

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Gospel writers and their subject: Matthew

What a tremendous game! We were all over them. Two brilliantly taken goals, although we should have had more. We controlled the game from midfield and our goalkeeper hardly had anything to do. It was a thoroughly deserved three points and it kept us right in contention for the championship.

They were so lucky! The referee was absolutely rubbish and their second goal was yards offside. We had much more of the possession and we deserved at least a point even though we never really got going. We played well below par. Still, we will end the season above them.

What a boring match! These were two evenly matched sides with not much to be said for either of them. The game got stuck in the middle of the field, with neither side showing much invention inside the area. There is not much risk of either of these sides mounting a challenge to us this season.

Is the game over yet, or do they have to play again? I can't see the point in a lot of men running round kicking a ball all afternoon. They didn't seem to be doing anything. Did you get that paint out of the carpet?

Four conflicting accounts, yet they all describe the same game of football. Firstly, the Liverpool fan, happy to see his side win 2:1 against Arsenal. Secondly, the Arsenal fan feeling robbed and disappointed at his team's narrow defeat. Thirdly, the indifferent Manchester United fan and finally, the person without the slightest interest in the game. They had all watched the same game. They were all describing the same ninety minutes and yet their viewpoints were widely different, and so were their descriptions.

As we begin this Christmas Eve to look at the Gospels we shall see that, although they are describing the one Man, who lived only one life, yet they do not give identical accounts. This in no way means that they disagree, nor that they were making up their stories. We can be fully persuaded that all that we read in the Gospels is true and accurate. They vividly portray the historical facts about the unique life of the Lord Jesus Christ. There are no errors in them. As we shall see over the next four weeks, each Gospel writer had an individual viewpoint, and this colours the content of each Gospel narrative. To summarise briefly, in Matthew we read about Jesus the King. In Mark we have Jesus the Servant described. Luke presents Jesus as the perfect Man, whilst John describes Jesus as the Son of God. It is interesting to note how these four facets of the life of the Lord Jesus correspond to the four faces in the image described in Ezekiel 1. There we have a description of the glory of God, characterised by the Lion, the Ox, the Man and the Eagle. These mirror the King, the Servant, the Man and the Son of God. How wonderfully these sixty-six books of the Bible bind together to form one perfect whole!

We shall turn now to the Gospel of Matthew and see how he brings out the theme of Jesus as the King. By the incidents in the life of the Lord that he recalls, and also by those that he omits, Matthew builds up a picture of the perfect King and His kingdom.

So it is, that right at the beginning of the Gospel we are given the genealogy, or family tree, of Jesus. At least three times in the past thousand years this country has descended into civil war because of a disputed succession to the throne. Matthew begins his Gospel, then, by clearly tracing the family line of Jesus, through Joseph, back through the kings of Judah to David, and from there to Abraham. It was to these two great Old Testament men of God that the promises of God to His people were given. "A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham." There could be no doubt to Matthew's Jewish readers that Jesus' royal credentials were impeccable. In 2 Samuel 7:16 God had promised that "Your house and Your kingdom shall endure for ever before Me; Your throne shall be established for ever." Here, in the infant Jesus that promise was to be made good. There is no mention of the stable, the manger and the humble shepherds in Matthew. These things are not appropriate in the consideration of the royalty of Jesus. Yet such was the greatness of His love for us that He humbled Himself even to those poor beginnings. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 8:9, could say, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." In divine majesty He came, a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths! How appropriate it is then that it is Matthew who tells us about the star of Bethlehem. His majesty could rule the heavens, even as a babe. It is only Matthew that tells us of the visit of the wise men to the infant Jesus. To the King of kings these earthly wise men could come and give their homage. In just the

same way as the mighty lords of the realm would come and swear fealty to the new sovereign, the Magi come and bow down and worship Him. No distance could be too far to travel when the prize was to see His majesty! In view of the fact that His majesty is so much the theme, it is all the more remarkable that it is Matthew who recalls what the prophets had foretold, "He will be called a Nazarene." That despised place which was held so cheaply in the view of so many in Israel! Yet God, in the person of His Son, chose Nazareth as His earthly home.

