

## ‘RESPONDING TO JESUS’ MATTHEW 13:53-14:36

**[St Mark’s Northbridge, Sunday, 4 September, 2022 – All Services]**

### **Introduction: The Big Question The Parables Raise.**

Over the last three weeks we’ve been reading Matthew 13 together and searching for treasure in the parables Matthew records for us. There are actually seven different parables in Matthew 13 and they all tell us something about the nature of the kingdom. And when read together they raise one particularly big question. And it’s a question about how people respond to the kingdom’s message.

When people hear the message of the kingdom will they be like the seed sown on the path, on the rocky ground, or in amongst the thorns, or will they be like the seed that falls in good soil and produces an abundant crop? When people meet Jesus will they become wheat or weeds? And when people respond to the gospel will they become part of the kingdom that grows and flourishes like a mustard tree, and which influences the world like yeast in dough, or will they remain outside of it? When people hear about the kingdom will they appreciate its true value- like the value of a treasure or a pearl, or will they fail to appreciate how precious it really is? And in the end, when people’s response to the kingdom’s message is finally weighed and evaluated, will they be like the good fish from the net that are kept, or like the bad fish that are thrown away?

All in their own way, the parables of chapter 13 press this question upon us. How will the people Jesus meets respond to what he says? And how will we the readers respond too? When we hear the message of the kingdom what impact will it have on us?

Well, 13:53 tells us that when Jesus had finished sharing these parables, he moved on from there. And as he started travelling around again we get to see how the different people he met responded to him and his message. And what we see is that the choice the parables of chapter 13 highlight is the choice that every person who meets Jesus has to make. And in the narrative that follows we see a wide range of responses. The very thing the parables taught us to expect is playing out before our eyes. As one writer says: ‘Chapter 13’s Parables become Chapter 14’s Histories’.<sup>1</sup>

And in the passage before us today there are four people or groups of people who all respond to Jesus slightly differently. And we’re going to consider their responses in turn.

### **1. The Resentful Neighbours (13:53-57).**

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Dale Brunner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 2, p.57

Firstly, there are the resentful neighbours. Because the end of chapter 13 tells us Jesus returned to his home town. And as he taught in the synagogue there they are amazed by his wisdom and by the miracles that accompanied his teaching.

But they are also confused. Because they remember him as the son of the carpenter. They know his Mum Mary and his four brothers and his sisters. And they don't remember him being particularly special when he was younger. {As Steph Kyme recently expressed it to me when we were reading this together- "they remembered going to the same milk bar with him when they were kids". Although as I pointed out to her at the time I think that's a reference that dates her. So if you're too young to know what a milk bar is, I suggest you talk to Steph.}

But now here Jesus is with a certain amount of fame, coming back to where he grew up, speaking like he expected everyone to listen to him. And many resented him. As verse 57 puts it, they took offense at him. I suspect the phrase "who does he think he is" probably got a bit of a work-out at the time.

And Jesus can see what's going on. And he suggests that this is part of a pattern- where prophets are welcomed everywhere except their home towns. And because they withdrew from him, he withdrew from them. They did not place their faith in him. So he did not do many miracles.

These old neighbours of Jesus remind us of what he said back in 13:12. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.

## 2. The Nervous Tetrarch (14:1-12).

The second response to Jesus that Matthew wants to show us is the response of Herod the nervous tetrarch. A tetrarch was a kind of ruler in that time, approved by the Roman Empire to govern a particular area. And Herod too heard about the things Jesus was saying and doing. And what he heard made him anxious. And Matthew takes some time to explain to us why he was anxious. Because he'd recently beheaded John the Baptist. And Matthew tells us that Herod had wanted to do this for some time because he didn't like the call for repentance that John issued to him. But at the same time he was scared to kill John because he feared a backlash from those who liked him. Herod, you see, was a terrible leader. He was that awful combination of both wicked and weak. And in the end he conceded to behead John in response to the request of Herodias' daughter. But he still worried about this coming back to bite him. And that's why he's nervous about Jesus when he hears about him. Because he thinks he could be John the Baptist risen from the dead. His own conscience has him worried. As one writer says, 'A wicked man needs no other tormentor . . . than his own heart'<sup>2</sup>.

