



Texts in Context

The End in Matthew (5:48 and 28:20): How to Preach It and How Not To

ROBERT H. SMITH

*Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
Berkeley, California*

I AM INTRIGUED BY MATTHEW'S APOCALYPTIC. AND HERE WE ARE AT THE END OF the church year, end of the calendar year, end of the century, even end of the millennium. This is an opportune moment for thinking about Matthew's picture of the end.

It is often said that Matthew, when compared with Mark and Luke, offers a "heightened apocalyptic." Which reader has not noted with astonishment, perhaps with revulsion, Matthew's repeated use of the threat that some will be "thrown outside into deepest darkness" or "into a blazing furnace," where the only sound will be that of "weeping and grinding of teeth"? That phrase is found in one form or another six times in Matthew (8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30).¹

Examples of apocalyptic imagery in Matthew could easily be multiplied. But it is not details alone that attract attention. Mark Allan Powell, an especially well informed reader of Matthew, notes that Matthew seems to have "an apocalyptic vision of the world." Powell points to the parable of the wheat and weeds, which implies that "some people were put into this world by Satan" and so seems to teach a dualistic determinism. Powell takes that to be a sure sign of an apocalyptic world-

¹The phrase does not appear in Mark. It stands in Luke 13:28 (parallel to Matt 8:12), so it is not a phrase that Matthew invented but was part of ancient Jewish and Christian culture.

ROBERT H. SMITH is Christ Seminary-Seminex Professor of New Testament. For many years he served on the Board of Directors of the Berkeley Emergency Food Project. He has contributed commentaries on Hebrews (1984) and Matthew (1989) to the Augsburg New Testament Commentary series, and he edits "Preaching Helps" for the journal Currents in Theology and Mission.

view. He thinks Matthew wore apocalyptic glasses through which he viewed world history, the story of Jesus, and the development of the new Christian community.²

We might debate how much “more apocalyptic” Matthew may be than Mark or Luke. But it is, I think, more useful to ask about the work that Matthew wanted to accomplish with his apocalyptic images. Answers to that question differ, of course. But the response of one recent commentator on Matthew’s apocalyptic may serve as a jumping off point.

David Sim offers the following conclusion as he ponders “why Matthew adopted and promoted his particular apocalyptic-eschatological scheme.”³ Sim thinks that the Matthean community consisted of an embattled group of Christians who withdrew from the wider world, which was itself made up of three groups: the Jewish parent body, law-free Christianity, and the gentiles. Matthew’s community withdrew from them and became a sectarian, apocalyptic community.

This Matthean community constructed an apocalyptic universe which “identified the members of the community as the suffering righteous who would soon be vindicated and their opponents as the Satan-influenced wicked who would soon experience unspeakable suffering as punishment for their crimes.” Thus, says Sim, Matthew wrote a gospel which satisfied his community’s need for hope (for themselves) and for vengeance (on Jews, law-free Christians, and gentiles). If Sim is correct, then Matthew’s Gospel is a document of smug self-justification on the one hand and of a vengeful spirit on the other. And that, of course, would mean that the community stood in diametric opposition to the values announced on nearly every page of the gospel! Something is wrong with Sim’s conclusions.

I. MATTHEW AND SOME ANCIENT APOCALYPSES

It is an eye-opening experience to read genuinely apocalyptic works of early Christianity like *The Apocalypse of Peter* and *The Apocalypse of Paul*. The first of this pair expands in a fantastic manner on the transfiguration (Matthew 17) and especially on the apocalyptic discourse (Matthew 24-25). What the unknown author of *The Apocalypse of Peter* finds especially intriguing are the tortures endured by the damned. *The Apocalypse of Paul* seems to build on those scenes of the earlier apocalypse. Sun, moon and stars, earth and sea all complain about wickedness rampant on the earth. Twice every day, at dawn and dusk, the angels indwelling each person report to God (surrounded by 24 elders and four living creatures as in Revelation) concerning the good or evil they see on earth. Paul, caught up to heaven, follows a righteous and an unrighteous soul and describes their differing experiences. Along the way he greets Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and other Old Testament saints and converses also with angels. The author takes particular delight in de-

²Mark Allan Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 70 and 155, note 19.

³David Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Cambridge University, 1996) 243.

scribing the visual horrors, the stench, the fire, and worms which are the destiny of the wicked.