By chapter four we come to the temptation of Jesus. "Then Jesus was carried by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted..." How fitting it is that the King is carried by the Spirit. In Mark, the Spirit drives the Servant. In Luke, the Spirit leads the Man, but here, as befits His majesty, the Saviour is carried to the place that God had appointed for His temptation.

The Sermon on the Mount, found in chapters five to seven, gives us the character of His kingdom. So far, Matthew has introduced us to the King. Now he shows us the character of His kingdom. We may speak of a Victorian society, by which we mean a morally upright society. Or we may speak of the Elizabethan age, conjuring up thoughts of adventure and English empire. To some extent, these kingdoms were influenced by the monarch who ruled over them. Matthew outlines here the nature of the kingdom that Christ was to rule over. Had the nation of Israel accepted their king, then Jesus would have introduced His earthly kingdom at that time. The beatitudes would have been His manifesto. However, this was not a part of the grand plan of God who "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). There is a day coming when Jesus shall return and set up His earthly kingdom. The characteristics that we read about in these three chapters are those that shall be displayed throughout His kingdom.

The next key stage in the Gospel of Matthew is found in chapter 13. The King had presented Himself to the nation of Israel, and they had rejected Him. Indeed, in the previous chapter, we read that the Pharisees accused Jesus of acting in the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. Some commentators identify Matthew 13:1 as marking a seismic shift within this Gospel. Until now, Jesus had come to the nation of Israel. They had rejected Him, and so He goes out of the house, down to the lake. Often in prophecy, water is used as a picture of the mass of humanity. In His ministry, Jesus would now go out to all who would have Him, Jew and Gentile alike. In chapter 13, then, we get seven parables describing the kingdom of Heaven. The number seven often suggests the idea of completeness. So here we have a complete revelation of the kingdom of Heaven in these seven parables. The kingdom of Heaven is a general term, and as can be seen from the parable of the weeds among the wheat, includes not only those who display genuine faith, but also those who outwardly go along with the claims of Christ, but inwardly reject Him. The term 'the kingdom of God' is a more specific term and includes only those who have genuinely accepted His authority. The Church forms a part of this group. Before moving on from this chapter, it would be wrong not to remind ourselves of the enormous cost that was involved in the salvation achieved by the Lord Jesus. So in verse 46 we read, "when he found one pearl of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it." What a price the Saviour paid so that we could have our sins forgiven! As Peter so powerfully puts it in 1 Peter 1:18-19, "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect."

In chapter 16 we get the marvellous confession which Peter made: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." It is only in Matthew that we have recorded the response of the Lord to Peter "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." In these words, the King delegated His authority to Peter. So it was Peter who first preached the Gospel to the Jews (Acts 2), and to the Gentiles (Acts 10).

As we move towards the end of Matthew's Gospel, we come to the triumphant entry into Jerusalem. In chapter 21, Jesus once more offers Himself to the people as their King. It is Matthew who recalls the prophecy of Zechariah, 9:9, "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" The King had come, and the people wanted none of Him. We see the fickle nature of the human heart here. In the excitement of the moment they acclaim Him as the Son of David. In the cold light of dawn, they will not have Him to reign over them, crying "Away with Him, crucify Him." Their will-of-the-wisp nature stands in poor comparison to the steadfast reliability of the King who is "the same, yesterday and today and for ever."

In chapter 23 we see the King weeping over His capital city. We can sense the anguish in the heart of the Lord Jesus, as He cries out, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing." Though His subjects were so unruly, yet this King loved them deeply. Some 1,000 years earlier, another king had had to flee from Jerusalem. There on the Mount of Olives, we read, in 2 Samuel 15:30, that David wept as he left his capital behind him. At that time, there were those who remained loyal to the rejected king. The faithfulness of Ittai the Gittite is an inspiration to us all. David describes him as a foreigner who had only recently come to him. He urges Ittai to return to safety. "But Ittai replied to the king, 'As surely as the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether it means life or death, there will your servant be.'" Were there any amongst the followers of Jesus, as He wept over Jerusalem, who

could say as much? Can you or I? The King is still rejected by this world, who would gladly put Him back upon the cross. Are you, am I, ready to go with Him, in rejection, whether it means life or death?

