

The Church's Witness to Christ

Faith Strengthening Evidence from Matthew

David Gooding

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



MYRTLEFIELD
HOUSE
www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

Contents

1	Two Feasts	3
2	Keeping Your Head Above Water	10
3	Real Dirt and Real Cleansing	19
4	Two Worlds	29
5	The Truth About the Death of Christ	39
6	The Return of Christ	51
	About the Author	62

David Gooding has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

Copyright © The Myrtlefield Trust, 2018

All rights reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce this document in its entirety, or in unaltered excerpts, for personal and church use only as long as you do not charge a fee. You must not reproduce it on any Internet site. Permission must be obtained if you wish to reproduce it in any other context, translate it, or publish it in any format.

This text has been edited from the transcript of six talks given by David Gooding at Apsley Gospel Hall, Belfast (NI) from 6 February to 13 March 1983.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. You may not copy or download more than 500 consecutive verses of the ESV Bible or more than one half of any book of the ESV Bible. Quotations marked KJV are from The Authorized (King James) Version. Rights in the Authorized Version in the United Kingdom are vested in the Crown. Reproduced by permission of the Crown's patentee, Cambridge University Press. Other quotations are Dr Gooding's own translations or paraphrases.

Published by The Myrtlefield Trust

PO Box 2216

Belfast, N Ireland

BT1 9YR

w: www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

e: info@myrtlefieldhouse.com

Myrtlefield catalogue no: mat.002/dw

Two Feasts

Reading: Matthew 13:53–14:21

And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, and coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?' And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honour except in his hometown and in his own household.' And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.

At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, and he said to his servants, 'This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him.' For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because John had been saying to him, 'It is not lawful for you to have her.' And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, 'Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.' And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' But Jesus said, 'They need not go away; you give you them something to eat.' They said to him, 'We have only five loaves here and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

May God grant that through the reading of his word, we too may find him who thus proved himself the bread of life.

Introduction

In these evening sessions together in the coming weeks I propose, God willing, to consider with you the early church's testimony to Christ. I suspect it is common knowledge with us all that from the very beginning Christian people have declared their faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. It is impossible to exaggerate the stupendous importance of their confession. The idea is big enough almost to shatter the mind. It is their claim that the Jesus who walked this earth is none less than God incarnate, Son of the transcendent Lord, Creator of all time and space. This testimony that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, is of course the very foundation upon which the church is built. So much so, that if it is proved untrue, there is nothing left in Christianity. I don't care how elevated and exciting the personal, subjective experiences you have had in the name of Jesus. If Jesus is not the incarnate Son of God, then all your experience is worthless and there is nothing in Christianity worth having.

This confession of the early church that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God is absolutely fundamental then. Since that claim is so stupendous, we might very well ask how anybody ever came to think that it were true. As we read these passages from Matthew 13 onwards in the coming weeks, we will be interested to listen to the story of the early Christians, for what we have now before us is the early Christians telling us how they discovered this stupendous thing: that the man they walked along the road with was the Messiah, and the man who travelled in their boat was more than human – and they came to know him as God incarnate.

Reasons to believe in Christ's deity

What were those experiences which made people come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God? I suspect I talk to a congregation where many of whom are already convinced that Jesus is the Son of God. How dearly I would love to come and sit by you and ask you why you believe it. Did I hear you say you believe it because your mother told you so? That, sir, is an excellent reason for believing it. Did I hear you, madam, say you believe it because your Sunday school teacher said it? That is also an excellent reason for believing it. It isn't enough though, is it? For we live nowadays in a world that's hostile to this very thing. A world in which even members of the so-called Christian church are prepared to deny this very foundation upon which the church is built, and tell the world publicly that it is impossible to believe that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God. They write books about it and entitle them such as *The Myth of God Incarnate*¹.

So even if we are already believers in the Lord Jesus and in his deity, we will surely be helped as we trace together the reasons why these men and women came to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Of course, as we read their story, it is evident what Matthew, the Gospel writer, will be trying to do, for he's not interested in passing an odd half-hour of our Sunday,

¹ Edited by John Hick, published by SCM Press, 1977.

merely regaling us with a few interesting stories. Matthew is telling us these stories that we too may come into these experiences and discover Jesus as God's incarnate Son and our personal Saviour. Tonight, we begin with two stories which will tell us how people discovered his deity—as they found Jesus Christ to be the living bread of God, the satisfier of the spiritual hunger of a human heart.

Disconcerting features

But I immediately notice a very interesting thing. When these early Christians were telling us their story and wishing to advertise and to commend to us their Saviour, Jesus Christ, you might have expected them to have painted a story full of glowing colours—of a Jesus Christ, merciful and compassionate and kindly and meek and mild, who never would have upset or offended anybody. But they don't, and they get full marks in my book for sheer honesty. They tell us that whereas indeed this Jesus Christ proved to be the bread of life and the satisfier of the human soul, there were many people who, when they first met Jesus Christ, found him anything but satisfying. They found him uncomfortably disturbing, disconcertingly unpleasant and they were offended at him.

We all know what it's like to be out on an afternoon stroll across the Sperrin Mountains maybe or down a country lane, and all is going well until our toe catches in a half-hidden root in the pathway and we go sprawling over on our noses. And then, if we're not careful, we say some things to that hidden root while we regain our composure! That is the word which Matthew uses here of the experience of many people when first they met Jesus Christ. He was an offence to them—a stumbling block, something that tripped them up, against which they stubbed their toes. And they found it distinctly unpleasant and uncomfortably disconcerting.

That warns me that, for all my evangelistic zeal, I mustn't try and tell you this evening that Jesus Christ is nothing but meek and mild, and that he would never offend you. If I did, you would know I was being untrue. Who amongst us is there that hasn't at times found Jesus Christ likewise positively disconcerting? It was so, says Matthew, with the members of his own family. It was even more so with Herod, King Herod Antipas, and it is on his story and his banquet that we will concentrate first of all. When we have regaled ourselves on his banquet, but had enough of it, we will then turn to another banquet—the feeding of the five thousand by our Lord. Two banquets, two offers of satisfaction: the one by Herod and the other by Jesus Christ; and in the end we shall take our pick. But more on that later.

Herod Antipas and his banquet

I was saying that Herod Antipas, when he heard of Jesus Christ, found Christ profoundly disturbing, so I must tell you a little about Herod. There were many Herods in New Testament days. This is Herod Antipas, descendant of Herod the Great and, like Herod the Great, Herod Antipas was a king and he was used to luxury. He had marvellous taste in buildings. Like old Herod the Great, nothing but the best of buildings, the very latest of architecture, the most sumptuous designs, could possibly satisfy Herod Antipas. He built some superb palaces. I don't blame him: I like lovely buildings. I hope you do too. I can't stick these old utility affairs. The only trouble with me is that I'm not a king! If I were a king and endlessly wealthy, I would do like Herod and enjoy myself. What's the sense of going through this world with grubby

meanness when man's heart was made for things glorious and wonderful and enjoyable? The very creative instinct that we have in our heart is witness to the glory and the majesty of the God who made us. He did not make us to grovel in the dust like a lot of worms. He made us to enjoy the thrill of developing all our human potential.