In spite of the memorable phrase, “weeping and grinding of teeth,” Matthew offers hardly a word about the fate of the wicked. Nothing in Matthew even remotely approaches the lengthy descriptions in *The Apocalypse of Peter* or *The Apocalypse of Paul*. Nor does Matthew give us a tour of paradise or of the New Jerusalem, which await the blessed, such as we have in Revelation 21-22.

Furthermore in contrast to works like the Jewish “animal apocalypse” (1 *Enoch* 85-90) Matthew does not recite page after dreary page of thinly veiled animal allegories: Adam as a bull, Eve as a heifer, the people of Israel as sheep, their enemies as wolves or vultures. In the animal apocalypse the Messiah is a great white bull or ox with mighty horns, while in 4 Ezra (2 Esdras 11:1-12:51) the Messiah is a lion that destroys a great eagle (Rome). In Revelation 5, of course, the Messiah is a Lion-Lamb or Lion-Ram.

I return to Matthew from these apocalypses with a sense of relief, like waking up from a bad dream. Matthew’s apocalyptic is meager, sober, and reserved in comparison to these Jewish and Christian apocalypses. The comparison also helps me to see that Matthew focuses sharply on one particular piece of apocalyptic imagery, and that is judgment.

II. JUDGMENT SCENES IN MATTHEW

Matthew gives the fact of judgment high profile by placing judgment scenes at the climax to each of the five great discourses of Jesus. The sermon on the mount (I) closes (7:13-27)⁴ with four powerful images of judgment: the narrow and wide gates, good and bad trees, renunciation of spirit-filled persons careless of God’s will, houses built on sand and on rock. The mission discourse (II) concludes (10:26-42)⁵ with words about not fearing those who can kill the body only but of fearing rather the One who can destroy body and soul together, of confessing or denying Jesus on earth and being confessed or denied before the Father in heaven, of losing and finding one’s life, of receiving a heavenly reward for having welcomed an emissary of Jesus on earth. The parable discourse (III) concludes (13:36-50)⁶ with two of the sayings on “weeping and teeth-grinding” and with words about angels catching and then separating good and bad fish at the end of the age. The community discourse (IV) ends (18:23-35)⁷ with the parable of the amazingly dense

⁴This year (1999) the Revised Common Lectionary does not use Matt 7:21-29 (= Proper 4 [9], called the gospel for the “Second Sunday after Pentecost” in older lectionaries). This year the Second Sunday after Pentecost falls between June 5 and 11, and so Matt 7:21-29 is dropped and we go directly to Matt 9:9-13, 18-26 = Proper 5 [10]. The loss of Matt 7:21-29 is unfortunate for anyone wishing to understand Matthew’s situation and intentions. Other portions of the sermon on the mount are read during Epiphany in year A: the beatitudes (5:1-12) are appointed for Epiphany 4 and All Saints in year A; Jesus’ words on alms, fasting, and prayer (6:1-6, 16-21) are the gospel for Ash Wednesday in years ABC.

⁵4th and 5th Sundays after Pentecost in 1999.

⁶8th and 9th Sundays after Pentecost in 1999.

⁷16th Sunday after Pentecost in 1999.

slave-administrator who was forgiven something like the national debt and then went out and threw into prison a fellow slave who owed him a pittance. That slave-administrator was handed over to the torturers and will never be released until he pays all that he owes. The fifth and final discourse in Matthew, the Olivet or apocalyptic discourse (Matthew 24-25), heaps up apocalyptic imagery, ending with a series of parables about the last times: a servant put in charge of the household while the master takes a trip of indeterminate duration (24:45-51), wise and foolish bridesmaids awaiting the coming of the bridegroom (25:1-13),⁸ and talents to be invested during a master's absence (25:14-30).⁹ Then comes the final paragraph of the final discourse, offering the last of Jesus' teachings in the whole gospel: the parable (or vision) of the sheep and goats (25:31-46).¹⁰

In this final piece of teaching in his last discourse before the passion, Jesus speaks more directly, less parabolically than in earlier passages about building houses, weeding out tares, sorting through fish, benefiting from cancelled debts, purchasing oil, or investing talents. But what does this vision teach? Unlike people in our own day, most people in the ancient world inhabited by Matthew believed in an afterlife at the entrance to which was the fact of a final judgment. Matthew had no need to teach people that there would one day be such a thing as the last judgment. They knew that. So what is going on here? Clearly Matthew reports Jesus speaking about the final judgment. People stand before the throne of the Son of Man and are divided into the blessed (εὐλογημένοι) on the right and the cursed (κατηραμένοι) on the left. Six phrases ring out four times in these few sentences, indicating the basis of the division. The basis of judgment is what Matthew's Jesus is teaching. And what is the criterion or standard? How have "all the nations" treated those who were "hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, imprisoned"?

