraham who entertains angels unawares.

He is a man of hospitality and that leads him to entertain angels not knowing that they

are angels. In the same way the people who are blessed here are blessed on account of their hospitality not knowing who it is that they are entertaining. They don't know that they are entertaining Christ and his disciples.

Now back in Matthew 10 there is a suggestion that there is some recognition that this is a righteous man or a prophet. So beware of overplaying this identification with the poor but it is important. One of the things that it does highlight is that Christ comes in a form that we would not expect.

Israel was expecting one to come as a great king perhaps and yet they find someone who eats with tax collectors and sinners. One who is a friend of prostitutes and those who are outcasts and hated and despised and marginalised. And Christ in a similar way tests our posture towards people in general.

Only by a greater extension of hospitality can we enjoy Jesus' particular presence. As Hebrews 13 verse 2 declares, that can be clearly located maybe in the Eucharist or in the preaching of the Gospel or in the body of the Church. But a Jesus who can come to us as the unrecognised stranger, that can come to us as he came to Israel for instance, as one who breaks some of our taboos, as one who does not socialise with the refined people that we would want to socialise with, well that is a lot more unsettling and threatening perhaps.

How can we welcome such a king? The connection of the test of hospitality with divine judgement is not just found here and in Matthew chapter 10. We see the same thing in Genesis with the stark contrast between the unwitting welcome that Abraham extends to the angels and the attempted gang rape of the angels and Sodom. And in Ezekiel chapter 16 verses 40-50, God declares that Sodom's condemnation was related to its indifference and cruelty to the poor and the needy.

And that was displayed in their treatment of two unknown visitors. They didn't know that that was the day of their visitation. They didn't know that those visitors were angels.

They just treated them as they would have treated other visitors. And on various occasions throughout the Scriptures we see that the revelation of the presence of Christ or his people is rendered contingent upon the extension of hospitality to the poor and those in need. It's in the act of mercy of the Good Samaritan that a new neighbour relationship was formed, a new brethren.

The Samaritan and the man who fell among thieves were separated from those who had excluded themselves from their indifference to the one in need. And in that parable the people of God are established through that act of mercy. At Emmaus it was only through the hospitality extended to the unknown stranger that the presence of Christ was made known and a meal that was just a regular meal became a celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Something very similar occurs in the parable of the sheep and the goats then. It is as the sheep receive Jesus' poor brethren that they receive Jesus himself unawares. It's through this act of receiving Jesus' poor brethren that they themselves are marked out as the blessed heirs of the Father with them.

And so the precondition of fellowship with the exalted Son of Man is the welcome extended to the Jesus who comes to us in the guise of the needy stranger. As the abandoned or attacked or rejected prophet. And perhaps this suggests that our society's welcome to the exalted Son of Man will be tested and sought and demonstrated first.

Not in great cathedrals or in the eloquent prayers that people can give in halls of power but in soup kitchens and prison cells, in shelters and refuges. And on that day of judgment it will be the way that we have treated that person in need, that person who's the stranger, that person who's rejected, who came across our path. And in our posture towards such people we are being tested in our reception of Christ himself.

Christ will go on to be rejected by this people. He will be an outcast. He will be a crucified one.

One who's marked as a criminal, one who's shamed and publicly humiliated and marked. He identifies with the least. He's the one who becomes one of the least of his society.

And only a people who can reach out and recognize and love those who are the least and rejected and outcast will be able to receive such a Christ. A question to consider. How can the criteria of judgment suggested in this particular passage change or maybe challenge some of our ideas of what final judgment looks like? At the beginning of Matthew chapter 26 we read that Jesus finished all of these sayings.

There's a sense of completeness and conclusion. These aren't just a random assortment of statements and stories but a clearly defined and rounded body of teaching. We have similar expressions in chapter 7 verse 28, chapter 11 verse 1, chapter 13 verse 53 and chapter 19 verse 1. And this is the last of the great teaching discourses that make up the bulk of Matthew's gospel.

I've argued that Jesus' teaching in Matthew is a complete body of teaching. It's not just a grab bag of different sayings that are ordered in random order. Rather it follows a pattern all the way through and it concludes with a condemnation in chapter 23 followed by the casting of a sentence in chapters 24 and 25.

Jesus once again foretells his death. The Passover is coming after two days, the third day after that and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified. Now he connects his death with the event of the Passover, inviting association with the Passover lamb, with the death of the firstborn, with the passing through the Red Sea and all these other elements.

Jesus has spoken about his forthcoming death before but hasn't connected it with the Passover in the way that he does here. The chief priests after this plan the plot to arrest and kill Jesus and do so in the palace of the high priest himself. This is a plot at the very heart of the authority structure of that day.

Jesus is a genuine threat to their power and their influence and they don't want to capture and kill Jesus during the feast but they end up doing just that later on. After this Jesus is in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper and a woman anoints his head with perfumed oil. This is an extravagant and a costly action and Jesus declares that it's preparing him for his burial.

It's an action that values Jesus himself, Jesus in his person, in his presence, in his body. And the disciples are indignant over the cost of the ointment but they fail to appreciate the value of the one to whom it is given. The value of that one more than deserving the extravagant gift that is given to him.

Jesus answers by saying that the poor will always be with them but that he will not be. They're thinking purely in terms of cost and money and the value but they don't see the value of the one they have with them. Now perhaps we should think of this in relationship to the previous chapter.

