

“According to Matthew”

A study of the Gospel of Matthew

Part 15: Compassion and Power

From the very start of Matthew’s Gospel we see that he is concerned with the idea of Kings and Kingdoms. Near the start of he gave us a portrait of King Herod, a King who was everything a King was never meant to be. Power crazed. Immoral. Fearful for his position. Herod the Great was the King at the birth of Jesus. But now that Herod has passed away his territory has been divided into three provinces. Herod-Archelaus is in charge of Judea and Samaria, Herod-Philip in charge of the Northern territories and Herod-Antipas, the Herod in Mathew 14, is ruler over Galilee and Peraea.

Herod Antipas was originally married to the daughter of a powerful ruler in a neighbouring province, that of the Nabateans. However, he has become involved with the wife of his half-brother Philip, divorced his first wife and taken Philip’s wife, Salome as his own. Eventually this would incite the wrath of the Nabateans who make war against him and defeat him, but all that is to come. At this point in the story John the Baptist has denounced Herod Antipas for his immorality, and Phillips ex-wife (now Herod’s wife), Herodias, is not happy about it at all. John, whom we learnt earlier in Matthew was imprisoned, has now been executed.

Chapter 15, verses 1-12 give us an account of a clash between Kingdoms, the Kingdom of righteousness represented by John and the kingdom of darkness, represented by the actions of Herod Antipas and his disturbingly dysfunctional family.

NAS Matthew 14:1 At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the news about Jesus, ² and said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead; and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him." ³ For when Herod had John arrested, he bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. ⁴ For John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." ⁵ And although he wanted to put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they regarded him as a prophet. ⁶ But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before *them* and pleased Herod. ⁷ Thereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. ⁸ And having been prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist." ⁹ And although he was grieved, the king commanded *it* to be given because of his oaths, and because of his dinner guests. ¹⁰ And he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. ¹¹ And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl; and she brought *it* to her mother. ¹² And his disciples came and took away the body and buried it; and they went and reported to Jesus.

Herod appears to be consumed by guilt and superstition. After having had John executed he learns news of the ministry of Jesus. He contemplates whether Jesus is the ghost of John come back to haunt him. Matthew then gives us an account of John’s death.

It at first appears that Herod was content with having John placed in prison. He was not inclined to have him killed because he knew of his popularity with the common people who regarded him as a prophet. His new wife Herodias sees things differently. John was an embarrassment. To rephrase a common observation, behind every twisted man, is an even more twisted woman.

At Herod’s lavish drink sodden birthday celebrations she persuades her daughter to dance for

Herod, in such an enticing manner that he promises to give her whatever she desired. Goaded on by mother she states her desire as being the head of the baptist. Out of concern not to look weak before his party guests the evil deed is done.

The New Testament book of James tells us: Chapter 1:14-15 **'But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.'**

The Scottish author and novelist Sir Walter Scott penned the lines "Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!" As Herod increasingly becomes tangled in a web of his own making his fall seems immanent.

John's disciples are at least able to give John some dignity in death and after obtaining his body he receives a decent burial. In many ways John was the first Christian martyr. The second would be a disciple named Stephen, whose death by stoning is recorded in the Book of Acts. Like John he also receives a dignified burial at the hands of devout men.

But what would become of Herod? There is a passage in the works of the Jewish historian Josephus that not only mentions John the Baptist but also the fall of Herod and the destruction of his army. Josephus lived between AD 37-100. While the main thrust of his writing was the Jewish wars with Rome, he nevertheless gives us a fascinating account of life in New Testament times Here's what he has to say about Herod and John.

¹¹⁶ Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist; ¹¹⁷ for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness toward one another, and piety toward God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body: supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness.

¹¹⁸ Now, when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late.

¹¹⁹ Accordingly he was sent as prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the citadel I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure to him."
(Antiquities 18:116-119)

There is no reference in Josephus to dancing girls or lavish parties, but there is a sense of the hostility that existed towards Herod and the acknowledgment that John was well known.

Elsewhere in his works Josephus has a brief paragraph that mentions Jesus. However the passage has been disputed by many scholars as it seems to have been edited to reflect Christian doctrine.

Others suggest the reference is genuine and it remains one of the few references, outside of the bible, that mentions Jesus by name. One expert, Géza Vermes, offers a speculative reconstruction of the original text of Josephus removing later Christian additions that reads:

"Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was called the Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day."

John was many things. Not only did Jesus suggest he was the greatest prophet who ever lived, (the 'Elijah' who prefigured his own ministry) but to Jesus he was a close friend and a cousin. Upon learning of the news of John's execution Jesus attempts to withdraw. Such proves impossible and instead becomes the setting for one of His most well known miracles.