Chapters 24 and 25 bring before us the matter of when the King will return to introduce His kingdom. As surely as night follows day, Jesus shall reign. There can be no doubt at all as to this. The honour and glory of God demand no less. So it is that Jesus informs His disciples as to the signs that shall precede His coming again to reign. At that time, He shall separate the weeds from the wheat, or the goats from the sheep. Those that have rejected His authority shall be separated from Him eternally to judgement. Those who have shared in the rejection of the King shall also share in His reign.

My son once told me that the way that you could tell the real Father Christmas from all those who were just dressing up was to pull their beard. If they weren't real, then the beard would come off! This plan worked well, until he met a pretend Father Christmas with a real white beard! The soldiers thought that a real king had to have a visible crown and royal robes. So it is that, in chapter 27, we read that they put a scarlet robe upon Him, and twist together a crown of thorns and set it upon His head. In a cruel parody, they put a staff in His hands and knelt before him, mockingly crying out "Hail, King of the Jews." Jesus needed no outward trappings of royalty to add to His majesty. Pilate put the charge against Jesus on a board and nailed it to the cross: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews," but they would not accept Him. The elders mocked Him: "He saved others, but He can't save Himself! He's the king of Israel! Let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him." What will they say on that day when they stand before Him? One day they will bow their knee to Him and confess Him as Lord. He was their king, but they did not know it!

As we come to the final chapter of our Gospel, there are two more incidents that Matthew chooses to recall, which point to the majesty of the Lord Jesus. Firstly, we read that there was one angelic messenger at the tomb. For a Servant, Mark notes the presence of just one man. For a perfect Man, Luke indicates the presence of two men. But for a king, Matthew points up His importance by recording the presence of an angel. It is fitting, then, that for the Son of God, John notes the presence of two angels. These apparent differences can easily be reconciled by assuming that here there were indeed two angels. In outward appearance they looked like men (no mention of wings and harps here), one of whom was prominent, bearing the glorious news of a risen Saviour. Each description is perfectly suited to its particular gospel. There are no contradictions but only a perfect harmony consistent with a particular viewpoint. Secondly, it is only Matthew who records for us the parting words of the Lord Jesus. Only a king has the authority to delegate to his servants. So Jesus says to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations."

It would be an extremely profitable exercise in the coming few weeks to read through the whole gospel of Matthew for yourselves and, with a pen and paper, make a note of all the instances that you can find that back up the thought of Jesus' kingship. Time has limited us today to only some of the more obvious ones, but we can never study the life of the Lord Jesus too much.

However, before we finish our studies today, let us just go back to the beginning of this Gospel. This time of year is so wonderful, a time to consider the mystery of the incarnation. This mind boggling, breath-taking act of God! How could it be that in the tiny, fragile form of the Baby of Bethlehem all the fullness of the divine nature could dwell bodily? How could the same hand that flung stars into space also just manage to clasp itself around the outstretched finger of Mary? Who, looking into that manger, would ever have seen there the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy: "Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over His kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this"? Yet here in the Gospel of Matthew, perhaps more than in any of the other Gospels, we see the majesty of the Lord Jesus. In a day soon to come, there will be a literal fulfilment of these words. His authority will stretch from east to west, bringing glory to His Father. The One who was born to be King of the Jews is to be the King of kings and Lord of lords. And yet it all started here. As Charles Wesley could say, "our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man." The wise men perhaps felt something of this. As they see the child for the first time, we read that "they bowed down and worshipped Him." How fitting a response this would be from each one of us this Christmas time.

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