Might there be a connection between Jesus' statement about his body and the fact that the poor will always be with us? Jesus in the previous chapter has spoken about the way that acts of devotion and care and concern for the poor, for the outcast, for the needy, for the homeless, for people in prison, etc. can be expressions of love for him and the hospitality and love shown to such persons are ways of showing our devotion to him. And this I think is part of what we're supposed to see.

The true devotion to Jesus' body will be seen in our treatment of the poor. Jesus goes to the chief priests after this and betrays Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. There are a number of things in the Old Testament that seem to lie behind this.

Exodus 21, verse 32 with the law of the goring arks for instance. Israel is like a goring ark and Christ is the one who is valued like the servant who is gored by that ark. In Psalm 22, verse 12, Jesus is described as the Messiah or the one who is persecuted is described as being surrounded by bulls of Bashan and wild bulls.

Jesus is also the rejected shepherd of Zechariah. Zechariah 11, verses 12 to 13, valued at only 30 shekels of silver. This is a significant number.

We've seen this number before in the Old Testament. Perhaps we should also connect it with the story of Judah in the sale of Joseph in Genesis, chapter 37, verses 26 to 28. In that passage we read, There would seem to be connections between Judah and Judas even beyond the name that they share in common.

We should also observe the very sharp contrast here. Jesus has been valued for so little, 30 shekels of silver, in direct and sharp contrast to the action of the woman at Bethany that values his presence at the most extravagant cost. The immense expense of the ointment but the cheapness of the sale of Christ.

It reveals that what was really being valued was money. It was the ointment's value, monetary value, that really mattered. Not the poor, not Christ, but money.

And here, the way that Christ is sold for such a pittance is again a revelation of where value truly lies. Throughout the book of Matthew there's a deep challenge to value systems. And perhaps we should remember at such points that Matthew was a tax collector, someone for whom the radical nature of Jesus' teaching about money might have particularly resonated.

We can think about Jesus' teaching concerning serving Mammon, or maybe his teaching in regard to the temple tax, or maybe his teaching in paying taxes to Caesar, or maybe, again, his teaching to the rich young ruler that is asked to sell what he possesses and give it to the poor. In all of these cases we're seeing something about the way that Jesus regards money, and how much it differs from the way that we usually regard money. It is literally the first of Unleavened, and Jesus sends his disciples into the city to ready the celebration of the Passover together.

Maybe in thinking about the leaven, and the reason for which it's brought up at this point, we should reflect upon the theme that's been in the book already of purging out the old leaven. The old leaven is going to be removed, and later new leaven will be added. Perhaps at Pentecost we're supposed to see that as adding of a new leaven.

The old leaven is the sourdough that is transferred from bread to bread in succession, and it's an old principle that's perpetuated. And Jesus has spoken about the leaven of the Pharisees and the scribes. They're teaching.

They're teaching that's passed on from one generation to another. Something that represents something unhealthy at the very heart that's passed on in succession. And Jesus is going to remove that.

That old leaven is going to be purged out, and a new one is going to be added. While eating the meal, Jesus declares to his disciples that one of them will betray him. And all of them wonder whether they will be the ones that will do it.

In Matthew's Gospel, that association of the disciples with the actions of Judas is interesting. In the other Gospels we hear that Judas is the one that particularly protests the cost of the ointment. And we also know that he is the one that's going to betray Christ.

But in this Gospel, the other disciples are indignant with him concerning the cost of the

ointment, and they're also wondering whether they will be the ones that will betray him. That line between Judas and the other disciples is really not so sharp here. It's not very clear.

Through this, Jesus' knowledge of Judas' treachery is revealed. There's also a sense of destiny. The Son of Man goes as is written of him in the Scriptures.

And I would imagine that this is primarily referring to various anticipating stories. Stories of Hithophel, stories of Judah and his relationship with Joseph, and other stories like that, along with certain prophecies. But primarily the stories that point forward, anticipate, and call for some great fulfillment.

Jesus and his disciples here are eating a Passover meal, or at least a Passover associated meal. And it is absolutely crucial to grasp this if we're going to understand what Jesus does. Jesus isn't just taking up physical food and drink.

He's taking up elements that already bear great meaning within a meal that has considerable meaning and import. In Exodus chapter 12, the whole thrilling story of the place is interrupted to institute something. The celebration of the Passover that shall continue and institute the events of that particular celebration.

This is an event that looked forward to future realities, and also drew the people back to that past event, and enabled them to participate in that reality. This meal then is freighted with meaning and symbolism already, and Jesus takes up that pre-existing symbolism and relates it to himself. In this case, that symbolism is that of the unleavened bread associated with the Messiah.

It's a broken and a distributed and participated body. It's a self-communication and symbol. But it's something that already has that meaning.

It's not something that Jesus conjures up as a symbol out of thin air. Nor is it best to understand this in terms of more metaphysical categories, if we're detaching it from the importance of the story. It has a typological, a symbolic, a figural meaning, first and foremost.

And that's how we'll understand how it is a self-communication of Christ. Jesus, in connection with the cup, speaks of the blood of a new covenant. The Sinai covenant had the blood of its covenant.

We see that in Exodus chapter 24. And in Zechariah chapter 9 verse 11, there's blood of a covenant there that will deliver people from the watery depths. There's blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Isaiah chapter 53 verse 12 speaks of such blood. And he shall make him a portion with the many and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to

death and was numbered with the transgressors, yet he bore the sin of many and makes intercession for the transgressors. This is for the forgiveness of sins.

And the forgiveness of sins is not just individual forgiveness, having access to God. It's the forgiveness of the nation. It's the forgiveness of a nation that's been alienated from God.