Herod and Herodias

Herod was a king. I hope he got his money the right way round: I suppose he did, though I'm not quite so sure. But I can't find it in my heart to blame him for wanting to make life as beautiful and enjoyable as he could. However, in the course of his pursuit of pleasure he did something else. We learn that while he was on a journey at a certain time and staying with a brother of his, he fell in love with his brother's wife. Being a very worldly-wise woman and seeing opportunity to become a king's wife, she ditched her husband and went off with Herod Antipas; and he ditched his wife too, daughter of a king though his first wife was, for the sake of this mad bit of so-called love. If it had been Hollywood, nobody would have said anything; and if it had been some television programmes, they wouldn't have said anything either. For we live in a world where this kind of thing is painted as stardom and the people who behave like that are the people who make the fabulous salaries. This is supposed to be pleasure, and is held up to our generation as the thing to do if you've got the money to do it.

Herod and John the Baptist

But in Herod's day there was a preacher of the old school, and his name was John the Baptist. Putting his fist in Herod's face, he said, 'It's not lawful for you to have her.' And that was embarrassing, because not only was the truth unpalatable, but the people knew—the press took it up, so to speak—and the people knew that the prophet had challenged the king. What would the king do now, poor thing? It set his majesty a problem. Did he give in and climb down and repent? But how could he, and what would his fashionable friends say about that? Anyway, hadn't he a right to enjoy himself? These old fashioned rules, why should he live by them? So he wasn't prepared to repent. He thought pleasure and satisfaction lay his way.

His new wife urged that he should execute John the Baptist, 'The horrible prig—who does he think he is: the little street corner preacher, standing there on the muddy banks of Jordan with an excitable crowd of rabble? We don't want preachers like that around this palace.' But then, said Herod to himself, he couldn't execute the man, for the people held him to be a prophet. It wouldn't be politically wise to execute the prophet, because religion has its uses if you're in politics. It helps you get votes if you play your cards right. Execute the prophet? Suppose he were a genuine prophet. Suppose this were the voice of God. Cut off the voice of God finally and forever? 'No,' said Herod, 'I can't do that.'

So Herod did what thousands of men and women of lower station have done since. He attempted a compromise. He wouldn't say 'no' to God outright. He wouldn't throw the Bible in the dustbin, but he wasn't for repenting just now. He would suppress the voice of God for a while, so that he could go on unimpeded with his pleasure. Then when he got older, perhaps he'd let the prophet out and get himself ready for God's heaven. How many men and women have done it since! Some of us here may have done it. Some of us may be trying to do it. You want pleasure, don't you? Well you say, 'Of course I do. I have a right to it.' Of course you have a right to it, but not sin. You don't intend to banish God altogether; but for the moment

that voice of God is inconvenient and uncomfortable. It goes against your fashionable friends. It goes against your indulgent lifestyle. You do not propose to ditch it completely, but for the moment you suppress it. Then later on, when you're older and life's spark is dying down, then perhaps you'll listen to it—so you say. It's a dangerous delusion. Let us all take note from this word of God. We may play with sin as though it were a toy, but there'll come a point when it becomes our tyrant and our master.

Herod's party

So the days went on and presently Herod had a birthday. Of course, when kings have birthdays—and especially a king like Herod Antipas in his superb palace—money was no object, for royalty were there and the aristocracy. There would be such satisfaction, such marvellous food and fare as the region had scarcely seen before. There would be food for their stomachs—*cordon bleu* and all that—and food for their minds and hearts. How dazzlingly brilliant it would be, just that little bit *risqué*. Herodias' daughter came in and danced: it was very *risqué* stuff, and the men were half drunk. How the guests loved it and they clapped and said 'Encore'. Herod was taken away with it: this was what life was all about. Presently he ordered the music stopped and brought the girl to him. He said, 'Your dancing has been tremendous. Ask anything you like and I'll give it to you—up to the half of my kingdom.' In that moment he felt a big man, bathing in the awe and wonder of his guests. The girl came back, instructed by her mother, and said, 'I'll have, please, the head of John the Baptist on a dish.'

The king was sorry, and he didn't want to do it. He never thought it would come to that. Kill the prophet in cold blood? A ghastly thing. How the woman behind the scenes was turning the screw. Not having the man beheaded in some obscure prison so that nobody, not even the press, ever heard about it, but the head brought in and triumphantly put as the main dish on the table. 'Get rid of that prophet,' said Herodias, 'and I'll show you the way to pleasure and we can behave as we like, with none to trouble our conscience.' Herod knew he ought not to do it, but how could he avoid losing face? How could he, in this kind of an atmosphere, stand up for the Bible and a prophet without looking the biggest fool on earth? He found that sin begins as a toy and ends as a tyrant.

Desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. (Jas 1:15)

They brought the head on a dish and the dish was beautiful, and they laid it on the table. The tongue was silent now. How long the party went on after that I cannot tell you, but now there was no troubling voice of the prophet to disturb them at all.

Herod and Jesus

Then Jesus came. Herod hadn't yet met him but he heard about Jesus and his miracles. He found even the mere report of it a profoundly disconcerting thing. Ponder it now for a moment. I told you before that not everybody found Jesus Christ pleasant. Herod didn't. What was it about Jesus Christ that so upset him? Well, even without meeting him, the report of Jesus Christ made Herod think of eternity. He'd done his best to shut that prophet's voice, to

keep the word of God out of his life. He thought he'd done it; but then there came Jesus. And against all Herod's efforts to try and hold it back, like the irresistible ocean seeping in through every door of his life, Jesus Christ proclaimed to Herod that there was a world beyond and you couldn't keep the door shut on that eternal world forever.

It was disturbing. Maybe you have known a similar experience and you know how he felt. We don't live in a self-contained flat, though there are many men and women who wish we did. Some of them labour to prove that somehow this world we live in is a self-contained flat. We can get inside, close the door and do as we like; and there's nothing outside to disturb us. And then comes Jesus, the eternal disturber of men. Isn't that why we don't like to hear about him sometimes? He is God's Son incarnate, come from that other world into our world, reminding us that despite all our attempts to shut the door, one day that great world will break in upon ours and we will be summoned to face God.