As a leader, Herod is a stark contrast to Jesus here. Jesus is developing a reputation for great wisdom. But Herod is a fool. Jesus is giving people new life wherever he

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<sup>2</sup> Bishop Hall, quoted by J C Ryle in *Matthew*, p.115

turns. Herod is killing people for sport. Jesus is opening the door of his kingdom that many may enter. But Herod is simply worried about how not to lose his own crown. And when Herod has an opportunity to learn something from Jesus that might save him from himself, he doesn't even take the time to enquire. He's like the seed sown along the path. He's a weed amongst the wheat. He doesn't see that the kingdom of which Jesus speaks is far greater and more valuable than his own.

### **3. The Satisfied Crowds (14:13-21, 14:34-36).**

But there's a third kind of response to Jesus that Matthew wants us to see in this section too. It's the response of the satisfied crowds.

In 14:13-21 we hear how Jesus fed the large crowd of people who chased him down. With just five loaves and two fish, Jesus provides dinner for 5000 men and no doubt a similar number of women and children. And all of them, every single one, ate and were satisfied. That's what verse 20 tells us. And then just in case we were in any doubt that everyone had enough to eat, Mark tells us there were baskets of leftovers.

Similarly at the very end of chapter 14 we're told about another crowd of people who got wind of where Jesus was and who came to him for healing. And as verse 36 says, even the people who touched the edge of Jesus' cloak experienced the power of God in healing.

The appetite with which people so many people come to Jesus suggests they had some sense of the kingdom's power- perhaps like yeast working its way through the dough. And it also suggests that these people had a sense of how valuable Jesus and his kingdom are.

And yet, we're left wondering, I guess, whether these people became followers. We know they had faith to come to Jesus in the first place. And we know that they found what they were looking for. People came to Jesus with their needs, and Jesus met those needs. He satisfied people. But did they continue to follow Jesus? Or was their appetite more just about their own self interest? Would they be like the seed that produces lasting fruit? Or would they be like those who welcomed the message gladly at first but who didn't have deep roots? We don't actually know. And Matthew uses the response of the satisfied crowds to remind us that responding well to Jesus is not just about your initial reaction, but about the sincerity of your enduring faith.

### **4. The Doubting/Worshipping Disciples (14:13-33).**

But then in verses 13-33 of chapter 14 we find Matthew's focus shifts from the crowds of people who sought Jesus to the few individuals who were Jesus' closest friends- his disciples. And they embody the fourth kind of response to Jesus that Matthew wants us to see here.

And the most obvious thing to say first is that their response is very mixed. We might even say confused.

Here Matthew tells us about the night the disciples were on a boat on the lake and Jesus came to them walking on the water. And then Peter decided to have a go at walking on the water too. And despite making a good start, he began to sink. And Jesus rescued him.

But what's interesting here is the various ways the disciples in these verses are described. Firstly there's fear- the fear they all felt when they saw Jesus walking on the lake and thought he was a ghost. And then the fear of Peter when he took his eyes off Jesus and started focusing on the wind instead.

But along with fear there's something else. Because when Jesus reaches out to save Peter from drowning he speaks of Peter's 'little faith', and of his 'doubt'.

And yet, it was in faith that Peter had begun to walk on the water. It's just that his faith was mixed with doubt- like many others in his day, and like so many of us who have come since.

But then there's also verse 33. Let me read to you again from verse 32.

[Read 14:32-33]

Those of us who are used to reading the Bible can be very familiar with these kinds of words. But we mustn't fail to see how shocking this is. Even if they thought Jesus was a once-in-a-generation prophet, they wouldn't have worshipped him. They would have known the commandments well. They were to have no gods but the one true God. And he alone was worthy of their worship. So what does the word 'worshipped' mean here? Well verse 33 can only mean one thing. The disciples believed Jesus to be God himself.

Fear, doubt, faith, worship. It's not a simple picture is it? Which of course makes it so relatable! But at least by the end of chapter 33, the disciples of Jesus are demonstrating that they have been given kingdom sense. The secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been revealed to them. They see the kingdom's treasure clearly. They've understood who Jesus is.

And unlike those who lack faith<sup>3</sup> and just feel resentful of Jesus, and unlike those who are just nervous around Jesus because they have a guilty conscience, and unlike those who've received some blessing from Jesus but who may or may not become true followers, these men in the boat had come to believe that Jesus really was the son of God. And they had begun to worship him.

**Conclusion: The Big Question The Gospel Raises.**

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<sup>3</sup> 13:58

So I hope you can see how this section before us today/tonight offers some answers to the big question raised by Jesus' parables. But, it's also important for us to consider those answers in the context of the even more fundamental question the gospel as a whole raises for us. If the parables of chapter 13 raise the question of how people respond to Jesus, the big question Matthew raises from beginning to end is this: who is Jesus? That's the key question Matthew wrote his gospel to answer. And there's very little point understanding how we're meant to respond to Jesus unless we clearly understand who it is we're responding to. So as we conclude today, let's also think about what this section tells us about who Jesus is.