God is going to restore his people, not just individual persons, but a people, and bring them in the Messiah into new relationship with himself. Wine also anticipates the kingdom. Christ will not drink the fruit of the vine again until he does so in the kingdom.

And so this celebration anticipates that celebration, the wedding supper of the Lamb. As we look in 1 Corinthians chapter 11, we see that the celebration of the Lord's Supper is poised between two great moments in history. It looks back.

It memorialises the Lord's death. And it does so until he comes. We're caught between those two events, the event that we memorialise in the past and the event that we anticipate in the future.

And the fact that we're memorialising his death also highlights that the meaning of the Last Supper was pointing forward to, and related to, and grounded upon the actual sacrifice of Christ's death. His self-communication in the elements of the supper was the self-communication of his death. A question to consider.

In what ways might the contrast between the actions of the woman of Bethany and those of Judas help us to reconsider our relationship with money? The middle section of Matthew chapter 26 concerns the falling away of the disciples of Jesus as he is taken in Gethsemane and as Judas Iscariot betrays him. Strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. We've encountered several allusions to and citations of Zechariah in these concluding chapters of Matthew and they continue here.

This verse is taken from Zechariah chapter 13 verse 7. As usual, it's important to hear the stories behind the story. From the triumphal entry onwards, Matthew is taking up such things as the Old Testament melody of Zechariah chapter 9 to 14 and he plays out the melody of the Passion narrative around this melody, making frequent allusions to it along the way. Here are a few examples that we might think of.

Chapter 9 verse 9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you! Righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Chapter 14 verse 21 And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day. Chapter 9 verse 14 Then the Lord will appear over them, and his arrow will go forth like lightning.

The Lord God will sound the trumpet, and will march forth in the whirlwinds of the south.

Chapter 12 verse 10 And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. Chapter 10 verse 8 to 9 I will whistle for them, and gather them in, for I have redeemed them, and they shall be as many as they were before, though I scattered them among the nations, yet in far countries they shall remember me, and with their children they shall live and return.

Chapter 14 verse 4 to 7 On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the mount shall move northward and the other half southward. And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azel, and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah the king of Judah. There the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.

On that day there shall be no light, cold or frost, and there shall be a unique day, which is known to the Lord, neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light. Chapter 9 verse 11 As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Chapter 13 verse 7 Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me, declares the Lord of hosts.

Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered. I will turn my hand against the little ones. Chapter 11 verses 12 to 13 Then I said to them, If it seems good to you, give me my wages, but if not, keep them.

And they weighed out as my wages thirty pieces of silver. Then the Lord said to me, Throw it to the potter, the lordly price at which I was priced by them. So I took the thirty pieces of silver, and threw them into the house of the Lord, to the potter.

We might perhaps add to this list the perplexing reference to Zechariah the son of Berechiah in Matthew chapter 23. These themes are messianic and apocalyptic. It's the rejected Messiah, wounded and killed.

And Matthew is taking this story and placing it in the background of his passion narrative, so that we can see that Jesus is fulfilling prophecy all the way along. Jesus foretells his disciples' rejection of him, in a way that shows that it fulfills Old Testament prophecy, and in a way also that reveals that he knows what's about to take place, and that even those elements that take the disciples and the reader by surprise, do not take him by surprise. He's already foretold Judas' betrayal, but now the disciples forsaking him and Peter's denying him are foretold.

Peter is the lead disciple, and he's the one who speaks up and declares with confidence

that he will not fall away. But Jesus declares that all of them will stumble that very night. However, Jesus will be raised and he will go before them to Galilee.

This is the closing scene of the Gospel, and the fact that Jesus foretells it here suggests that it is important that it happens in Galilee. He's returning to the point where he first gathered them. The shepherd is going to regather his sheep, and he's going to send them forth as shepherds themselves.

It's a reunion of the scattered sheep and the risen shepherd. Peter's excessive confidence in his own abilities and his insistent denials that he will deny Christ are striking here. He presents himself as the most faithful disciple.

All the others might reject him, but Peter would not. And perhaps there's an invited comparison between the proud, crowing cockerel and Peter himself. Peter is crowing about his faithfulness, but that very morning he will be reminded about that crowing that he is engaged in by the crowing of the cockerel, who alerts him to the fact that he has just denied his Lord.

From the prediction of three denials, Jesus goes on to pray three times in the Garden of Gethsemane, three times for the cup to be removed. And he takes with him Peter, James and John. They're the same disciples as were present at the Transfiguration, and they're probably near enough to hear his prayers.

He tells them to watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. We've had that statement before in the context of the Lord's Prayer. Lead us not into temptation.

Or we can think about the way that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where he was tempted. It's that entrance into that place of testing and trial, that place of tribulation, where your faith will be pushed to its limit and maybe beyond. And they're supposed to pray that at this very moment, this critical moment, that they will not find themselves pushed beyond, that they will not find themselves in a situation where their faith is overwhelmed.

They must pray for that. You can also think of the way that people are warned to keep awake in the Olivet Discourse. Warned to stay awake because they do not know when the time of trial and testing and tribulation will hit them.

They must be prepared at all times. And the disciples here just fall asleep. They cannot keep awake.

Three times they are tested and three times they fail, in contrast with Jesus in the wilderness. He talks with Peter in particular in verse 40, in a way that maybe anticipates Peter's denial. The Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Peter is zealous, but he lacks the ability to carry it out in practice. And Jesus wrestles

with the reality of his forthcoming suffering. These are agonised, passionate prayers calling upon his Father.

And yet there is a shift in the balance of the prayers between verse 39 and verse 42. In verse 39, my Father if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, nevertheless not as I will, but as you will. And it seems by verse 42 he has his answer.

