

# THE WAY TO PEACE: A COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW AND LUKE

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## **MATTHEW AND THE MESSAGE OF SCARUFUCE,**

In this commentary on Matthew I will deal with several interrelated themes that continue to be widely disputed in biblical scholarship - namely the tension between present and future in the mystery of the Kingdom and its relationship to the ministry of social justice, the practicality of the Kingdom's ethics as expounded in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, and the place of non-violence in the service of the Kingdom. In doing so, I am making a personal statement about my reading of Matthew's gospel, to the effect that love of one's enemies and non-retaliation are, in the words of Gandhi, 'the quintessence of true religion'.

This section on Matthew is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the

nature of the Kingdom and its relationship to the present, the second part discusses the role of the Church in Matthew's gospel in proclaiming and extending the Kingdom, and the third part examines the ethics of the Kingdom, with the love of one's enemies and the willingness to suffer unjustly seen as the perfection of true discipleship.

Jack Kingsbury remarks that the 'Kingdom of Heaven' is "the single most comprehensive concept"<sup>1</sup> in Matthew's gospel. The meaning of the expression is principally that God rules, but this rule is to be understood as "God's drawing near with his eschatological rule in the person of his Son Jesus to dwell to the end of the age with his people, the church."<sup>2</sup> John Meir sees this "nexus" between Christ and his people as the specific message of Matthew's gospel. It is the church's mission



to proclaim the Kingdom. More specifically, it is the Church's mission to pass on and interpret the teachings of Jesus concerning the 'greater righteousness' required of those who would enter the kingdom, a righteousness as ethical behavior which Jesus himself embodies and makes possible through his death and resurrection.

Jesus, then, incarnate in history, inaugurates the new age of God's Kingdom, teaches the new morality of the kingdom made possible through his death and resurrection, and commissions the Church to extend the Kingdom and correctly interpret the ethic required to enter it. His abiding presence as Risen Lord assures the authenticity of the Church's teaching.

But what is the nature of this Kingdom or rule of God? Walter Kasper explains that the biblical conception of the Kingdom was one of liberation from unjust rule and the establishment of God's justice in the world.<sup>3</sup> Yet Jesus himself never seeks to explain the notion of God's rule. "The concrete content of it emerges from his ministry and activity as a whole, his parables and actual conduct."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus' contemporaries, however, would have understood the concept from the Old Testament traditions. John Donahue in *The Faith That Does Justice* explains that Kingdom, while denoting the active rule of God, never loses its spatial dimension as active rule calling for a place or area in which this rule finds a home."<sup>5</sup> In other words, there is something very concrete and immediate about the Kingdom and its justice. It is the power of God challenging every structure and system of values that threatens the integrity of human life. "The Kingdom, and, therefore, the justice of God... are to be manifest in history no less than

the proclaimer of the Kingdom, Jesus, was incarnate in history."<sup>6</sup>

Through Jesus' ministry and activity as a whole', especially through his deeds of power and healing, the Kingdom is made present now. Through Jesus' mercy and compassion for the marginalized and poor, we can see that "God himself now moves into action...against humanity's history of incomprehensible suffering...Jesus, through that compassion of his, brings the message from God of God's radical 'no' to the continuing course of man's sufferings."<sup>7</sup>

In Jesus' reference to Isaiah 61 (Mt. 11:5f.) we can see his understanding that the time of salvation is now. "This is what Jesus' deeds of power and miraculous healings are meant to show; in them the Kingdom of God reaches into the present to save and heal. They show that the salvation brought by the Kingdom of God is the well-being of the whole individual, body and soul."<sup>8</sup>

Matthew's reference to the ejection of demons and the Kingdom of God, Mt. 12:28, further reveals that the salvation of the Kingdom entails the overpowering of all the forces of evil that are hostile to humanity and to the new creation brought into being by the Kingdom.

The resultant 'new creation' of the Kingdom of God will be a community of service, without overweening relationships based on power or the oppressive domination of one person over another. A community whose members forgive and are reconciled and prefer mercy to sacrifice, a community in which the lowly are esteemed and the poor and oppressed are sought after and saved.



It is God's dominion in the present, working in hidden and mysterious ways, that brings about the final state of 'definitive good'. Jesus has inaugurated the Kingdom in his deeds of mercy and compassion, in his ethical teaching, and in his death and resurrection. But it is a reality that grows mysteriously, like the mustard seed, in a hidden and obscure fashion, and is reflected in the lives of those who have accepted Jesus and follow in his path. "Thus Jesus does bring in the kingdom in which people are freed for justice and peace, but only imperfectly, moving progressively to perfect justice only in the kingdom's final fullness. God is still 'out there', ahead of us, to be met in the future."<sup>9</sup>

The paradox of the Kingdom is that while it brings a salvation that humanity is unable to possess through its own unaided resources, yet it is in and through human beings that the self-communicating love of God comes to power. The world is transformed and humanized through love, communicated through the actions of those who have embodied the ethic of the Kingdom and are enlivened by its 'grace'.