This vision has been giving interpreters fits in recent years. It was long regarded as a simple and unambiguous recommendation of the works described here: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, tending the sick, and visiting prisoners. Everything seemed clear: as the capstone of his teaching in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus declares that he, the coming judge of the universe, desires these works above all others and is pleased when they are performed.

But then doubts crept in. Does this parable-vision really call "blessed" just any do-gooders? Or are the blessed those few in the midst of all the nations who welcome Christian missionaries? This is a complicated question that need not be pursued here. Whoever is thought to perform these deeds, whether we prefer the universalistic or the missionary interpretation, it is sufficient for our present purposes to see that this great and climactic apocalyptic scene in Matthew's gospel is

⁸24th Sunday after Pentecost.

⁹25th Sunday after Pentecost.

¹⁰Appointed for Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday.

used not to support some detailed apocalyptic timetable but in support of earthly, ethical ends.¹¹

III. THE “END” IN MATTHEW

More than once Matthew speaks of “the end of the age” (συντέλεια τοῦ αἰῶνος, 13:39, 40, 49; 24:3; 28:20; otherwise only in Heb 9:26), as though he would inform us about the future. But the end that really interests Matthew is not the sequence of final events in the world’s old age. “End” is not just chronology but teleology. It designates the target and goal of living right now. Συντέλεια (“end of the age”) and τέλος (“end” as goal) are, of course, cognates. And it is easy to see that τέλος is embedded in τέλειος, used in the sermon on the mount at the climax of the antitheses (5:21-48).¹² There Jesus says, in a free paraphrase of Lev 19:2, “Be perfect (τέλειοι) as your heavenly Father is perfect (τέλειος)!”

This perfection is the condition of being fully mature, all grown up, of having reached the end and goal (τέλος) of human life under God. It means being children of God, sharing in the divine nature that is marked by stunning and indiscriminate acts of generosity to all. God, who is τέλειος, sends sun and rain upon the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous (5:45). So, if you say you are children of God, offspring of the Most High, made of the same stuff as God, then love not only those who will reciprocate, but “love your enemies” (5:44).¹³

That kind of perfection, loving as God loves, is the end and goal of life. All the material in Matthew about the end of the world is at the service of this loving or ethical end.

IV. THE TWO “ENDS”

As we near the end of this century and millennium, we have a surfeit of speculation about times and signs. When will the end come? Is the Y2K bug God’s way of throwing a dragon-sized glitch not only into computers but into the entire

¹¹John Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988), has an excellent treatment of the basic options in interpretation. He himself agrees with the general thrust of the missionary interpretation, but he argues that “the parable as presented by Matthew [in distinction from any pre-Matthean form and use] brings together many important themes from his Gospel and remains a rich source for Christian ethics” (112).

¹²The six “antitheses” are broken up in the lectionary and appointed for reading during Epiphany: 5:21-37 on Epiphany 6, and 5:38-48 on Epiphany 7.

¹³To the rich man desiring to gain eternal life, Jesus recommended, in addition to his pious keeping of the ten commandments, that he should get treasure in heaven by giving all his money to the poor. Do that, said Jesus, if you truly desire to be “perfect” (19:21).

“Righteousness” texts are mostly near the beginning in Matthew (3:15; 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33; 21:32). The word is never used in Mark and occurs only once in Luke (1:75). When Jesus says that John the Baptist “came in the way of righteousness” (21:32), he means that John came as the last of the prophets preparing people for the advent of the one destined to set the world right. A concordance will lead to a few other words in Matthew with the same stem as “righteousness” (δικαιοσύνη).

“Love of enemies, love of God, love of the neighbor” (5:44; 6:24; 19:19; 22:34-40) and “mercy” contrasted with “sacrifice” (9:13; 12:7 = Hosea 6:6) are other ways of imaging that which is central to Matthew’s picture of the life of the children of God.

cosmic machinery so that the end of the world will be hastened? If A = 6, and B = 12, and we continue through the alphabet in increments of 6, then COMPUTER = 666! Astonishing, isn't it? What is (and yet is not) astonishing is that so many people are far more intrigued with the chronological end of the world than they are about the ethical and spiritual end or goal of human living. It is this latter that is Matthew's major concern. He only mentions the other because it serves to remind people of the seriousness of the lives they are living in the world, not just as people of the moment, here today and gone tomorrow, but as people of the living God.