And he prays differently. My Father if this cannot pass, unless I drink it, your will be done. His first prayer is a prayer that if there is any way according to God's will that the cup could be removed, that it would be removed.

And the second prayer is knowing that it cannot be removed. Let God's will be done is a prayer in which we see the will of Christ, according to his human nature, conformed with the will of the Father. A will that is set on the same thing.

Once again we might hear an echo of the Lord's prayer here. Your will be done. And perhaps further, an echo of the story of the binding of Isaac and the relationship between Isaac and his father Abraham.

Having prayed these three times, Jesus then gets up and goes out to face his betrayer who has come. And Judas is accompanied by a mob. He's one of the twelve we're told.

Now we know that Judas is one of the twelve, but this underlies the scale of the treachery that is taking place here. He betrays Jesus with a kiss. Maybe it reminds us of Joab betraying Amasa with a kiss in 2 Samuel 20 verses 9-10.

One of those with Jesus, identified with Peter elsewhere, strikes the high priest's servant. This again might make us think of the story of David fleeing from Absalom and the way that Abishai, the son of Zeruah, asked to strike down Shimei who comes out against him with curses. Here, Peter is forbidden and in that place Abishai is forbidden by David.

Those who deal in the coin of violence will receive their recompense in violence. But Jesus is not being taken for want of force. If he wanted, he could summon legions of angels to his aid.

However, the scriptures must be fulfilled. What are the scriptures in question? We could think of a number of different stories. The story of David and his fleeing from Absalom and the different events that occur there.

The story of Joseph being betrayed by his brothers and Judah in particular. We could think of the story beneath the final part of the prophecy of Zechariah. We could think of a number of other places like these that seem to point forward to what Jesus accomplishes and suffers.

In other gospels we see this particular incident associated with Isaiah 53, verse 12. He

was numbered with the transgressors. They come out against him like a brigand because he's numbered with the transgressors in fulfillment of the scriptures.

A question to consider. What similarities can we see in the way that Paul prays in 2 Corinthians 12, verses 7-10, concerning his thorn in the flesh, and the way that Christ prays in the Garden of Gethsemane? What can we learn by the comparison? And how does it relate to the broader themes at the end of the book of 2 Corinthians? In the concluding part of Matthew 26, Jesus is seized by the mob with Judas by night and taken to Caiaphas the high priest. The setting of night highlights the urgency and the underhandedness of what is taking place.

The authorities are impatient and they desire to do away with Jesus as soon as possible, as quickly as possible, rather than following a slower procedure of justice. The occurrence of these things at night also makes clear that the authorities are not people of the day, but people of the night, who desire the cover of darkness for their sins. Jesus' resurrection, by contrast, will be associated with the rising of the sun.

Earlier on, in the celebration of the Last Supper, they had celebrated a Passover meal in the evening, and now we are seeing the events of the Passover night. This is an inversion, or a reversal, of Passover and its meaning. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, brings forward false witnesses against Christ, seeking to get the conviction that they so desperately desire.

But they repeatedly try and fail, until two come forward, and the accusations made against him focus upon Jesus' challenge to the Temple. Jesus has challenged the Temple on a few occasions during the final week in Jerusalem in particular. He declared that it had been made into a den of robbers and a place of traders, a place where brigands would take refuge from justice.

Jesus has declared himself earlier to be greater than the Temple, in chapter 12, verse 6. And later on in the ministry of the early church, the challenge that Jesus posed to the Temple is brought forward again. In Acts chapter 6, verses 13-14, we see this. And they set false witnesses who said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law.

For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us. In his challenge to the Temple, Jesus could be seen as a prophet like Jeremiah. You can think maybe of Jeremiah chapter 7, verses 1 following.

But you cannot trust in these deceptive words. This is the Temple of the Lord. The Temple of the Lord.

The Temple of the Lord. For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly

execute justice one way or another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever. Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail.

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered, only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house which is called by my name become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, says the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel. And now, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you you did not answer.

Therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I give to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh, and I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim. Jesus then poses a very strong challenge to the temple. He is the one who cleanses the temple.

He is the one who declares that the temple has become like a den of thieves. He alludes to Zachariah, he alludes to Jeremiah, and all these other texts that speak about the way that the temple will be cleansed, and that God will judge the temple, and will remove trade from it, and he will oppose and defeat those who have made it into a den of brigands. The charge that is made against Jesus here is not actually found in Matthew's Gospel, although we do find something like it in the book of John, chapter 2, verses 19 following.

Jesus answered them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews then said, It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days? But he was speaking about the temple of his body. The witnesses then seem to make a true statement, but with the attempt to destroy, and with a twisting of Jesus' words.

It's a false witness in the sense that it's designed as a malicious witness. Yet the result is that Jesus is convicted by true testimony. They are judging Jesus' true message, not just something that's been misrepresented.

It's not just Jesus himself who is rejected, it's his message too. Jesus is silent before his accusers at first, as a sheep before its shearers is silent. In Isaiah chapter 53, verse 7, this is the way that the servant is described.

And the high priest commands him before God to tell him if he is the Christ. That's a strange thing to ask. Is this a separate charge? No, I don't think it is.

It's because the Messiah was the one to cleanse and restore the temple. And so theologically it follows from the statement about the temple. Note the repetition of this charge when Jesus is on the cross.

In chapter 27, verses 39-42. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, you who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself. If you are the son of God, come down from the cross.

So also the chief priests with the scribes and the elders mocked him, saying, he saved others, he cannot save himself. He is the king of Israel. Let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him.