How would Herod face God? The thought of it curled him up inside. Herod, very literally, had a skeleton in his cupboard; and Jesus Christ started rattling the bones. What should Herod do? How could he keep that world outside? Luke tells us that he sent a message via the Pharisees warning Jesus Christ to get out, otherwise Herod would kill him (see Luke 13:31). At length Jesus and Herod met, and Herod would have liked to have seen a miracle or two before this Jesus Christ was executed. It would have given him a little entertainment and he wasn't averse to having exciting entertainment. He asked Jesus many a question and Jesus answered nothing. Oh, that terrible silence. Once upon a time God had spoken to Herod through John, and Herod had cut the prophet's head off and silenced the voice. God in his mercy had sent Jesus Christ and Herod's only response was to threaten to kill him. At last he met Christ and Herod had what he chose. There came no voice, only silence. I fear that, tonight, Herod is in a place where there is an awful silence.

His story makes me think of the story of King Saul, another king who had disobeyed God flagrantly and deliberately. God had sent King Saul a saviour, in the person of David, but Saul, in spite of many an opportunity to receive him and be saved, had rejected David to go his own way. At length, David had departed and for a while Saul felt relieved to have this nuisance out of his way. But then the political storm clouds gathered, and the Philistines came with their great armies. Saul one day found himself against impossible odds and, with death staring him in the face, he cried to God. God wouldn't answer him and Saul got himself to his seances and his mediums, like many do today who've lost faith and go to superstition. He got the medium to bring up Samuel and when Samuel came up, Saul said, 'the Philistines are warring against me, and God has turned away from me and answers me no more' (1 Sam 28:15). Oh, friend, we've all of us run away from God at times, haven't we? All of us shut the door against the voice of God thinking to gain pleasure thereby, and God in his mercy has sent the Saviour. Be careful what you do with the Saviour, for if you reject him, one day that voice will be silent forever. Oh, the awful silence of a soul to whom God never speaks for all eternity.

What shall we do then? Let our early Christian friends tear away from us this illusion of ours that Jesus Christ has come to make life miserable; that the only satisfaction to be had is by keeping him at arm's length and shutting the door against the voice of God. That's a lie.

Let's leave that palace. It was fun to start with, but ugly now — that ghastly mess, that awful disfigurement, that bleeding skull. Is that where the world's pleasure ends?

Christ's banquet

Come, let us leave that banquet: there is a better one. For Matthew tells us that after this our Lord took his disciples and the crowd and led them out into a desert and there he fed them. He used only five loaves and two fish, and yet they satisfied five thousand and more. You say, 'Do you believe that story, preacher? How could five loaves and two small fish satisfy five thousand people?' I do believe it and I'll tell you why. It was the hand behind the bread, for some people discovered that day that the hand behind the bread and fish was the hand of God incarnate. As Jesus took it, we're told, and he looked up into heaven and he blessed it. That lovely Christ, who joins us in heaven and gives to earth's simplest things an eternal significance!

Friend, what is your life? Bread and fish, with cornflakes thrown in, and some entertainment for your mind? And how long is it going to last? Suppose the fish is nice and the bread is sweet, but how long are they going to last? For bread and fish don't last many years and soon they'll be done. Have you yet met the God that's behind them? In Jesus Christ you may meet him. The God who gave us breath and the God who daily gives us food, has come down to our planet that he personally might meet us and that we can be introduced to him who is the eternal God. He comes to forge a personal relationship with us so that when the bread and fish are long since gone, we might know him and enjoy him forever. This is eternal life, to know God. Not just to enjoy one or two of his passing gifts, but to know him, to be linked with him, to have a relationship with him that will outlast life, and live through all eternity.

This is the only banquet that in the end can satisfy our souls. Listen to Jesus Christ himself say it:

I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst . . . For I have come down from heaven . . . (John 6:35, 38)

He offers us physical resurrection when these bodies are done. He guarantees to those who trust him that he will raise our very bodies and make them eternal and eternally glorious. He gives us eternal life now, his own life shared with us, his blood to cleanse our sins, his own person by his spirit to dwell inside us and to satisfy our longings. And presently he will take those who trust him to the eternal banquet in his Father's home on high.

A choice to be made

This is how the early Christians began to discover Jesus, the bread of life and eternal satisfaction. Those who seek satisfaction now, and those who don't, you have your choice. There are Herod's banquets and all the ones that are like it, all down the ages. They are on the one side, with the world and its godless fare. On the other side is the bread of life, Jesus Christ, God's Son. What will you do with Jesus who is called the Christ?

Keeping Your Head Above Water

Reading: Matthew 14:22–33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, 'It is a ghost!' and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.'

And Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, 'Lord, save me.' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?' And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

May God give us that same assurance in our hearts in the storms of life.

Introduction

Tonight, we are to continue the general topic that we began last Sunday evening, namely the witness of the early church, the early Christians, to Jesus Christ our Lord. Here in this central part of the Gospel of Matthew, as in many other parts of the New Testament, we have the record of the witness of the early Christians—how they came to discover exactly who Jesus was and is. In chapter 16 of this very Gospel, we have recorded the glorious confession of the Apostle Peter as he turned in response to the Lord Jesus and said,

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. (16:16)

The interesting thing about these records is that they tell us about the Lord Jesus not as mere hard, theoretical theology, but as the living experience of men and women who discovered this glorious fact, and the tremendous effect it has upon the lives of those who discover it.

Another interesting thing about the Gospels is that in their present form, they were written down after the death of our Lord Jesus, after his resurrection indeed and after his ascension

to heaven. It becomes obvious as we read these stories of the life of our Lord Jesus that they are being written by men who have discovered this further great thing about him — that he not only died at Calvary in accordance with the Scriptures and was buried, but that he rose again the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures, and has ascended to the right hand of God on high (see 1 Cor 15:3–4).

As they pondered that glorious fact, it is evident that they looked back to the deeds and the miracles which our Lord Jesus performed when he was still here on earth, and began to see in them a significance that they hadn't even seen at the time. They discovered that they were not only wonderful exhibitions of the power of God but they were at the same time eloquent parables, vivid object lessons of what the deity of the Lord Jesus means; what his salvation means and how, because he is indeed the Son of the living God, he is available to men and women to save them and to keep them. Vivid illustrations moreover of how anybody can come to this Christ, how we can approach him and discover him as our living Saviour too.

And so it is with this story we have read together from Matthew 14—a story which at its literal level tells us that on one stormy night, when the apostles were rowing for their lives across the Sea of Galilee, Jesus Christ came walking towards them, walking on and over the water. Of course that very fact, if it is true, tells us at once that our Lord Jesus possessed more than human power, for it is not normally given to ordinary men to walk on water! But when we have learnt that, we might well turn to ask, what's the point of it? Suppose Jesus Christ could walk on water. What good does that do me? The story indeed tells us that he not only walked on water himself, but he was able to make his disciple, Simon Peter, walk on the water even as he walked. But then that merely increases the problem to thoughtful folks. So what? What good would that be to anybody? Suppose that he could make me walk on water nowadays. We might find it an entertainment for a summer evening to be able to walk on water—a kind of water skiing without a motorboat to pull us! The interest would soon wane, wouldn't it? What practical use would it be?