The true disciples of the Kingdom are those who practice justice, who do the greater righteousness that is the will of Jesus, who display the unconditional love of God, the neighbor and the enemy. In the words of Schillebeeckx, "God looks to us to make the Kingdom operational, to make explicit God's 'No' to suffering".<sup>10</sup> In the words of Matthew's Our Father, God's Kingdom comes when his will is done on earth, as it is in heaven.

It is the disciples' responsibility to teach the right way to do the will of God, as this

was taught and interpreted for them by Jesus. The most explicit teaching of Jesus about the ethics of discipleship is found in the Sermon on the Mount. At the root of the beatitudes and the antitheses is a concern to do justice, to love one's enemies, to care for the poor and the marginalized in effect to express God's all inclusive and compassionate love. To do the will of God and his justice is to be radically converted to the neighbor, and not only the neighbor who is oppressed, but also the oppressor.

John Topel says that "this emphasis on interhuman justice sums up the Gospel of Matthew as a whole, for at the end of Jesus' last discourse in the Gospel comes his famous description of the Last Judgment, where the motive for judgement on the success or failure of every human life is 'Whatsoever you did to one of these, my least brethren, you did unto me' (25:40). Thus does conversion to the neighbor come to be seen as the rule of Christian conduct, not only in the Sermon on the Mount, but in the whole of Matthew's Gospel."<sup>11</sup>

As Jesus is to be found hidden in the world in the least of his brethren, so the true disciple must be engaged in a mission of mercy and compassion to the outcast and the marginalized. But as Jesus' opposition in Matthew's gospel to the demonic forces makes clear, the disciples' mission in proclaiming the Kingdom must include a prophetic witness in opposition to all the forces of evil and oppression in the world. Mercy must include protest.

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It is Jesus' own opposition to the forces of evil in his day which brings about his death. But in his final hours, he exemplifies the very peak of ethical behavior he had



presented in the Sermon on the Mount. To the disciple who had struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear, Jesus says, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (26:52).

"True to his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (5:38-42, 44), Jesus rejects man's violence as the tool of God's will, both for himself and his community."<sup>12</sup> He goes to his death forgiving and uncomplaining and in this way offers the supreme testimony to the nature of the Kingdom - a love so unconditional that it embraces the enemy even to the point of readiness to suffer at his hands. Jesus sacrifices effectiveness and success for the sake of obedience and for the sake of love. But the apparent impotence of his sacrifice is turned into victory through the glory of the resurrection.

As Jesus embodies in his life and death the ethics of the Kingdom, so the disciple must follow his example. His conduct must be transformed, the power for this transformation flowing from his relationship of faith and love for God, which Jesus has made possible. Only in this way can he become an effective instrument for bringing in the kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount rejects *all* forms of retaliation, because only the power of such unconditional love is capable of converting society and the neighbor. Self-sacrificing love is the power that effects God's justice.

John Howard Yoder, in *The Original Revolution*, describes the difference between the ethic of Jesus and the 'righteousness of the Pharisees'.<sup>13</sup>

First, the Pharisees' standards were fulfillable within the capacity of ordinary,

selfish human nature. One could love one's neighbor if one could also hate. Secondly, the righteousness of the Pharisees was external and accessible. Certain specific acts could be proscribed as right or wrong, regardless of the intentions of the heart. And finally, the norms of the Pharisees assumed a 'reasonable degree of self-interest'. One would not lie or kill - except to save one's life or one's country.

But this is not the ethic of Jesus and the Kingdom. For the disciple, in proclaiming the Kingdom and God's justice, is asked to resemble God in his excess and his abundance, his indiscriminating and unconditional love. "There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds." (5:48) Jesus' witness from Gethesemane to the Cross embodies the limitless goodness of the Father. The disciple must follow after, offering love and non-retaliation to the enemy, with his hope and confidence placed in the power of the Resurrection.