In response to the high priest's request, Jesus affirms it. And he says that he is the son of man. And that the high priest would from then on see the son of man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven.

Jesus here is alluding to Daniel chapter 7. Daniel chapter 7, verses 13-14 read, In response to this, the high priest tears his clothes. Something the high priest was explicitly told that he ought not to do in Leviticus chapter 21, verse 10. The high priest and the court charge Jesus with blasphemy and declare him worthy of death.

They don't have the jurisdiction to carry out the sentence though, so they must deliver him to Pilate in the morning. Claiming to be the son of man goes beyond the status of a man. It's claiming a status that is more divine.

And there also seems to be cultural blasphemy here. He is opposing the temple and the religious leaders too. So there is the greater charge, the charge that he has made himself the son of man.

And then there is also the lesser charge of cultural blasphemy opposing the temple and the religious leaders. And they respond by spitting in his face, mocking him, slapping him. And we could maybe think to the mockery of Samson before his death.

But also of Isaiah chapter 50, verse 6 and the way that the suffering servant is described there. I gave my back to those who strike and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard. I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.

One thing we should be noting here is that even in that great hour of darkness, the enemies of Christ are constantly and continually fulfilling prophecy. Also, Jesus is living out his manifesto. He is turning the other cheek, not avenging himself.

Peter's denial is paralleled with and contrasted with Jesus' trial. In verse 58, Peter's presence is described. He is there at a distance.

And then we see him come to the forefront again in verse 69. Both Peter and Jesus are

questioned. One is faithful and the other unfaithful.

The two women who claim that he was with Jesus were probably with the arresting party. And we can see a gradual escalation. First he is approached directly and personally and denies it to the entire group.

He then tries to move location. And there he is accused to the bystanders by another servant girl. And then he denies it strongly again.

Then the bystanders accuse him together of association with the followers of Jesus. Note the way that Jesus is seen as an outsider from the north. A man of Nazareth, a man of Galilee.

And Peter, his accent giving him away, is associated with that region too. Peter's curse, that he declares at this point, is either an anathema upon himself or an anathema upon Christ. Both of the very utmost seriousness.

And it emphasises just how terribly and seriously he has fallen. Hearing the crowing cock brings sudden and horrified self-recognition of his earlier pride and his current sin. And startles him back to his senses.

He now completely removes himself. He's been gradually moving out and now he completely removes himself and weeps, bitterly. A question to consider.

What are some of the ways in which the justice of Christ condemnation of the Jewish leaders a few chapters earlier is manifested in the various injustices that are involved in their condemnation of him? In the first half of Matthew 27 we see the final cascade of events leading to the crucifixion of Christ. Judas feels bitter remorse for what he has done. But he doesn't seem to repent.

He abandons all hope and he kills himself. We should be alert to the fact that Judas' response is closely juxtaposed with Peter's denial as it is in Jesus' initial prediction of both events. There is a fearful near-symmetry between the two while some important differences that distinguish them.

It's very important to notice that Judas casts down the blood money in the temple itself. The trail of blood goes into the heart of the very house of God. The temple has become a house of blood.

And the fate of the temple is central in the concluding chapters of Matthew. Jesus is the prophet like Jeremiah who declares that the temple is doomed. A temple that has become a den for sheltering the wicked.

A refuge for the bloodthirsty, for people who are brigands. When it should be a house of prayer for all nations and a site for relationship with God. Jesus is the temple that is

about to be destroyed but there is also going to be a judgement upon the actual temple.

And the matter of Jesus' blood is key throughout this passage. Judas mourns for betraying Jesus' innocent blood. Placing the money he was bribed for the blood in the temple.

The blood money is used to buy the potter's field, thereafter called the field of blood. Pilate washes his hands of Jesus' blood. The people call for Jesus' blood to be on them and on their children.

We should consider this in the light of Matthew 23 verses 34-36. The innocent blood of Christ is contaminating everyone in this chapter. It is spreading and it spreads to the very heart of Israel in its temple.

The story of Israel began with the purchase of a burial place for the people in a land of strangers. The cave of Machpelah and the field of Machpelah. And now the doom of Jerusalem is declared in the purchase of a burial place for strangers in the land of the people.

Matthew says that this is fulfilling Jeremiah. But he quotes Zechariah 11 verses 12-13. This is all very strange.

In Zechariah 11 verses 12-13 we read. So what's going on? It seems to me that Matthew isn't stupid. He knows his Old Testament scriptures and he presumes that his readers do too.

Matthew wants us to hear the Zechariah citation within the resonance chamber of Jeremiah 18-19 and 32 verses 6-15. So in Zechariah 11 God withdraws his favour from the people. The prophet performs the part of an unfaithful shepherd, shepherding the people doomed for slaughter.

And then breaking his staffs that signify the covenant, asking for his wages. And then he's given 30 shekels of silver which he throws down in the house of the Lord to the potter. The reference to the potter there may seem strange and odd.

But Judah seems to play much the same role. He's paid 30 shekels of silver for destroying the Lamb of God. However, Matthew's reference to Jeremiah challenges us to hear this text against the background of another series of passages.

Concerning the fate of Israel as the pottery of the Lord. There is a message of judgement but with a silver lining of blessing. In Jeremiah 18 God compares his people to a piece of pottery that he works with.

In chapter 19 he says to Jeremiah Because the people have forsaken me and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods, whom neither they nor their

fathers nor the kings of Judah have known. And because they have filled this place with the blood of innocence, and have built the high place of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as a burnt offering to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind. Therefore, behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter.