We welcome all entertainments that help us forget life's troubles a little while, yet life is full of deeper problems than the mere ability to walk on physical water could help. When we begin to think like that, it becomes evident that not only was it true that he did literally and physically walk on water and enable his apostle to do the same but, like others of his miracles, it was a parable too. As we saw last week, when Jesus Christ our Lord multiplied the loaves and fish to feed people's stomachs, it was not only an exhibition of his miraculous power over creation, it was a vivid parable to the effect that he himself at the spiritual level, is the bread of life to satisfy our hearts.

Walking as Christ walked

So assuredly that night, when through the storm they saw him walking on the water and learnt how they too could walk on the water, he was giving them a parable of how we may learn to walk. Whether life's passage is calm or tempestuous with storm and wind and wave, we too may learn to walk triumphantly and to walk even as he walked. I suspect the moment we observe that it is meant to be a parable, we find it easy to follow, because we use the same

kind of language ourselves. How often have you heard somebody confess to you in a difficult moment, 'I'm finding it difficult to keep my head above water'?

Here's one poor woman, her elder son is grievously sick, her husband has just lost his job, the other son has gone on drugs and, as the woman will tell you, with all her troubles she's finding it very difficult to keep her head above water. And you, sir, in your business, with the tide of economics gone against you, and some of your competitors not playing fair, you want to walk straight in your business life but the blast of the opposition is so big that it's blowing you off course a bit, and you're tempted to cheat like the other fellow. And there's the young fellow and the young girl, and they wanted to walk straight in life, but they got out into the real world and the blast of temptation, the pressure of the world has overwhelmed them and they've gone under.

We know all too well the kind of situations when we ourselves use this very metaphor for trying to walk straight and keep afloat in the difficulties of real life. And here comes a parable, written by men and women of like passions as ourselves; a parable which is so interesting because it is a real story that actually happened. How they discovered that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God; and discovered it not merely as an item in the creed of the church, but discovered it in a personal and practical way that gave them the very secret of their salvation. They tell us how they too learnt to walk as the Saviour walked.

Of course, to come to the straightforward language of the Christian epistles, they do lay it down that it is the bounden duty of every believer to walk—that is, to behave, to conduct ourselves through life—even as he walked.

By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. (1 John 2:5–6)

But then, you say, that's to make life even more difficult. Life's storms are bad enough—the winds and waves and tempests of suffering, of temptation, of opposition. But if in it all I'm supposed to behave with an unfailing Christian standard and to behave like Christ behaved, to walk as he walked, how could I ever do it? So it's more than interesting to hear the story of one early Christian and how he learnt to walk even as the Saviour walked.

I confess to you a little secret of my own: I'm delighted with this story. If it had been the story of a great apostle who, having started out to walk on the Christian pathway, had walked with unvarying, undeviating success, I would have said, 'How marvellous, but that's not the story for me.' How many times I have sunk down until the water has come gurgling round my mouth. How many times I have known what it means to say, 'I don't know whether I can keep my head above water.' But here's a man like that, telling us of a Saviour who, he discovered, could not only bid him to come and walk on the water, but was able to give him the strength to walk as the Saviour walked.

The Scriptures tell us the story so that we might learn the secret too. How did the Saviour teach that man to walk as he walked? There are three things amongst others I want to call your attention to briefly. The first is that he did it by praying for them. Did you notice how the story began? After the feeding of the five thousand our Lord Jesus sent the disciples away

in the boat across the lake to the other side while he himself sent the crowd away. So the disciples left and started their journey across the lake. We are told that the Lord Jesus, when he had finished sending the crowd away, went up into the mountain to pray. He prayed for them. Secondly, we are told that he came to them in the middle of the night, in the fourth watch, when the going had become almost impossibly tough. He came to them. Thirdly, we notice that when he began to teach Peter to walk on the water, he not only supported him, but in the end he saved him. He prayed for them, he came to them, he supported and he saved them. What a lovely Saviour! Let's think of that today, still with this story in our minds, as an illustration of what Jesus Christ waits to do for every one of us.

1. He prays for us

How can I lead a Christian life? How can I walk through this tempestuous world as the Saviour walked? How can I walk above the storms and not go under? Secret number one is that we have a Saviour who prays for us. That night, so we are told, he went up the mountain and prayed, and do you suppose that as he prayed, he forgot those twelve men who were struggling against the storm across the lake? Certainly not! He prayed for them, and what a vivid illustration it is of what has happened now on an exceedingly greater scale. For the Bible tells us that not only did the Lord Jesus die for us at Calvary and was buried and he rose again, but he ever lives and has gone back to the very throne of God.

There now, even at this moment as I stand at this desk and you sit on those seats, our blessed Lord, so the Bible says, intercedes for us.

He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. (Heb 7:25)

What a glorious fact it is. Already I begin to see the daylight through the storm, don't you? How could I ever begin to walk like the Saviour walked? Learn this: there is a Saviour in glory, gone up to the very mountain of God, who always lives to make intercession for me. And because he thus ever lives to intercede, he is able to save to the uttermost.

You say, 'What in particular does our Lord's intercession do for us?' Well, in the first place it guarantees salvation. How I love those words the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8, as he urges upon all believers the utter unshakeable security that we have in the salvation that God has provided for us. How can I be sure? This is an important thing, isn't it? Life is difficult enough with the ordinary storms of economic difficulties, the trials of family life, pain and suffering and sorrow, the difficulties of walking straight, of being successful. But underneath it all, there's a bigger struggle, a bigger insecurity.

Assurance of salvation

What if I fail, ultimately, in the ultimate sense? What if in the end, when God weighs up my life, I am found to have failed, my whole life a disaster before God? How deep is that ocean underneath my feet? How deep is the abyss over which daily I attempt to walk? What if ultimately I fail? How deep is an eternity without God, without salvation? It is this basic insecurity that makes many people nervous. Fancy trying to walk through life with a steady nerve and being unsure of ultimate salvation, with eternity itself at risk. That's a nightmare to

anyone who has the sense to see the reality. But listen, Christ can remove that nightmare and his intercession is one of the things he does that he might guarantee to all who trust him, the utter certainty that they shall never perish. Listen to it:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. (Rom 8:31–34)

And, in answer to his own questions, Paul says,

I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (vv. 38–39)

Christ died for me. Shall the very Saviour who died for me in the end condemn me? Christ not only died for me, but he was buried for me, he rose again for me and, at this very moment, he intercedes for me. Shall the Saviour who intercedes for me turn round and criticize and in the end condemn me? Oh, it shall not be.