C. S. Lewis has been quoted a number of times recently in the context of ongoing discussions about belief in a transcendent heavenly world. Somewhere or other he said that people who believe most fervently in heaven are the ones who have made the most astonishing contributions to life on earth.

Czeslaw Milosz wrote recently about religion and the afterlife, commenting on the old Marxist complaint that religion is opium for the people, that religion promises heavenly rewards as a narcotic sop to dull the present pain of humiliation or serfdom. Now, writes Milosz, "we are witnessing a transformation. A true opium for the people is a belief in nothingness after death—the huge solace of thinking that for our betrayals, greed, cowardice, murders we are not going to be judged."¹⁴

The heart of these statements of Lewis and Milosz, like the heart of Matthew's message, has to do not with the "furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell," but with the kinds of lives we are living now in the presence of God.

V. HOW MATTHEW BEGINS

The first word out of Jesus' mouth in Matthew's Gospel tips us off to what we may expect from Matthew's Jesus. To John the Baptist, protesting that Jesus should baptize him rather than vice versa, Jesus said, "It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." We might paraphrase: "Our calling (that of John and Jesus and the readers) is to bring righteousness to fullest expression." Or even, "We are called to bring righteousness to fullest expression here and now, in the fullness of time" (3:15, baptism of our Lord).

We should not choose between righteousness as a divine act of salvation (God's gracious intervention, setting right what was wrong) and righteousness as an act of human obedience to the divine will. It is not the case that the former is Paul and only the latter is Matthew. Righteousness in Matthew conjures both images: God lays healing hands on the world through Jesus Christ to make the world "all right," and God is calling people through Jesus to live lives of "all rightness."¹⁵

¹⁴Czeslaw Milosz is quoted by Martin Marty, *Context* 31/6 (March 15, 1999) 8.

¹⁵John Reumann, *Righteousness in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), summing up his discussion of righteousness in Matthew, notes how Georg Strecker and others stress the imperatival side of righteousness. He wrote of his preference for the view of Hans Conzelmann, who compared Matthew and Paul this way: "Where Paul speaks of righteousness as God's gift and of faith as the human response, Matthew sees the kingdom as

The first word out of the mouth of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel centers on righteousness, and the first public action of Jesus recorded by Matthew is not an exorcism in a synagogue (as in Mark 1:21-28), not a sermon on mercy to all people including gentiles (as in Luke 4:18-30), and not a miracle transforming water into wine at a wedding (as in John 2:1-11). In Matthew, Jesus opens his public ministry with the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5-7). That sermon, spoken on a mountain (not in a synagogue), delivered before an international (not exclusively Jewish) throng of women and men (not men only), occupies the same relative position as those other stories in Mark, Luke, and John. The opening stories are the evangelists' deliberately chosen introductions of Jesus to their readers, and they are especially significant.

In the sermon on the mount, I do not see Jesus laying down a new law, certainly not any law that could be enforced by police. What he does is share his vision of the new world that God is breathing into existence in these last times. As he describes that new world, pressing language to its limits, he refrains from talk of golden cities with jewelled foundations and pearly gates. It is a new world of righteousness and *agape* and mercy. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for that righteous world" (5:6).

VI. HOW MATTHEW ENDS

First and last words, first and last deeds hold especially significant positions in any narrative. That is true also of Matthew's Gospel. The last "deed" of Jesus is his dying. His death was not simply his passion. It was his action. He was not merely the passive object of others' action. He broke bread and poured wine, and part of what that means is that he freely offered his life for others. His death was his merciful action on behalf of friends and enemies. It was "for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28; cf. 1:21).¹⁶

Jesus' final word in Matthew's Gospel coheres perfectly with his first word and first public action, and brings the gospel to its fitting conclusion. The final paragraph of the gospel (28:16-20) is appointed for reading on Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday and this text inspire some preachers to take yet another stab at explaining the inner and outer workings of the Trinity. Matthew himself of course

the gift and righteousness as the response." But then Reumann says he would qualify even that way of putting it. He concludes that "righteousness in Matthew also has the sense of gift at times, and Matthew is not without emphasis on faith." Ulrich Luz, *Matthew* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989) 1:237f., opts for the imperatival interpretation. For him "righteousness is the behavior commanded by God," but at the same time he wants to avoid saying that Matthew teaches any kind of works-righteousness. Donahue notes the "multidimensional" character of the term righteousness and writes that "God's justice [righteousness] is always joined with mercy and with surprising lovingkindness" (*Gospel in Parable*, 72).