And in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, and will cause their people to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hand of those who seek their life. I will give their dead bodies for food to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the earth, and I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at. Everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its wounds, and I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and their daughters, and everyone shall eat the flesh of his neighbor in the siege and in the distress, with which their enemies and those who seek their life afflict them.

Then you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you, and shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, So I will break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended. Then if we go forward a number of chapters to Jeremiah 32, in verse 6 and following we read, Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord, and I bought the field at Anathoth from Hanumel my cousin, and weighed out the money for him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales.

Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions and the open copy, and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch, the son of Neriah, son of Masiah, in the presence of Hanumel my cousin, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the God. I charged Baruch in their presence, saying, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware vessel, that they may last for a long time. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

So there's a message of judgment but also a hint of blessing. Matthew then wants us to read the story of Israel, the story of Judas, the story of Jesus, against this very carefully orchestrated allusion to Old Testament Scripture, both Zechariah and different parts of Jeremiah. You could also see this passage as connecting Judas and Ahithophel.

Ahithophel is a close friend and counsellor of David, but during the rebellion and the coup of Absalom, he joins Absalom and serves him as counsellor. And this was seen as a great betrayal by David and is spoken of in the Psalms and elsewhere, and is connected with Judas, as Psalm 41 verse 9 is applied to both Ahithophel and Judas, in John chapter 13 verse 18. In 2 Samuel chapter 17 verse 23, Ahithophel's advice is rejected for

Hushai's, and Ahithophel, seeing that the plot has gotten away from him, responds by taking his own life.

The similarities with Judas should not be hard to see. In both cases, there is remorse as a plot against the Davidic king gets out of hand. And there is a further parallel that could be considered.

In 2 chapters, in chapters 17 and 18 of 2 Samuel, you have two people hanging on trees. You have Ahithophel, who hangs himself, and then you have Absalom, the son of David, who is also hung on a tree, the rebellious son hung on a tree. In Matthew chapter 27, you have two people hung on trees.

You have Judas and you have Jesus. And those two characters are juxtaposed in other ways. Jesus is the son of David.

He's suffering the fate of the rebellious son, but he is the faithful son. And so the juxtaposition between Jesus and Judas, and then the juxtaposition between Judas and Peter, should all be considered. Judas is placed here, whereas in Luke's account, Luke brings him forward to Acts chapter 1. It does not mention his death within the context of his account of the Passion.

The ways that such stories are told really matters. Jesus is tried by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Once again, Jesus is notably silent in fulfillment of Isaiah chapter 53 verse 7. The lamb led to the slaughter, who before his shearers is silent.

Pilate's wife has dreams concerning Christ and warns her husband. Once again, the language of the king of the Jews is coming to the surface. Once again, warning dreams.

This is something that we saw at the beginning of the Gospel in the story of the Magi. The choice between Barabbas, whose name means son of the father, and Jesus, could be seen as the choice between two sons. Peter Lighthouse has suggested that we should think of the two goats on the Day of Atonement.

Jesus is the sin offering that is going to be offered to God, but Barabbas is the scapegoat who bears the sins of Israel. Barabbas, however, is released back to Israel, placing their sins back upon their heads. In choosing Barabbas, the people also choose the revolutionary over the true Messiah, a choice of a particular course of action that would seal their fate later on in AD 70.

Pilate's actions are constrained by the fury and the bloodthirstiness of the crowd who are baying for Jesus' blood. And we should observe the similarity between the statement of Pilate in verse 24 and the statement of the chief priests and the elders in verse 4. In verse 24, I am innocent of this man's blood, see to it yourselves. And then in verse 4, what is that to us? See to it yourself, the response of the chief priests and the elders to Judas.

A number of commentators have observed that in the background of this particular passage is the rite of Deuteronomy chapter 21 verses 1-9 unwittingly being performed. That rite is atonement for unsolved murders. And they shall testify.

And do not set the guilt of innocent blood in the midst of your people Israel, so that their blood guilt be atoned for. So you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from your midst, when you do what is right in the sight of the Lord. This is a passage lying behind the actions of Pilate, who is unwittingly performing this ritual in a certain way.

However, the irony in this case is that the heifer is the Jews themselves. He washes his hands. I am innocent of this man's blood.

And then the people respond, his blood be on us and on our children. Once again, this fulfills Jesus' judgement in Matthew chapter 23, that the blood of all these people will come upon that generation. It's important to emphasize here, against some later Christian readings, that this judgement is fulfilled in AD 70.

This doesn't refer to a curse that continues over the Jewish people. However, Israel is supposed to bear the sin of the old creation upon it, as the appointed scapegoat and sin-bearer for the nations. And what we see fulfilled in Christ is just that.

So Israel suffers the fate of the blood of all the righteous slain. But Jesus is also bearing the sins of the world, all the sins of the old creation coming upon him. And Jesus is then led away to be crucified.

Behind this text then is a rich tapestry of Old Testament allusions, that help us to see exactly what is taking place in the cross of Christ. And the movement of the blood from one party to another, the ways in which different parties are implicated in different ways, the rituals beneath the surface, all of this helps us to see how God is orchestrating his purpose for redemption for his people, through the sacrifice of his son. And that in this event of crucifixion, it's not just an unjust murder.

It's a means by which atonement is being provided. A means by which God is fulfilling his purpose for Israel. And a means by which judgment is working itself out, both for those who are rejecting and for those who will accept this sacrifice.

This is the outworking of destinies. A question to consider, the role of the crowd within this particular narrative is incredibly important. The crowd press Pilate to crucify Christ.