Friends, here is that glorious, basic, ultimate security as we walk the choppy sea of life—the ultimate security of the certainty of salvation through Jesus, who died for us and now lives to intercede for us. By his intercession, he not only guarantees those who trust him eternal salvation and security, but present strength against temptation. We have a merciful and faithful high priest, says the New Testament, who has entered into the very presence of God. He's not one who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. He too has felt the blast of the wind and the pressure of the wave, and so he is able help those who are being tempted, putting out spiritual power to support us in temptation's struggle (see Heb 2:17–18; 4:15–16).

You say, 'But your own story tells us that Peter, when he tried it, came unstuck and began to sink.' Yes, I have to admit that. I shall have to admit to something worse. He not only sank when he tried to walk across the sea; there came another terrible night when he sank in another sense. It was the night in which the Lord Jesus stood on trial for his life. Peter, brave man, went in to see the end. That night, though he had been warned, he was unsuspecting of the storm that was about to break around him. It was as sudden as if the very tornadoes of hell began to beat around him and the flood tides of fear came up in his heart. So much so that when a mere maid said, 'Are you a Christian too?' he lost his nerve and denied the Lord Jesus. Are you afraid something like that might happen to you? Maybe not persecution, maybe some other kind of suffering? When I went to live at one stage in the northeast of England, there was this good man who lived across the road from where I lodged and he had recently found the Saviour and had been converted from atheism to Christ. He said to me, 'David, yes I'm sure of my salvation at the moment. But one thing troubles me. Suppose one of these days a lorry knocks over one of my daughters in the street and kills her. I don't know if I could still go on believing in God after that.'

What would happen to you if the storm got so much that you couldn't stick it and your faith was destroyed? Let me tell you of this Saviour who lives to intercede and let me tell you not merely what he did for Peter on that dark night, but what he did for Peter on the night he denied him. Just before Peter went out to that disaster, our Lord Jesus said to him, 'Peter, Satan is going to attack you, but I have prayed for you that your faith shouldn't fail. And when you come back again . . .' What lovely music that was. Not, 'Peter, *if* you ever come back again,' but, 'Peter, *when* you come back again' (see Luke 22:31–32). How could Christ be so confident even before it happened that Peter was going to come back? For this reason: he had prayed for Peter that his faith would not fail. Peter came back and he learnt the reality of what this parable had already begun to teach him—that when a man commits himself to Christ, to begin to walk on the water even as Christ walked, then though all hell whistle about his ears and he fall and fail and begin to go under, Christ will save him. Christ will intercede for him and will maintain his faith, though all else go, and Christ will bring him through. That's the glory of it: he prays for those who trust him and because he ever lives to make intercession for them, he is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him.

2. He comes to us

He taught them to walk on the water that night, not merely empowering them by interceding for them, but we are told that at the fourth watch when the going was tough, he came to them. It was not something that the world at large saw or ever knew of. How would you explain such a thing to your ordinary, cynical man of the world? The Christians didn't try anyway: neither did Christ. Here is a secret for those in the family of God, and what a blessed secret it is. It reminds me of what our Lord Jesus said to his disciples just before he left, 'I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.' Note carefully what he meant. Not merely that one day he would come again, with the voice of the archangel and the trump of God at the second coming and take his people home. That he will do, but in the course of life and from time to time he has promised:

I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. (John 14:18–19)

Judas (not Iscariot) didn't quite understand and enquired further, 'Lord, how is it you'll manifest yourself to us and not to the world?' Said Christ,

If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. (v. 23)

Christ comes to his people. I am not promising that he'll give you visions or spectacular sights, though I can't say he never will. But at that deeper level which is far more important than sight, the level of our spirit, it is still blessedly true that from time to time, Christ comes to his people. We get literal examples of it. After the resurrection, there were those two people, for instance, on the road to Emmaus, journeying with their heart in their boots, utterly disgusted. They couldn't make sense of anything and all their hopes were shattered. An apparent stranger drew near and began to recall to their memory certain passages of Scripture,

and as they listened their very hearts were warmed. They invited the stranger in, for it seemed to them as though the very truth of God and the reality of eternity were filling their hearts and dispelling their sorrows. They asked him in for a meal and, as he broke the bread, they realized who it was and he vanished.

Or Mary in her grief in the garden, when the Saviour came to her and dried her tears, making real to her the personal relationship between her and his Father. Or those disconsolate fishermen on the Lake of Galilee, having toiled all night and caught no fish, when the Saviour came and stood on the shore, unbeknown to them, and directed their operations and, presently in the success that attended their labours, they realized who it was. And John nudged Peter and said, 'Peter, that's the Lord, you know.'

Without excitement, without voices from the blue but in the profoundest level of reality, believers will tell you again and again of how, in their times of need, the Saviour has come to them. They have, so to speak, heard the rustling of the shepherd's robes and they said, 'It is the Lord.' Friend, do you know what it is to walk with the Saviour like that? If the Saviour comes, it has an affect. Although the storm may rage still, somehow all seems well.

3. He saves us

And finally, when he taught Peter to walk even as he walked, he supported and then he saved him. I don't know what John thought when he heard Peter make that extraordinary suggestion. In fact I don't know what you think either, but you could have argued that it was rather out of place for Peter to make any such suggestion. They saw the Lord Jesus coming, walking on the water. At first they thought it was a ghost. I don't know why they should think it was a ghost—perhaps reasoning that a ghost is an insubstantial thing and therefore able to walk on water. But when they saw it was the real Jesus, in that moment, Peter's mind was lit up with a flash of surely God-given enlightenment—if Jesus could do it, why couldn't he do it too?

'Lord,' he said, 'if it's really you, bid me come to you on the water.' I don't know whether John said, 'Tut, tut, Peter, get back in the boat. You can't do what Jesus does.' But Jesus told him otherwise. Peter knew that Jesus was a man, and he sensed that, if he could walk on water, he could make Peter walk on water too; and it was true. Our Lord didn't say, 'Don't be so absurd, Peter.' Rather he said, 'Peter, come to me.' That is the wonder of the incarnation, isn't it? God has not sent his Son to mock us, but to leave us an example that we should follow his steps. We shall never have omnipotence as he had but, I repeat, he's not come to mock us but to show us how we can begin to learn to walk even as he walked. 'Come,' he said. So it wasn't any reckless act on Peter's part: it was calm, sober faith.

What is faith? Faith is our response to a word from God. Faith is our responding and laying hold on the word of Christ. That's what faith is. I'm not saying 'I feel I could do it'. No, but if God says something then I respond by believing it and acting on it. If Christ speaks, then I believe. This is the secret of salvation, as the Saviour said, 'whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life' (John 5:24). This is where the walk of the spirit begins—in hearing the word of Jesus to my heart and daring to step out in faith upon the word of Christ.