Let us read verses 13 -23

¹³ Now when Jesus heard *it*, He withdrew from there in a boat, to a lonely place by Himself; and when the multitudes heard *of this*, they followed Him on foot from the cities. ¹⁴ And when He went ashore, He saw a great multitude, and felt compassion for them, and healed their sick. ¹⁵ And when it was evening, the disciples came to Him, saying, "The place is desolate, and the time is already past; so send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away; you give them *something* to eat!" ¹⁷ And they said to Him, "We have here only five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And He said, "Bring them here to Me." ¹⁹ And ordering the multitudes to recline on the grass, He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed *the food*, and breaking the loaves He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave to the multitudes, ²⁰ and they all ate, and were satisfied. And they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve full baskets. ²¹ And there were about five thousand men who ate, aside from women and children. ²² And immediately He made the disciples get into the boat, and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. ²³ And after He had sent the multitudes away, He went up to the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone.

The contrast between the kingdoms of the earth and the kingdom of God continue to be made. Herod had a drunken birthday banquet at which the select few were fed and a good man lost his life. Jesus has a banquet in the wilderness and over 5000 hungry folk are refreshed. All are invited. No-one is turned away. All are made welcome.

Jesus withdraws to an area that is outside of Herod's jurisdiction. He is both escaping from Herod's delusional notion that He is a reincarnation of John the Baptist and grieving the loss of His friend. Now was not the time for confrontation. Though He seeks to be alone, the crowds follow. But He doesn't turn them away. Verse 14 tells us that He had compassion on them.

The word used in Greek here is the word (σπλαγχνίζομαι) 'splanchnizomai'. Matthew only uses it a few times, the other gospel authors hardly at all. It's a word of deep feeling. It is previously used by Matthew when Jesus looks upon the crowds and sees them like sheep without a shepherd. (9:36).

It is used only twice in Luke's gospel. Once in the parable of the Good Samaritan to describe the feelings the Samaritan has towards the man when he sees him laying at the side of the road in desperate need of help. The other use by Luke is in the parable of the prodigal son. When the younger son returns home the Father sees him coming and is filled with 'splanchnizomai' 'compassion' and he runs to him, embraces him and welcomes him home.

A literal translation would be along the lines of 'to yearn to the depths of ones bowels'. It describes the heart going out to somebody in a situation of desperation or great need. Stomach churning compassion. Even in the midst of His own grief, Jesus sees the crowds and is moved with a deep feeling of love towards them.

We are given here a tremendous picture of the love of God towards us all. This is a love that does not condemn but rather yearns for our restoration and wholeness. This is a love that longs to see fellowship renewed and desires only the best for us, coming to us from the very depths of who God is. This is a love that is not phased by the events of the world or any demands made upon it. This is deep compassion.

Henry William Baker has an adaption of the 23rd Psalm that appears in our hymnbooks (171) set to the tune St. Columba, that reflects on the depth of such love and links it to Kingly imagery in a way that would have made Matthew proud. I also had this hymn at my wedding to my lovely Yvonne so it has a special place in my personal love imagery!

**The King of love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am His
And He is mine forever.**

St Columba, whom the tune is named after, is credited for bringing Christianity to Ireland. However he never got to be the patron Saint. Patrick got that job. Otherwise we would have an annual St Columba days parade. However Columba is recorded as the first to ever report a sighting of the Loch Ness monster. But as we don't come to strange things going on at sea till the next passage, we'll put those thoughts aside for the moment and head back into the wilderness, where we find Jesus is once again healing folk of every kind of sickness. Marks gospel tells us He was also continuing to teach them. And quite a crowd has gathered. 5000 guys, not to mention the women and children.

As it is getting late the disciples suggest they all go home, get something to eat and call it a day. Jesus instead suggests that the disciples feed them, a rather ludicrous idea when they only have two fish and five loaves. And then comes the account of the miracle of everybody getting enough to eat.

Miracles are never easy to interpret. Over the centuries this parable has been pictured in a number of different ways that include literal, sacramental, spiritual and natural.

Literal. The literal view simply accepts the miracle as being a miracle. Under the touch of Jesus, through whom all things in creation came into being, the fish and bread are enough to feed

everybody; with scraps left over. It is a miracle that speaks of the abundant love and ability of God to give us our daily bread. As to the plausibility, possibility and any other-ibility, the question is irrelevant as by its nature a miracle is not a natural but a supernatural event.