¹⁶Matthew 1:21 draws special attention to Jesus' name by telling us that his name (and therefore his character and mission) were given to him by the angel of the Lord: "Name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." It has been noted that Matthew uses "Jesus" in many contexts where the Markan parallel simply uses the pronoun "he." By using Jesus' proper name Matthew reminds readers that the protagonist of his story speaks and acts with saving power, even when his utterances sound like commands.

has christological concerns. He celebrates Jesus' unique relation to the Father¹⁷ in the narratives of Jesus' birth and baptism and transfiguration, and in such passages as the famous "bolt from the Johannine blue" (11:25-30). But in 28:18-20 Matthew fixes our attention not so much on Father, Son, and Spirit as on a trinity of interlocking themes: (1) the majesty of Jesus ("all authority in heaven and on earth"); (2) Jesus' mandate to shape believers' lives ("make disciples of all nations"); (3) Jesus' promise of his own enduring presence ("I am with you all the days to the close of the age"). This trinity of Matthean convictions and concerns could well be the preacher's mantra all the way from Trinity to Christ the King.

VII. THE COMMISSIONING (MATTHEW 28)

Years ago Bruce Malina wrote what for me is one of the most illuminating essays I have ever seen on the great commission.¹⁸ He compared the form and substance of Matt 28:18-20 with the decree of Cyrus the Great in 2 Chron 36:23.

	CYRUS	JESUS
1.	The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth.	All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
2.	He has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.	Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.
3.	Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go up!	I am with you all the days to the close of the age.

¹⁷Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Abba and 'Father': Imperial Theology and the Jesus Traditions," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992) 611-630, notes that Matthew uses "father" in speaking about God more frequently than Mark and Q combined. She writes in part to counter Jeremias' well-known assertions about Jesus' use of "abba/father" in prayer to God as something new and unique. She refers to a recently published text from Qumran (4Q372 1) in which Joseph addresses God as "my father and my God." But even more arresting is her discussion of father in Roman imperial theology. The emperor was held to be *pater patriae*, father over the totality of the Roman family and over all the inhabitants of the Roman empire. Ancient Jews and Christians, when they used father as the highest or most appropriate title for God, reflected their imperial context. On the background of the use of father for God among Jews and also among some Stoic philosophers, D'Angelo believes that father was used by Jesus and early Christians to challenge patriarchal organization in the Christian community (see Matt 23:9, 23rd after Pentecost) and to resist the patriarchal claims of the emperor. Nevertheless, she cites with approval the words of Phyllis Trible: "To the extent that Jesus disavowed the earthly father in the name of the heavenly father...to that extent Jesus reinforced patriarchy by absolutizing the rule of the father." Whatever one thinks of Trible's comment, D'Angelo's essay offers very interesting possibilities for thinking of father as a piece of early Christian resistance to patriarchy (familial, ecclesial, and imperial) and not simple acquiescence to it.

¹⁸Bruce Malina, "The Literary Structure and Form of Matt 28:16-20," *New Testament Studies* 17 (1971) 87-103.

In spite of other studies of the passage, Malina's analysis retains its hold on my imagination.¹⁹ Cyrus held an honored position in the mind and heart of Israel, because he ended the exile. He was God's "anointed," sent for the liberating of captive Israel (Isa 45:1). Jesus, with vastly greater authority than Cyrus, commissions the eleven (nucleus of a new humanity) to make disciples out of all nations. That task is to be accomplished by incorporating people into a new inclusive human community (no mention here or anywhere else in Matthew of circumcision as a valid boundary marker), and by teaching these people "all that [Jesus has] commanded."

It is rarely noted that the task is not described as "making believers" or "taking the gospel to all nations." The language of evangelistic outreach is absent. I think that Matthew takes for granted that the nations are beginning to hear the good news and are beginning to trust in God through Jesus. What he stresses is that Jesus commissioned the church to make disciples out of believers and confessors.