Now they're spurred on by the chief priests and the elders, but there's something about the crowd itself that deserves attention. How might we think about the relationship between Satan's agency within the story and the role of the fevered crowd? Towards the end of Matthew chapter 27, we reach the point that the entire gospel has been working towards, especially since chapter 16, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. And it begins with a parodic coronation and enthronement.

Gentile soldiers ridiculing the king of the Jews, gathering as an audience before him, dressing him up with a crown and a scarlet robe, giving him a reed of authority and kneeling before him, expressing a sort of feigned homage to him as the king of the Jews. He has the crown of thorns, which is a mark of the curse upon his brow. The soldiers then reverse this ironic pattern.

They spit instead of kneeling. They take the reed that they had given him and they strike him on the head with it, where they had earlier placed the crown. Then they strip him of the scarlet robe that they had dressed him in and they lead him away to be crucified.

But there is truth even in the mockery. Jesus is the king of the Jews. Indeed, he's the ruler of all, and those Gentile soldiers are included in that.

And for all the pride of the soldiers of the Romans, they have suffered a humiliation. Pilate has bowed to the Jews in surrendering Jesus to the Jewish mob. He's not expressing Roman authority.

Rather, he's submitted to the Jews in this matter. There's a contrast between Simon of Cyrene, who bears the cross for Christ, and his namesake, Simon Peter. Simon Peter is the one who said that he would follow Jesus all the way to the end and that he would never forsake him or deny him.

And yet, he's nowhere to be found, whereas Simon of Cyrene, a Gentile who carries his cross, is showing the very mark of discipleship that Simon Peter, the chief of the disciples that Jesus called, has failed to show. Throughout this passage, the voice of Scripture is whispering in the background. Matthew expects his readers to know Scripture fairly thoroughly and to recognise its voice throughout his Gospel, and most particularly here.

There are a number of references to the Psalms, which were the songs of the people of God. And by evoking this biblical background, Matthew conveys a deeper account of what is happening at the cross too. For instance, in being given gall to drink, Jesus is being given a narcotic that will relieve some of the pain.

But it's also an allusion to Psalm 69, verse 21. They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink. We might also hear the words of Lamentations in the background.

Lamentations, chapter 3, verse 19. Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall. And then in chapter 2, verse 15 of the same book.

All who pass along the way clap their hands at you, they hiss and wag their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem. Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth? The people are treating Christ in the same way as they treat the fallen Jerusalem after its destruction by the Babylonians. And there is a theology here.

Jesus is presented as the embodiment of the fallen city of Jerusalem in Lamentations. Jesus is suffering the judgement of Jerusalem's exile himself, the predicted fate of Jerusalem in Jeremiah 18, verse 16. And then they cast lots for his garments.

Again, there's Old Testament scripture in the background here. Psalm 22, verse 18. They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

And the charge against him is that he is the king of the Jews. To the Romans this would be maybe a sign of insurrection, a sign of claiming an authority that he did not have. And for the Jews they would have a sense of the more messianic connotations, that this is one who claims that he's going to destroy the temple and rebuild the temple in three days.

He's the one who's taking on the mantle and the task of the Messiah. He has robbers placed on either side of him, like people on either side of an enthroned king. And again we need to recognise that this is a parodic coronation and enthronement.

There are many rituals and rites and other things like that that are being performed here in either mockery or unwittingly in these chapters that help us to understand what is really taking place. This is truly a coronation. This is truly an enthronement.

But the people involved do not realise what's taking place. They do not know what they are doing. And the fact that he has robbers on either side of him is a fulfilment of Isaiah 53, verse 12, that he'd numbered with the transgressors.

And people passing by wag their heads. We've already seen the way that this alludes back to lamentations and the fate of Jerusalem and the way that people respond to its miserable condition. But it also relates to, again, Psalm 22, verse 7. All who see me mock me.

They make mouths at me. They wag their heads. Jesus is ridiculed as the one who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days by passers-by.

He's also ridiculed by the chief priests, the scribes and the elders as the one who, though he saved others, cannot save himself. He's the supposed king of Israel and claims to trust in God. But where's God now? He's not coming to his aid.

And the questions at the cross, the challenges and the mockery followed by the centurion's confirmation, truly this was the Son of God, might remind us of the testing of Jesus in the wilderness, where the question of whether he was the Son of God was also central. Maybe we could think back to the trial before the Sanhedrin. Tell us if you're the Christ, the Son of God, in verse 63 of chapter 26.

The choice there, is he going to live by the word of God? Is he going to accept the cup? Or is he going to take the easy route out? And again, there's the temple reference in

verse 40 of chapter 27. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross. And he is the one who said that he would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days.

And then, after that, there's the reference to his kingship. If you are the king of the Jews, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders mocking him here, again telling him to come down from the cross. Perhaps we're supposed to see that Jesus is being tested once more.

Once more, he's proving faithful through testing. He's not giving up, he's not surrendering, he's not being unfaithful to his calling. Jesus was accused of blasphemy, but this whole scene is one of extended blasphemy.

And the chief priests and scribes and elders ironically quote Psalm 22 verse 8, seemingly completely unwitting of its significance. Psalm 22 verse 8, Let him deliver him, let him rescue him, for he delights in him. There is then darkness over the entire land from the sixth to the ninth hour, from about noon to about three o'clock.

The final of the cycle of the plagues before the death of the firstborn, which also occurred in the darkness of midnight, involved the darkness over all the land. It could be also seen as decreation, return to the original darkness of the unformed creation. The darkness at Jesus' death contrasts with the light of the dawn upon his rising.