If God is God then we cannot limit God to our understanding and should not expect to explain all that God is capable of. The scholar Rudolph Otto, who gave to theology the wonderful word 'numinous' to describe the holiness of God, regarded Jesus as a charismatic figure from whose presence sick people went away healed and hungry people went away filled. Feeding 5000 was an expression of God's 'numinosity' .

Sacramental. Albert Schweizer argued that the story was sacramental. That what we have pictured here is some form of communion service where folk are nourished by the presence of Christ. Maybe they even received small pieces of bread in a similar way as we do during our communion service. The celebration in the wilderness anticipated the celebration of the sacrament and looked beyond it to the final messianic banquet at the end of all things.

Spiritual. The spiritual view suggests that the story is not based upon any particular event but is a symbolic representation of the meaning of Christ's coming. That it's a story to represent the significance of Jesus' life and His ability to feed the deepest needs of all peoples lives from the abundance of the love of God. In the earliest days of Christianity the story was sometimes given an allegorical interpretation, the 5000 representing all the people of faith in the world, the 5 loaves representing the 5 books of Moses and the 2 fishes as being the Old and the New Covenants. As the faithful spiritually feed on His Word they are nourished for His service.

Natural. The natural view suggests that we see here is an amazing act of sharing. A scholar called H.E.G. Paulus has argued that what really happened was a lesson in unselfishness, as Jesus and His disciples shared the little food that they had, others were shamed into doing likewise. The miracle was the birth of love in self-centered hearts.

William Barclay makes the comment "It does not matter how we understand this miracle. One thing is sure - when Christ is there, the weary find rest and the hungry soul is fed"

Yet placing the story back into it's setting in Matthews gospel it does not just function as an act of compassion for the hungry, but is a significant teaching moment for the disciples. We should notice the part they are playing in the proceedings and how this event relates to their faith particularly as we are about to read a passage that has Peter significantly challenged in his belief.

The disciples do not share the compassion of Jesus, the heart yearning He has for the crowd. They come to Him and ask Him to send them away. Instead He tells them to feed them. But how are they to do that? They do not have the resources to perform such a duty.

Jesus gives them the resources they need to do the job. You may have heard the expression; 'God equips those He calls to serve'. The disciples are able to minister to the crowds through the bread that Jesus offers them. The little they thought they had turned out to be a lot. They thought they had nothing to offer, but through Christ they found so much abundance that there were even left overs.

In our own lives we can be aware that we do not always have the patience or stamina to do all things and be all things to all people. Yet Jesus still calls us to go. But not go in our own power. To go in His name, with His Holy Spirit as our resource and His compassion as our inspiration. When we place our limited lives in God's hands it is amazing what He can do through His abundant love.

Our passage began with Jesus not being able to retreat. It finishes with Him eventually getting away from it all for prayer and renewal, verse 23 **“And after He had sent the multitudes away, He went up to the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone.”**

We have to have times for personal renewal. If Jesus needed them then so do we. We can't always get them when we want them. Our plans are sometimes in conflict with things that need to be done. But God is Lord of our times and will find us spaces for refreshment.

Meanwhile... the disciples have gone sailing. Verses 24-33

²⁴ But the boat was already many stadia away from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary. ²⁵ And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶ And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were frightened, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." ²⁸ And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." ²⁹ And He said, "Come!" And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But seeing the wind, he became afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² And when they got into the boat, the wind stopped. ³³ And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "You are certainly God's Son!"

Each of the 3 gospels treat this passage in a different way.

In Marks gospel (6:45-52) there is a description of the events and linking of the walking on water with the feeding of the 5000. Mark makes the comment *'The disciples were completely amazed because they had not understood the real meaning of the feeding of the 5000. Their minds could not grasp it.'*

In John (6:16-21) the story is used as a link between the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus teaching them that He was the bread of life.

For Matthew the passage is placed in the framework of the disciples need for deeper faith. The key phrase to interpreting this passage is verse 31 where we read **'And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of Peter, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"**

Traditionally this passage has been interpreted as meaning that if only we had enough faith then we too could walk on water. Emphasis has been placed on the fact that as soon as Peter took his eyes off Jesus and focused on the storm then he began to sink and had to be rescued.

Yet on deeper examination such an interpretation does not really hold up. The initial context of the passage is that the disciples are in a boat in the midst of a storm and are fearing for their

lives. When they see Jesus approaching they become, not encouraged, but even more fearful. They cannot believe that He would come to them. Just a few verses ago we were given a description of Herod and his superstitious fear that Jesus was in fact the ghost of John the Baptist come back to haunt him. Now it is the disciples who are seeing ghosts.