One loves even "beyond the limits of reason and justice, even to the point of refusing to kill and being willing to suffer"<sup>14</sup> not because Jesus told us to, but simply because God is like this. In offering such unqualified love of neighbor, the disciple gives the "most appropriate testimony to the nature of God's love and His Kingdom."<sup>15</sup>

John Topel, in *The Way to Peace*, describes how the Christian just-war theory led to a compromise in the gospel ethic of self-sacrificing justice, substituting in its stead "the enlightened self-interest that originated with the Greeks (as) the basis of our ethical system."<sup>16</sup> But as he points out, "any ethic that ignores the ethic of the Sermon, based on self-sacrificing con-



version to the neighbor, and builds instead on rational self-interest cannot bring peace and justice to society. Thus we must turn to the Sermon again as embodying the only hope for long-range justice in our world."<sup>17</sup>

The disciple is called through the Spirit of Jesus to bring in the kingdom through his faith working for justice, knowing that the sinful structures of the world will avenge themselves on him. In the face of such persecution, the disciple is called to lay down his life, with only faith in Jesus' resurrection that this will be a step to the conversion of enemies and the world.

This kerygmatic message is also affirmed by the Buddhist tradition. The following is a poem written by the venerated Vietnamese monk, Nhat Hanh, and offers an Eastern expression of the idea of the 'budding forth' of the kingdom through suffering and sacrifice.

*Life has left her footprints on my forehead*

*but I have become a child again this morning.*

*The smile, seen through leaves and flowers, is back to smooth away the wrinkles.*

*as the rains wipe away footprints on the beach. Again a cycle of birth and death begins.*

*I walk on thorns, but firmly, as among flowers.*

*I keep my head high.*

*Rimes bloom among the sounds of bombs and mortars.*

*The tears I shed yesterday have become rain.*

*I feel calm hearing its sound on the thatched roof.*

*Childhood (o my birthland!) is calling me*

*and the rain melts my despair.*

*I am still here alive, able to smile quietly.*

*The sweet fruit brought forth by the tree of sufferings!*

*Carrying the dead corpse of my brother,*

*I go across the rice-field in the darkness.*

*Earth will keep thee tight within her arms, dear one,*

*so that tomorrow thou wilt be reincarnated in flowers--*

*those flowers smiling quietly in this morning field.*

*This moment you weep no more, dear one - we have gone through too deep a night!*

*This morning, yes, this morning, I kneel down on the green grass*

*when I feel your presence.*

*O flowers which carry the smile of ineffability!*

*The message*

*The message of love and sacrifice*

*has indeed come to us.*

II

## THE GOSPEL WITHOUT COMPROMISE.

In the opening chapter of the gospel of Luke, the maiden Myriam sings a hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God for choosing her to be the mother of the Messiah. But she herself is no more than a handmaid or slave of the Lord and hence will bring the Messiah into the world without the glory and honor her fellow Israelites would consider fitting. However, the message of her hymn is that wealth and power and prestige have no real value in God's sight and the child in her womb will become an agent of radical



change by means of which such customary values will be overturned. So the mother of the Messiah gives expression to that reversal of values which is to bring about the rejection and death of her son. The scandal of the cross has been introduced into the good news proclaimed by Gabriel. For those who can see, however, it is through the paradox of this rejection, and not despite it, that God remains faithful to his promises of salvation and continues his commission to Israel through that holy remnant that believes in Jesus, His Son.

In this section I will examine Luke's presentation of this reversal of values proclaimed by Jesus, by means of which he comes into conflict with humankind's basic methods of self-validation - namely wealth and possessions, social respectability, cultic and religious orthodoxy and righteous violence. His message of mercy and forgiveness and his openness to the poor and the outcasts will bring him into conflict with the protectors of the social order of his day and the price of his social non-conformity will be the cross. As Jesus has suffered the same fate as the great prophets before him, so also the disciple must expect the hostility of the social order as he confronts the basic sinful structures and attitudes of humankind. This sinfulness and hostility will confront him not only from the society at large but also from within his own religious institutions, as the prophets continue to suffer misunderstanding and rejection as the price of their future victory.

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The testing in the desert, a scene which Luke shares with the other synoptics, presents Jesus struggling over the means by which to spread his kingdom. His mission in life is beginning, but is he to use the ways of

glory and kingly power to establish his rule? Shall he turn the stones into bread for the multitudes so they will proclaim him king (as they try to do later in the gospel), shall he adopt the nationalistic cause and the idolatry of political power hunger, shall he present himself as the heavenly messenger from above, come to set things right? All these methods are rejected by Jesus because in their ambiguity they contradict his basic message. One cannot approach God through methods that center a person upon himself as the source of absolute power and which impede the fundamental insight of one's radical poverty and need before the face of God.

Jesus has come to overturn the values of the established order, but not by that order's established methods.