Have you done it yet, friend? Have you ever personally heard the word of the Saviour to you and, by an act of faith, stepped out to come to Jesus? Listen to the blessed invitation:

Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matt 11:28)

Tonight his voice comes through the storm and the wind and the spray of your life. The storms remind us that our little world is transient and soon will be gone. We must begin the great journey to the eternal world or be lost forever. Soon all our little boats will be gone: my house, your bungalow, your job, my profession. Soon we shall stand on the very edge of life and a great, vast eternity will lie before us. How shall I reach the many mansions of the Father's home above? There stands one tonight before us—our Saviour himself, with arms outstretched—and he says to you, 'Leave your boat; leave all else you trust in and come to me.' Have you ever done it, friend?

It's difficult, isn't it? You say, 'If I were to try, I know I couldn't keep it up: it's no good my pretending.' No, you couldn't. To let go and just come to Christ seems even more difficult than walking on water. And I think I see Peter—I hope I don't do his memory any wrong—but if I'd been he, I wouldn't have let go of the boat too soon! I would have kept hold like grim death and put one foot down and said, 'Will it work? I don't know whether I'm going to take this too far or not.' And some of you are still hanging on to things for salvation—your own merit, your church maybe—when Christ will demand that you let go of everything and just trust him. Why not do it right now? It's taken for granted that you couldn't keep it up—listen to the story. When Peter decided to respond to the word of the Saviour and he let go of the boat and he walked one step then two, to his amazement it worked. He said, 'I shall never keep this up,' and he began to look at the waves, and presently he was sinking. Of course he was.

You wouldn't be the last person to commit yourself to Christ for salvation and have begun the Christian life and then find it too much and begin to sink. Because it was his fault, our Lord eventually had to chide him saying, 'Oh, you of little faith, why did you doubt?' But notice the order of events. Peter had responded to the word of Christ. Now in his weakness and with his faith all jittery, he was beginning to sink. Would the Saviour let him sink and be lost? The music of heaven would stop and heaven itself grow black if the Saviour would encourage anybody to put their faith in him and then let them down and let them perish. Christ has given his word, 'whoever comes to me I will never cast out'; 'this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me' (John 6:37, 39).

That night, as the storm raged and the water began to come up round Peter's waist and up across his shoulders and neck, what heaven was interested in was what the Saviour would do. Would he be faithful to the man? What do you think he said? Did he stand there and lecture him? 'Peter, you foolish man, you've lost your faith, haven't you? Yes, I will save you, but obviously I can't save you until your faith is perfected. Now try to believe a little bit better, and when you've learnt to believe perfectly, then I can save you.' By that time the water would have dragged him down.

Strength in the Storm

I suppose once or twice a year, like any other Christian servant, I get folks coming to me, sometimes senior Christian people who started out long ago on the road to Christ; but recently illness has beset them, depression maybe, psychological difficulties, and their faith is jittery. Now becoming aware how weak their faith is, they suddenly have it suggested to them that perhaps they're not a believer at all because 'if you were a believer you wouldn't be fearful'. And they say, 'Well perhaps I'm not a believer then,' and immediately comes that awful sinking feeling and they start going down. They desperately struggle to believe and earnestly try to believe the right way round, and to believe without any doubt. And the more they try to believe, the worse it gets and the more they sink.

I'm always delighted to be able to sit beside such folks in their psychological distress and talk to them about this story and to remind them of what Christ did when Peter, having started out on the path to Christ, began to sink because his faith became small and jittery. So I ask them,

Did Christ look at Peter and say, 'You terrible man, fancy doubting my word: no wonder you're sinking'?

No, he didn't do that.

Did Christ just stand there and say, 'All right, Peter, I'll give you another chance. Try and believe a little bit stronger'?

Well no, he didn't do that either.

What did he do then?

He grabbed hold of him.

Ah, yes, as Peter went down, he simply cried, 'Lord, save me.' And Scripture says 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Rom 10:13). You won't be able to keep it up, but the Saviour who invites you to come, promises you now that in the day when you fall, when you call upon him, he will save you. And Christ lifted Peter up and then he did lecture him, as Peter deserved to be lectured for he needed to be taught a lesson. Jesus lectured him, but held him up as he lectured, and then with his strong, divine hand, he made him walk.

You've room enough to criticize the preacher who stands before you and some weak other Christians you've met. I'll tell you what the apostle says about them all—they're weak, but God is able to make them strong (see 2 Cor 12:9). And that is the Saviour I present to you. Fellow Christian, if you feel as if you can't stick it, that you don't know whether you can keep it up, whether you can maintain your faith, if you feel you're going down, then cry, 'Lord, save me'; knowing that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, and saved to the uttermost (Heb 7:25).

And you, friend, you've not yet started. You'll have to start someday to launch out into eternity when the solemn things of earth have gone. It will be a bad job if you are launched out into eternity when the Saviour is gone. Wouldn't it be better now, as you hear his word, 'Come to me,' that you let all else go and, even though it might seem like walking on water with nothing to get hold of, you say, 'Lord, just as I am, I come.'

Real Dirt and Real Cleansing

Reading: Matthew 15:1–28

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.' He answered them, 'And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, "Honour your father and your mother," and, "Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die." But you say, "If anyone tells his father or his mother, 'What you would have gained from me is given to God,' he need not honour his father.'" So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: "This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

And he called the people to him and said to them, 'Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.' Then the disciples came and said to him, 'Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?' He answered, 'Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.' But Peter said to him, 'Explain the parable to us.' And he said, 'Are you still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.'

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.' But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she is crying out after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' And he answered, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

May God give us to discover that healing of which the word of God speaks.

Introduction

In our current studies, we are thinking together of the early church's witness to the Lord Jesus—how they discovered him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God. This is the very foundation stone upon which the Christian church is built and we have been noticing the interesting way in which they bear their witness to him. In these chapters they do not seek to spin us some theological theory, nor even to preach some carefully laid out doctrine. Rather they tell us of their own personal experience, how as they walked around Palestine with this Jesus of Nazareth, they had such experience of him that they discovered for themselves that this Jesus was not merely a preacher nor merely a prophet, but none other than the Christ, the Son of the living God, able to save to the uttermost all that came unto God by him. Tonight will be no exception, as they tell us of some others who came like them to discover that same Saviour. In our passage tonight, Matthew introduces us to two very different groups of people.