This Jesus, given universal authority by God (contrast Matt 4:8-10), is the one who speaks and acts all the way through this season after Pentecost. In every reading of the season, Matthew bears witness to this exalted Jesus. He, the one to whom God has revealed everything (Matt 11:25-30)²⁰ and given absolute authority (28:18), is the one whom we see and hear as we take up the pages of Matthew's Gospel Sunday by Sunday. Both 11:25-30 and 28:18-20 indicate that the way to honor the Trinity is to take up Jesus' yoke, be Jesus' disciples, enflesh Jesus' "commands."

"I am with you" (28:20) assures readers ancient and modern that the apocalyptic worldview has been broken at a crucial point. The exalted Christ does not say, "I will come again later at the end of history after an immense absence." Matthew's Christ is a powerful presence in the midst of ongoing history, yoked to disciples (11:29), dwelling in their midst (1:23; 18:29), feeding them the richest food (26:26-28).

VIII. TWO POSSIBILITIES

Matthew actually concludes his gospel with brief descriptions of not one but two communities. Each has its authority, its commissioning, its set of values, its encouragements. The penultimate paragraph (28:11-15) is too often ignored or undervalued.

In form and content, Matt 28:11-15 is the dark mirror image of 28:16-20. Guards report to priests and elders who hold the governor to be the highest author-

¹⁹See R. H. Smith, "Matthew 28:16-20, Anticlimax or Key to the Gospel?" *SBL Seminar Papers*, ed. Eugene Lovering, Jr. (Atlanta: Scholars, 1993) 589-603, for further bibliography and discussion of other treatments.

²⁰Matt 11:16-19, 25-30 is the Gospel for the 6th Sunday after Pentecost.

ity in the land, instruct the guards to spread a lie, and give the guards money to encourage their obedience in the deceit.

These two clusters of people at the end of the gospel represent possibilities set before the reader: Of which of these two communities do you wish to be a member? Which of these two appeals to you or describes you? Do you take your stand with the guards gathered with the priests and elders in Jerusalem or with the eleven gathered with Jesus in Galilee?

We should not leave the penultimate paragraph of Matthew's Gospel without facing the fact that it raises in some minds the specter of Matthew's alleged anti-Judaism or anti-semitism with its reference to the fact that the lie about Jesus' body being stolen by his disciples circulates "among the Judeans until this day" (28:15). Both with respect to Matthew's supposed moralism and his alleged anti-semitism I find a series of three vivid parables to be quite enlightening. In these parables Matthew in effect asks his readers to ponder the quality of their lives: What kind of son or daughter are you (21:28-32)? Are you a worker yielding up to the owner of the vineyard his rightful share of the fruit (21:33-43)? Are you dressed in a wedding garment and so properly honoring the Lord of the banquet (22:1-14)?²¹

We might find in the second of these parables a doctrine of the church's supersession of the synagogue if we overlooked the fact that all three of these parables are directed at Christian insiders (people who entered the banquet hall late in the game). These parables are not smug condemnation of Jewish or gentile outsiders. And we could easily head off in a moralistic direction if we forgot that these are parables and not road maps or, worse yet, little systematic theologies. Furthermore these earnest parables are situated in a context of stunning generosity. In the lectionary they follow immediately after the parable of the owner of the vineyard who offends people with his strange hiring practices and his even stranger pay scale (20:1-16).²²

It is easy to see why Douglas Hare writes that "the dominant characteristic of the First Gospel is its moral earnestness."²³ But again, we need to watch our language and remember that moral earnestness is not the same as a sour or judgmental spirit. Matthew is morally earnest, but he also continually encourages readers by assuring them of what we might call "the incredible lightness of discipleship" (compare 11:30 and contrast 23:4).

IX. FROM TRINITY TO CHRIST THE KING

All the gospel readings from Trinity Sunday to Christ the King are held in

²¹The three parables in Matt 21:23-22:14 are the appointed Gospels for the 18th, 19th, and 20th Sundays after Pentecost in 1999.

²²The parable of the strange vineyard owner (20:1-16) is appointed for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost.

²³Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1993) 1.

place between two great bookends: Matthew 28:16-20 (Trinity) and 25:31-46 (Christ the King). The commissioning of the small Galilean band to “make disciples of all nations” stands at the beginning, and the final judgment of “all nations” stands at the end. The whole saga of the church’s story plays itself out between that start and that finish. These two great texts are perfect guides for all our reading, all our preaching, all our living ⊕.