Jesus inaugurates his mission by the reading of Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth. He has come to proclaim the mercy and justice of God and the fulfillment he promises is "a visible socio-political, economic restructuring of relations among the people of God."<sup>18</sup> Salvation has come in the person of Jesus, anointed with the Spirit.

The pattern of rejection in Jesus' life begins here at Nazareth. A prophet is not acceptable in his own country. People are offended if one of their own seeks to rise above them. So Jesus proclaims his opening to the outsiders, the gentiles who are unclean, and incurs the community's wrath.

It is in the Sermon on the Plain that Jesus' proclamation at Nazareth is expanded and the methods of his Kingdom are explained. Yet these methods are so radical as to run "counter to all standard and accepted rules for so-called civilized existence. One



is to love one's enemies and to do good to them, blessing and praying for them. Seized property is not to be reclaimed and delinquent loans are to be forgiven. And the basic theme of the gospel, the rich and mighty are to be brought low and the humble exalted. The principal recipients of the Kingdom are the poor, both the economically and socially poor and the downtrodden, the persecuted and the rejected, in other words, "the neglected mass of humanity" who in their need recognize their dependence on God."<sup>19</sup>

The sermon, then, expresses a striking reversal of customary values and of the ordinary natural law behavior of others. The poor are exalted, showing that God's favor does not depend on external fortunes. The persecuted are to be blessed and will have their reward, reversing the standard criteria for success. One must be willing to sacrifice even one's undergarment, the poor man's last resource, if one's cloak is taken away. In so doing, one shows total reliance on God. And one is to do good not merely to those who can return the favor. Finally even enemies are to be blessed and loved. All the standard means of buttressing one's sense of self-importance and security are overturned. In their place are humility, simplicity and a boundless love.

During the rest of Jesus' ministry, he will offer a fuller elaboration and example of his Kingdom's ethic and as a result will come into conflict with the religious authorities, whose position and prestige his teachings challenge. He will preach a radical redistribution of wealth, he will eat with outcasts and sinners, he will prefer the good of humanity to the security of the religious establishment, whose primary motives are power and control without compassion, and he will eschew all violence, dying on

the cross with words of forgiveness for his persecutors.

I must now examine the challenge Jesus offers in these four areas to the accepted values of his day.

The gospel of Luke is well known for its emphasis on the renunciation of surplus possessions and their redistribution to the poor. While this attitude did not originate with Luke, he has chosen to accentuate it, no doubt in response to the special needs of his community. In biblical thought the problem with wealth is that it not only could become a source of dominating power over others. It could also dominate the one who possesses it. The wealthy person becomes attached to wealth as a sign of his moral rectitude, the outward, visible sign of his superiority. Through this attachment, he then becomes closed to the needs of those around him. He becomes blind to his right relationship to God and to his neighbor. Self-importance and security replace openness and love.

To drive home the message of radical detachment, Luke has gone beyond his sources in Mark and added his own striking references to the theme of material possessions. Matthew leaves *everything* to follow Jesus, the Sermon on the Plain contains a woe to the rich and the full, and the poor who are blessed are the economically poor. The parables of the rich fool, the great banquet, the unjust steward and the rich man and Lazarus are dramatic illustrations of the need for detachment from material possessions and for openness to the poor. The Pharisees, who are 'lovers of money' sneer at Jesus' teachings, but the true disciple must renounce all he has, sell his possessions and give alms. This radical message is tempered in places, as with the



reference to Zaccheus, who gives half of his possessions, but the basic message is the same. Surplus possessions are an obstacle to one's right relationship to God and neighbor. One must invite to one's banquet the poor and the maimed, the blind and the lame. The forgiveness and mercy of God one accepts into one's life are to be communicated to others in concrete and practical ways, above all in openness and assistance to the poor and rejected. Richard Cassidy sees this as Jesus' social response to the problem of poverty in his day, a response that calls for a radical modification of existing social patterns.<sup>20</sup>

Quite possibly, Jesus' attack on the buying and selling in the temple forged the resolution of the chief priests and scribes to have him killed.

Yet what precipitated the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities to begin with was his association with sinners and outcasts and his disregard for the fasting regulations and sabbath ordinances. A strict demarcation between the righteous and unrighteous was apparently of great importance to the religious leaders, as a means of assuring their own moral purity. Contact with sinners led to defilement of this precious possession and among the sinners were those too poor to afford the leisure to fulfill all the detailed religious proscriptions by means of which righteousness was attained. Such people were as unclean as the gentiles and were to be shunned. Jesus, on the other hand, openly associated with the sinners and outcasts, and even allowed a woman of sin to touch him. He thus presented a direct challenge to a very precious system of behavior and attitudes by means of which the 'righteous' ones assured themselves of their own moral superiority and social acceptability: separa-

tion from the riff-raff. As with surplus possessions, such practices created rigid attitudes of self-complacency and false self-reliance, persons rich in the knowledge of their own virtue.