Religious Jews

The first group were some of his own fellow Jews and among the Jews, a very special group—some were Pharisees and some were scribes: exceedingly religious people, perhaps some of the most religious people in all the Jewish nation. The Pharisees were particularly devoted to trying to keep the law of God as best they could and attain to special and superior holiness. Their desire was to live a life separate from all evil, separate from all uncleanness, to make themselves holy in the sight of God. The scribes were also religious, but more like university professors or at least theological professors. They had an immense knowledge of the Bible. They knew vast parts of the Old Testament off by heart and, along with that, all the learned expositions and traditions of the Jewish faith. They were repositories of enormous religious learning. They wore special clothes, long robes with big borders, and as they went down the street, the ordinary people bowed as they passed. They were taught to call them 'father' and 'rabbi' and respect them even more than they respected their own human parents.

These religious men didn't discover Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, though they knew all the Bible passages about the Messiah. When the Messiah came, says Matthew, they did not recognize him. Instead, as they listened to him preach, they grew offended and upset and exceedingly indignant; and they rejected and eventually crucified him.

Pagan Gentiles

Then there was another group—two women, a mother and a daughter. Neither were Jewesses. They were Canaanite pagans, pure and simple, in all their Gentile darkness and ignorance and sin, sunk in superstition and idolatry. The girl herself was caught up in her study of the occult and was now in the grip of an evil spirit. The wonderful story is that whereas the religious Jews didn't find the Saviour, nor recognize him, these two Gentiles found the Saviour and his great salvation. It reminds me of what John says in his Gospel as he tells how the Lord Jesus came first of all to the Jews, his own people.

He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. (John 1:10–12)

The same thing happens still. It is not merely that the Jew doesn't find him and the Gentile does. But even in our society, isn't it curious how sometimes it is the very religious people, keen on their religious observance, who nevertheless fail to find the Saviour? Whereas often it is the drug addict, the criminal, the lost, the vicious who come to repentance and receive the Saviour and are born again.

Clean but dirty

So first let us look at this religious group and why they didn't find the Saviour and what made them grow offended. First of all, says our Lord Jesus quite bluntly, it was because their religion was merely trifling with reality. They observed how our Lord Jesus ate his food at table with his disciples without first washing his hands, and so they criticized the Lord Jesus because, according to them, he had broken the traditions of the elders. Now it wasn't a Bible command that our Lord Jesus had broken. He broke none of them, but these hyper religious people had all sorts of rules and regulations that their scribes and religious teachers had invented. Among these religious rites and ceremonies that they had invented and that were not in the Bible whatsoever, was this rule that before you sat down to a meal, you must wash your hands to wash off from them the dirt that had come, not through honestly digging your garden or anything like that, but the dirt that had come from contact with this wicked world around you. So they washed their hands religiously before they ate bread. Our Lord Jesus denounced them and he told them straight that it was a lot of nonsense and worse than nonsense, for it was trifling with life's most solemn things.

Why was it nonsense? Why, because it did no good. It did nothing to reach the real problem in life. It did nothing to touch real dirt and God knows, this is a dirty world. I don't mind whether you are Christian or atheist, you yourself will admit what a dirty, filthy world this can be. And I'm not thinking merely of the fearful filth of modern immorality, sexually speaking. That can be filthy enough, but all of us know what we mean, don't we, when we say of that man, 'What a dirty trick he played'? We recognize that some tricks in business, in politics, deserve no other name than 'filthy'. 'It's a dirty trick,' we say. Yes, we all know what we mean and this world is a real dirty place. You can find it in business, you can find it in academic circles, you'll even find it on the sports field—where the men in the scrum aren't beyond giving somebody a kick in the jaw accidentally on purpose. You've got to win, no matter how you win. It's a filthy, dirty world and for religion to come in the face of real dirt and offer a token little washing of the hands with water is to make a mockery of the whole thing. What good does it do, washing your hands with a little water? Of course it will do some good if your hands are filthy with some germ or other, it'll do a little good, it'll protect your hygiene. But dirt of that kind on our hands isn't the real trouble. It's what my mother used to call clean dirt!

The real dirt is dirt in our hearts. 'It's not your hands that are the trouble,' said Christ, 'it's your hearts that are the trouble. It's not what goes into a man defiles a man, but what comes

out of a man defiles a man, for out of the heart proceed evil thoughts' (see Matt 15:11, 17–20). What a viper's nest our minds can be. Which one among us would care to have our inward thoughts exposed on a screen for all to read, every hour of the day? All of us, without exception, have known what our Lord means when he says, 'Out of the heart of man proceed evil thoughts.' What about those dark moments when you would have freely knifed your opponent? Only prudence kept you back from doing it, but the envy was there, wasn't it, and the jealousy was there? And though you didn't commit the foul deed of murder, inside the heart there was the disposition to. Who of us hasn't been defiled by it? The sight of that woman in a better hat than yours, the sight of that man with a better car than yours, and all that filthy, evil thing of jealousy and envy. 'Out of the heart of man proceed evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, false witness, slander.' And what shall we say of it? Here is real dirt and it needs to be cleansed and, said Christ, to imagine that you're going to deal with that by a few washings of the hands with tap water is to fool about with reality.

Breaking God's law

Our Lord Jesus denounced these religious people for another reason. So keen had they become on their religious rules and regulations, that there were occasions when, in order to keep their rule and regulation, they opposed the positive command of holy Scripture. How very serious. The Old Testament had laid it down as one of the ten commandments, 'Honour your father and your mother', which means not merely sending them a card on Mother's Day, but when necessary supporting them and caring for them and requiting them for all that they have done for their children, and in the end, if need be, maintaining them. To honour your father and mother can be grossly inconvenient, can't it? Looking after elderly folks can be exceedingly tiresome and trying to the patience and the nerves.

These fine religious men had found a way round it. You could, according to their rules, vow some of your spare cash, if you like, to the temple and give it to God. What a marvellous thing. Ah, but they had another refinement. You could vow to give your £500 or £1,000 to the temple so it was no longer yours, and that meant you couldn't use it to maintain your parents. 'Sorry, it isn't mine anymore. It belongs to God. I've given it to God.' But if you had a word in the priest's ear, the priest wouldn't mind spending it on what you asked him to spend it on. It was humbug, a veneer of devotion to God, a way out of performing your moral duty.

We Gentiles will have to be careful if we criticize some Jews. How easy religion can be made a cloak for an attitude of heart that doesn't intend to keep the law of God at all. You pay a little cash into the church's coffers to quieten a conscience that does not intend to obey holy Scripture, and you make the word of God of none effect. And by your tradition you have stopped people obeying holy Scripture. I say again, we of a Christian world as distinct from the Jews, cannot shout too loudly. But as I think of this charge which our Lord levelled, I think again of the context in which he was talking—the need for spiritual cleansing. How guilty Christendom has been on this very score.