### **- not just a carpenter's son**

And firstly, he's not just a carpenter's son. This, you remember, is how Jesus was dismissed by his resentful neighbours in 13:55. But at the heart of their mistaken reaction to Jesus is this mistake about his identity. He wasn't just the kid who grew up going to the same milk bar they went to. He wasn't just the son of Joseph the chippy. He didn't just come from Nazareth. It's also true that he came from somewhere else-from heaven. And he was the son of someone else. As the disciples conclude in 14:33, he was the Son of God.

### **- not the risen John the Baptist**

But secondly, we wasn't the risen John the Baptist either. You remember that this was the nervous conclusion of Herod the tetrarch in 14:1. Although it's interesting that he believed resurrection was possible. But, as we know, the miraculous power that was at work in Jesus' ministry was not because he was a prophet who'd come back from the dead. Rather, his power was the power of God himself. And, ironically, it would be by that same power that Jesus would himself one day be raised from death.

### **- the powerful provider**

And the third thing we see about Jesus in this section is that he is a spectacularly powerful provider. The feeding of the thousands here is surely one of his most impressive miracle. It was seen by thousands. The baskets of leftovers would have been memorable evidence that something extraordinary had taken place. But, of course, this was not merely a show of strength on Jesus' part. This was also a sign of his identity. Because the many, many people in the crowd that day who knew the story of the ancient Israelites would have known very well who it was that last provided bread for his people in a desert. And the desolate location of this miracle here is underlined in both verse 13 and verse 15<sup>4</sup>. And that's not insignificant I don't think<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> The NIV translates as 'solitary' (13) and 'remote' (15) the same root word in the original- the word often translated as desert/desolate.

<sup>5</sup> See also, for example, Psalm 136:25.

And of course, this is not just about the provision of food. It's also about the provision of powerful wisdom to those who sought it. And the provision of powerful healing to those who were sick. Jesus meets the needs of all who come to him here. And he does it with unique power.

### - the compassionate servant

But these miracles are not just about his power, are they? They're also about his compassion. And they're not just about his heavenly origin. They're also about his humble descent as a servant.

Did you notice as we read how Matthew shows us Jesus' very human need for some time alone! In verse 13 he withdraws from the crowds- no doubt wearied by the constant demands upon him as well as his grief in the death of his cousin John. And in verse 23, we find him withdrawing again. But on both occasions, when presented with pressing need, he forgoes his time alone, and moves instead to meet the need he saw. If it was me, I would have run further away. But not Jesus. He comes near to people selflessly. And even when the disciples urge him to send the crowds away so they can get food, Jesus instead urges his friends to seek an alternative.

And once again, this deep compassion points us to who Jesus is. He reminds us, does he not, of the one who revealed himself hundreds of years before as 'the LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness'<sup>6</sup>.

In these verses, and especially in the feeding miracle, we see in the crowds a picture of all humanity. The great multitude- famished and needy, hungry and powerless. And in the face of this great throng- Jesus draws near. And he draws near with what Matthew calls- verse 14- deep 'compassion'.

### - the patient saviour

But remember, we don't just see here a picture of the breadth and strength of Jesus ministry, but we also see a picture of Jesus' gentle and tender care of individuals. Because after Matthew's record of the feeding miracle comes his record of Jesus rescuing Peter on the lake. Jesus- the patient Saviour<sup>7</sup>.

When the disciples are terrified by the appearance of his presence on the water, Jesus speaks to them to reassure: 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid'. When Peter tells Jesus he wants to try and walk on the water as well, Jesus doesn't tell him he's being

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<sup>6</sup> Exodus 34:6

<sup>7</sup> In fact, we see something of Jesus' patience with his disciples even in the record of the feeding miracle. They come to Jesus to tell him to dismiss the crowd and he gently tells them that this is not needed. And when he takes the 5 loaves and 2 fish and transforms them it's to his disciples that he then gives the food to be distributed. And it's the disciples who then pick up all the leftovers as well. Jesus is patiently teaching them. And we see the same in verses 23-33 as well.

ridiculous but simply says 'come'. And when Peter starts to drown he cries out to Jesus 'Lord, save me!'. And as Jesus lifts him out of the water, he simply says: 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'. And I don't think there's a sharp tone in Jesus' words as much as a gentle reminder to Peter that he didn't need to doubt.