Luke's own contribution to this theme can be found in his parable of the good Samaritan, the unclean gentile who offers the proper response of neighborliness as opposed to the priest and scribe. Even more striking in its dramatic succinctness is the story of the self-congratulating pharisee in the temple and the contrite toll collector, considered by his own people to be a traitor. Conventional values are radically overturned. It is no wonder the religious establishment was enraged.

Related to the theme of sinners and outcasts is the matter of Jesus' seeming indifference to the fasting regulations and sabbath ordinances. The real needs of humanity always took precedence over the prestige or good order of the institution. Yet the priests and scribes and pharisees were very attached to these regulations and ordinances, both as a means of exercising power and control as well as of establishing ritual purity: righteousness acquired through performance of exact formulae and power acquired by compelling others to do likewise. In both instances, the esteem of the self as an absolute is established and the radical need for God denied. The self becomes rich in the illusion of its own power.

To the numerous examples of healings on the sabbath found in Mark Luke adds the cure of the woman burdened with an infirmity for eighteen years and the cure of the man with dropsy. And there are the references to picking grain on the sabbath and eating with unwashed hands and the aforementioned eating with sinners, among



whom Matthew and Zaccheus are prominent. Jesus has not allowed the pharisees' attachment to their institution as an absolute to impede his service and compassion to humanity.

In contrast to the behavior of the priests and scribes, Jesus has counseled service and humility and childlike dependence. He has also welcomed to himself children and a blind man whom the disciples have rebuked for attempting to approach him - evidence that the sin of exclusivity does not lie with the pharisees and priests alone.

The disciples' further misunderstanding of Jesus' mission is found in their lack of comprehension of the necessity of his final suffering and in his rejection of violence. Luke's special contribution to this theme can be found in the incident of the Samaritan village, when Jesus must rebuke the disciples for wishing to call down fire upon the town. Luke also has Jesus express exasperation over the issue of 'two swords' at the final passover meal and in Luke alone Jesus heals the ear of the high priest who had been attacked by Peter in the garden. Finally, on the cross Jesus dies an outcast with words of forgiveness for his enemies. He has faithfully transmitted God's universal, boundless love and forgiveness to the end.

This forgiveness communicated by Jesus is the key to his offer of salvation. For it is in the experience of such unconditional love and acceptance that the divisions and wounds within the human person are healed. No more may one live in fear of one's radical incompleteness and have to project this fear of unworthiness and imperfection upon the outsider, the sinner and the enemy. No longer need one hide behind the false security of possessions or institutional regulations. One has been forgiven and one is

loved to the depths.

But to make contact with this experience, one must have the courage to renounce the old ways and the old ties and make a great leap into the dark.

Jesus' greatest reversal of accepted values lay in his trusting surrender to suffering and to the failure of the cross. This moment of trust was Jesus' supreme act of revelation of the Father as the only source of our well-being. "Jesus' revelation of the Father provides release from all the gods in which we humans place our trust - money, personal virtue, power. Jesus trusts his Father and reveals that the salvation of humankind is to be found in such trusting and not in grasping at things which are no gods...To Jesus' expression of complete fidelity and trust the Father answers in the Resurrection and the power of the Spirit at Pentecost."<sup>21</sup>

It is Jesus' trust in suffering, then, that marks the inauguration of the Kingdom. "Here at the cross is the man who loves his enemies, the man whose righteousness is greater than the Pharisees, who being rich became poor, who gives his robe to those who took his cloak, who prays for those who spitefully use him."<sup>22</sup>

And as the Master has gone, so must the disciple follow. Luke has accentuated the theme of the special costs of discipleship by several additions to his sources in Matthew: "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God" (9:62), the reference to *bating* one's relatives in order to become Jesus' disciple, and even hating one's own life, and the necessity of taking up one's cross *daily* and following Jesus. For in spreading Jesus' message of universal love and forgiveness it is inevitable that the disciple will come



into conflict with the universal practices by which a sinful humanity shores up its belief in its own omnipotence. "The believer's cross must be, like his Lord's, the price of his social nonconformity".

*For him who looks towards the future,  
The Manager is situated on Golgotha  
And the Cross has already been raised  
in Bethlehem.*

Dag Hammarskjöld  
Christmas Eve, 1960

## ENDNOTES

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