Jesus does His best to reassure them. **“Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.”** But the disciples are having none of it. Peter goes as far as questioning the presence of Jesus and uses the words **“Lord, if it is You....”**

The last time we heard anybody ask Jesus “If you are who you say you are”, and challenging Him to prove himself by some amazing act, was back in the wilderness and the question came from the devil. A couple of chapters on from here Jesus goes as far as reprimanding Peter for allowing Satan to direct his thoughts (16:23).

Just as Jesus had responded to the demons with a one word granting of permission (8:32) so also with one word Jesus allows Peter to leave the boat. Notice here... the initiative was with Peter, and it was an initiative grounded in a lack of faith and putting God to the test. It is the other disciples who display the real faith by staying together in the boat until Jesus reaches them. Peter abandons his colleagues and in effect plays God.

To quote from The New Interpreters Bible commentary “The message is not 'if he had enough faith, he could have walked on the water; just as the message to us is not “If we had enough faith, we could overcome all our problems in spectacular ways” This interpretation is wrong in that it identifies faith with spectacular exceptions to the warp and woof of our ordinary days, days that are all subject to the laws of physics and biology. This is wrong because when our fantasies of overcoming this web are shattered by the realities of accident, disease, aging and circumstance and we begin to sink, this view encourages us to feel guilty because of our 'lack of faith'”

If Peter really had faith he would have stayed in the boat and believed the word of Jesus that there was no need to panic because He was coming to them. As again the NIBC explains, “Faith is not being able to walk on the water – only God can do that – but daring to believe, in the face of all the evidence, that God is with us in the boat, made real in the community of faith as it makes its way through the storm, battered by the waves.”

Lest we still feel there was something noble and faithful about Peter's attempt at walking on water the final interpretive clue comes in the final verse of this section. **And when they got into the boat, the wind stopped.** ³³ **And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, “You are certainly God's Son!”**

The disciples believe and profess their faith in Jesus as the Son of God, not because of Peter's crazy antics but because Jesus is in the boat with them. You will notice the storm doesn't stop till both Jesus and Peter are on board. Until they get in the boat the storm continues. Once the community is gathered, the storm ceases and then they worship and declare their faith.

Maybe we are sometimes tempted to believe that we can be the Lone Ranger and by our godlike abilities we can save the world. This story rebukes such an attitude and reminds us not

only that whenever we try and play god we eventually sink and are in danger of drowning, but also, and maybe more importantly, that true faith is found not through individual pursuit, but within community.

Having been given the lesson that 'with Jesus in the boat we can smile at the storm' the action moves back to the shoreline.

Read 34-36

³⁴ And when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. ³⁵ And when the men of that place recognized Him, they sent into all that surrounding district and brought to Him all who were sick; ³⁶ and they *began* to entreat Him that they might just touch the fringe of His cloak; and as many as touched *it* were cured.

The mission of healing continues, in unexpected ways. There appears almost an element of superstition when read “**They *began* to entreat Him that they might just touch the fringe of His cloak; and as many as touched *it* were cured.**”

This idea that being able to simply touch Jesus could bring healing we first saw back in the healing of the woman in chapter 9 where we read of a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for 12 years came up behind Him, touched the fringe of His cloak, and found healing.

In both Mark and Luke's gospel we read of how the crowds pressed in on Him. Luke tells us (Luke 6:19) “**All in the crowd were trying to touch Him, for power came out of Him and healed all of them**”

Later in the Book of Acts we read of people having a similar attitude towards the apostle Paul. We read in Acts 19:11-12 **'God did extraordinary miracles through Paul so that when handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them'**

Whilst not wanting to limit in any way the avenues through which God chooses to work, I probably won't be suggesting to any of the Deacons that they take one of my used handkerchiefs with them next time they go visiting any of the infirm in our congregation. For myself the key word in the Acts passage is the word 'extraordinary'.

I do believe that there are seasons when God acts in ways that defy our explanation. Feeding 5000 + hungry folk. Walking on water. Healing through touching the fringes of His cloak. Yet our chapter begins in the grim reality of the clash of two Kingdoms and the tragic murder of a man Jesus described as the greatest prophet ever born.

It's a challenging chapter. It confronts us with death, loss, superstition and faithlessness. Yet it also stretches us to believe the unbelievable, find faith in community and seek healing in unexpected ways and places. Where is Matthew taking us?

Next chapter he takes his readers, particularly his Jewish ones, way beyond their comfort zone!