Do you see how Matthew records the words of Jesus for us in this section? Those three short sentences- in verse 27, in verse 29, and in verse 31. With these words, Jesus patiently teaches his disciples not to fear. He sees their weakness and bears with it<sup>8</sup>. He comforts them with his presence. He speaks to them as their Saviour.

I was listening to the radio in the car recently and the host was speaking to a man named Gary Raymond who was a senior officer in the Police Rescue service for many years. And Gary Raymons was telling a story about a man who came up to him in a shopping centre recently and asked if his name was Gary and whether he used to work in Police Rescue. Apparently the man who approached him was a man who 20 years previously had been fishing on some rocks at night near the ocean and had been swept off and needed rescuing. And Gary Raymond was in the team who came and saved his life. But the amazing thing about this story was that the man in the shopping centre didn't recognise Gary Raymond by sight. In fact he said he didn't really know what he looked like because he was rescued in the black of night. But in the shops that day he'd heard Gary Raymond speaking to a friend. And when he came up to Gary to introduce himself he said 'I'll never forget your voice'.

And don't you think the disciples, and especially Peter, could say the same? There was Peter, rescued out of the water in the dead of night. He finds himself being lifted out of the water by a strong arm. He had asked the Lord to save him and he was saved<sup>9</sup>. But as he was lifted up, he also heard the words of Jesus. 'You of little faith. Why did you doubt?' And would not Peter have been able to say, for the rest of his life- "I'll never forget his voice". And again, after he'd died and Peter came to Christ in heaven, could he not have said 'I've never forgotten your voice'.

And might not we testify the same? Jesus says that the sheep recognise the shepherd's voice. And he is our Saviour just like he was Peter's Saviour. And he is patient with us in our frail and feeble faith, just like he was with Peter. And he draws near to us when we are afraid and his presence is our comfort too. And he speaks to us- firmly and clearly, but gently and patiently- urging us to trust him, and to keep on trusting him. It is I. Don't be afraid. Come. There is no need to doubt.

### **- God in human form**

And it's because he is our patient Saviour, that we too are invited to worship him- just as the disciples worshipped him that night on the boat. And if we've come to see what they saw about who Jesus really is, then it will make sense for us too to treat him as he

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<sup>8</sup> J C Ryle says: 'He knows their feebleness, and bears long with them'. *Matthew*, p.123

<sup>9</sup> See also Psalm 94:18

deserves to be treated. If we worship him it will be because we've concluded, as they concluded, that Jesus is actually God in human form.

You see, when Jesus and Peter climbed back into that boat and all the disciples got down on their knees and bowed their faces to the sodden boat deck at Jesus' feet, they were acknowledging that Jesus' gentle rebuke to Peter was right on the money. There was no reason to doubt. And there was every reason to have faith in him.

When Peter went from walking on the water to drowning, what changed? Peter changed, didn't he? It wasn't Jesus. An older writer I was reading during the week simply put it like this. Christ was 'not altered'<sup>10</sup>. He was not altered. I love that. So simple. But so easy to forget. The Christ to whom Peter walked on the water was the Christ who he'd just heard bid him come. He was the same Christ who had just come to the disciples as a group and told them not to be afraid. He was the same Christ who had recently fed 10,000 or so with a few bits of bread and fish out of the deep compassion of his divine love. He was the son of God. And when Peter started to find his feet sinking, it wasn't because Jesus had ceased to be the Son of God. Jesus was entirely unchanged. Not altered.

And sisters and brothers, Jesus is not altered to this day. He still speaks to us. So I urge you to listen to his words and never forget his voice.

He still looks out upon the great throng of famished and needy humanity and feels deep compassion. And he is still able to satisfy the needs of everyone who comes to him. So I urge you to keep praying for your family and friends and neighbours to turn to him and to be given eyes to see who he really is.

And, what's more, he's still patient with his people who fear and doubt, and he still invites us to see that, no matter what we face in life, he can be entirely trusted. There is no need to doubt. Not now. Not ever. So I urge you to trust him. With everything.

And he is still God- still deserving of our worship. So it's right that we fall to our knees and humbly praise him. It's right that we reserve our highest loyalty for him. It's right that we love him- him who first loved us. It's right that we give ourselves to him each day in glad and earnest surrender- offering our lives to him, moment by moment, as a pleasing sacrifice. It's right that we worship him as God.

If he is not altered, then the response of the disciples should also be ours.

[Read 14:33]

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<sup>10</sup> J C Ryle, *Matthew*, p.122