And it also might recall the darkness of the day of the Lord, described by Zephaniah in Zephaniah chapter 1 verse 15. We should consider the similarities between the description of Jesus' trial, mockery, crucifixion and death, and the events involved in and leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Jesus is suffering a similar fate to Jerusalem's fate, but presenting an alternative for all who trust in him.

He is suffering the fate that he describes in those earlier chapters. Here there is a fourth allusion to Psalm 22, which arguably serves as the most foundational text that Matthew wants his readers to hear his crucifixion account in terms of. At the ninth hour, Jesus cries out with a loud voice, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And these are the first words of Psalm 22.

It's the psalm of the suffering Davidic king. And the bystanders don't recognise that Jesus is quoting scripture. Like Eli in the temple in 1 Samuel, who couldn't recognise the prayer of Hannah, they can't recognise the voice of scripture and the words of the Psalms.

Hearing they do not understand. And perhaps there's a further irony here in that they think that he's calling for Elijah. The coming of Elijah was associated with the arrival of the great and terrible day of the Lord in Malachi 4. And here we're seeing that day take place in miniature in the death of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is then given sour wine again. And this is in fulfilment of Psalm 69 verse 21. Once

more, the scriptures and the Psalms, the suffering of the Davidic king, the fate of the city that's been destroyed and broken down, all of these lie behind the events of Christ's death.

And as we hear such allusions, we're getting an insight into Matthew's theology of the cross. Jesus is the suffering Messiah. He's the suffering servant.

He's the one that takes the fate of the unfaithful city upon himself. Jesus cries out again with a loud voice and gives up his spirit. And some have seen this as perhaps an initial giving up of the spirit, a delivering over of the spirit.

And there's a dramatic response to Jesus' death, a response that manifests its character as an event that shakes the whole world order. The curtain of the temple, the realm of God's dwelling, at the very heart of the religious order is torn from top to bottom, a sign of God's action. Now, we don't know which curtain this was, whether it was the inner curtain between the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place or whether it was the outer curtain.

But one way or another, access into God's presence is being made open. There's also an anticipation of the judgment upon Jerusalem's temple, an initial fulfilment of the destruction of the temple that Jesus speaks about and the way in which he is the alternative temple, the place in which people meet with God and whose body will be the place of God's residence as he forms his bride around himself. The realm of the creation is shaken by an earthquake and rocks are split.

The realm of death is shaken and graves are opened. The appearance of the raised dead in the Holy City to many after Jesus' resurrection is proof of Christ as the first fruits of the dead. And perhaps reminiscent of places like 2 Kings 13 20-21 where Elisha's bones revive a dead man.

God promises to shake the earth in Haggai 2 verse 6 and the earthquake is evidence that the shaking of the earth is beginning. We see a similar thing in Ezekiel 37 where there's an earthquake, a rushing wind of the spirit, graves are opened and bodies come to life and Israel is restored. This is something that Christ is doing through his death and a new world is coming into existence.

The darkness of the original creation before light has come and now there's a new creation bursting into existence. A new creation that will be seen most particularly with the light of resurrection morning as that dawns. The centurion and those who were with him confess that Jesus must be the son of God.

Gentiles responding in faith. It's another faithful centurion like the one in chapter 8 verses 5-13. Along with the centurion, Matthew draws our attention to the many women of Jesus' disciples who were present at a distance.

While the male disciples had almost all forsaken him at the end, the women remained faithfully present. They had ministered to him, providing for his needs. We see this in Luke chapter 8 verses 1-3.

We can see within the women the importance of loving devotion to Christ's body. It's something that you see in the actions of the women throughout the gospels. Just as Jesus draws attention to the importance of children as models of the kingdom, I think we should also see women as models of the kingdom.

Their commitment to Christ's body and their loving devotion to it is an example to follow. The male disciples are committed to Christ's mission and his teaching and when those seem to fail, they are nowhere to be found. While it is the women who are able to see the importance of Christ's presence himself and provide a model for our devotion to Christ's body in terms of service of one another, tending for each other's needs and being present to one another.

That is a form of faithfulness to Christ that can so often be neglected when we focus merely upon the mission and the teaching of Christ and fail to be devoted in love to his body. A question to consider. There are several allusions to Psalm 22 within this passage.

Go back and read Psalm 22. How can we see the story of Christ within that Psalm? How does that Psalm help us to read the events of the gospel? How does Psalm 22 shed light upon Jesus' use of its opening statement as his great expression of dereliction on the cross? We have reached the conclusion of the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus is buried, rises from the dead, appears to his disciples and gives them the Great Commission. Rather a lot of grand cover.

Joseph of Arimathea comes at evening asking for the body of Jesus. Arimathea seems to be the same place as Samuel came from which we see in 1 Samuel 1 verse 1. Jesus is the Davidic King and it seems fitting that a figure associated with Samuel is burying him into the chamber from which he will come forth as the risen Lord. That Joseph of Arimathea is a rich man and a disciple is also an interesting detail of this narrative.

Throughout Matthew's Gospel the theme of riches and money has often come up and here it comes up again. But now although the earlier rich man who wanted to become a disciple failed to do so, here is one that has. It's an encouraging note towards the end of the Gospel.

The presence of two Josephs, remember earlier Mary is the mother of James and Joseph, and two Marys in the account of the burial of Jesus brings our minds back to the beginning of the story of the Gospel which also began with a Joseph and a Mary. Jesus is placed into a new tomb, a virgin tomb, and the connection between the womb and the tomb is important throughout scripture. You can see this in places like Isaiah chapter 26 verses 16-19.