Real cleansing

This is a dirty world. The only thing that will cleanse the human heart is what Paul describes in these words:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:3–5)

Thus spoke the apostle, describing that real thing—radical repentance and personal faith in the Lord Jesus, with a positive renewing by the Holy Spirit within a man or woman who has real dealings with God. Alas, how soon Christendom bypassed that reality and, like the Jew, instead of demanding that an individual must be born again by personal repentance and personal faith, Christendom substituted a little washing with holy water and told people they were born again, because they'd been through an innocent little ceremony. It produced what the great and famous Anglican Bishop, J. C. Ryle, called 'millions of baptized pagans'.

This is not a matter for sectarian strife. This is a matter for the realities of time and eternity. Our holy Lord says, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God' (John 3:3). We all need that washing of regeneration. It's no use taking a few drops of water and, by priestly manipulation, spreading them on the forehead and pronouncing that this human being is now born again. Thereafter the people think they are born again and don't need to heed the word of the Saviour. They've been through the ceremonies and this has left their heart untouched. The tragedy is they think they've seen all that Christianity can give and it hasn't worked, and it drives them to despair.

When the Pharisees heard our Lord Jesus talking like this, they were greatly offended. I'm not particularly surprised, but Peter was and he came running after the Lord. 'Lord, please tone down your sermon next time' he said, 'because the Pharisees were offended and they've not come back.' Our Lord replied, 'If they are offended, then let them be offended, for every plant that my Father has not planted will be rooted up' (see Matt 15:12–14). Oh, my dear friend, excuse my great plainness of speech, but it's no good fooling about. Real dirt demands real cleansing. What a sorry thing religion is if it is not the real thing. I must ask myself, and you should ask yourself, am I genuine? Do I stand rooted by faith in God, in the gospel of Christ, or am I like those of whom our Lord spoke in the parable of the Sower—the seed was sown, it grew up, but there was no real root and, come sun and rain, it withered away (see Matt 13:5–6)? Anything that isn't the real thing, says Christ, will be rooted up. If I haven't got the real thing, if all I have is a substitute thing and I'm religious but not saved, religious but not born again, then the sooner I allow Jesus Christ to show me and root it up, the better. So let's pass on to the real thing. In this world where dirt is a very real thing, how would anybody get cleansed?

There is hope here. Oh, what a lovely gospel. No person is too far from God. No matter how filthy, Christ is able to cleanse.

O precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know;

Nothing but the blood of Jesus.²

Oh, let us see it, for the story is told to that end. Have you known like I have known the dirt in the human heart? Like the old puritan said at one stage, there's dirt at the bottom of my tears. You've seen me crying over other people's wrongs to me and, in the end, if you go too deep, you'll find the mud of my own self-interest. And know this too, if you have known the wretched dirtiness of your heart, there is a fountain and it can be cleansed. And so Matthew takes as an example one who found the Saviour's cleansing, a Gentile Canaanite woman and her afflicted, demon possessed daughter.

Unworthy but cleansed

Now, please do notice that whereas our Lord Jesus had denounced and attacked a lot of the mere formal Jewish religion, he didn't go to the other extreme like some people do and say, 'Well the Gentiles were all right and you needn't bother and make a fuss.' For if the Jews with their Bibles and their religious ceremonies still needed to be saved, the Gentiles without their Bibles and without God and without Christ were, many of them, abominably filthy. What a world the ancient world was, where immorality was common and nothing thought of. When the early apostles wrote their letters to the churches of their new converts, they had to tell Gentiles that fornication was wrong, for they wouldn't have known it. Where the higher society engaged in pederasty and homosexuality and nobody thought anything much about it, though they had a conscience about it. Where unwanted children would be taken and put in cots out on the mountain for the wild beasts to get rid of them. What a cruel, heartless world it was and what a world full of superstition and fear, where people went to the temples and to the magic men and got themselves all involved with demons. Where often religion itself was a source of corruption.

I remember in my youth being on a tour and standing with a busload of people in the marketplace of Old Corinth in Greece. Some of you may have been there. The Greek guide was telling us about the glories of this wonderful city with its marble-lined streets and its wealth and its beautiful temples. Then she pointed us to an old mound which looked like a heap of dirt. She said, 'This was the speaker's platform, ladies and gentlemen, in the day when it was all marble-covered and with beautiful columns and buildings.' This was the speaker's platform where anybody stood who wanted to address the crowd. She said, 'Paul would have stood here when he came here preaching his gospel.' She turned round and said, 'And you see that large hill. On top of that, when Paul was here, there was a temple with a thousand priestesses devoted to the goddess Aphrodite, and every one of them open to all comers for the payment of a fee.' Said the Greek guide, 'Paul had a difficult time when he came here.' Yes, as he subsequently wrote to some of his converts, 'Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practise homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you' (1 Cor 6:9-11).

² Robert Lowry (1826-1899), 'Nothing but the blood of Jesus' (1876).

It was a dirty world, but here's a Canaanite woman who found the Saviour and found cleansing and found release, and discovered true religion—salvation that works and sets a person free and cleans up the life, releasing it from the power of Satan. How did she come to it? Two very simple steps. She first of all believed. 'Great is your faith,' said the Lord Jesus. You say, 'What does it mean to believe?' Well first of all, it means to accept God's condemnation, God's diagnosis, God's description, and that can be difficult. Here's this woman and she came crying after the Saviour, 'Son of David, have mercy on me,' but Christ took no notice and walked straight on. She cried again and again and kept following them saying, 'Son of David, have mercy on me.' But he took no notice and he made no reply, so much so that the apostles came to the Lord Jesus and said, 'This woman is making such a fuss and such a scene in the street, give her what she wants and send her away.' 'No,' said Christ, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel—this woman's a Gentile. It is not for me to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.'

When the woman heard that, how do you suppose she felt? 'He called me a dog. Who does he think he is? I'm as good as his fellow Jews—I know some of them, with all their religious talk and humbug.' But she didn't say that. 'He called my daughter and me dogs, did he? That's precisely what we are.' Some good Christian expositors have become a little nervous here and they say that the Lord didn't really mean to call her a dog. He wouldn't have done that. He used a Greek word that means a little puppy dog. What was that meant to be—a compliment? You can call them dogs, you can call them puppy dogs, but to a Jew all dogs were by definition unclean animals. Unclean.

The woman as she came was saying, 'Lord, Son of David'. That was his title as a Jew, but she wasn't a Jew. She was a pagan Gentile, and as Scripture reminds us:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh . . . were . . . separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (Eph 2:11–12)

Not knowing the true God, worshipping demons, worshipping idols. No relationship with the Messiah and therefore no hope in history. No hope. Uncircumcised, unclean.

Accepting God's verdict

When our Lord Jesus pointed it out to the woman, marvellously she said, 'Yes, Lord, that's true of me.' What a wise woman she was. What would have been the good of her arguing, 'Those Pharisees are just as bad as I am, if not a bit worse'? That wouldn't have made her any better, would it? You know some hypocritical religious people? Well that's a sorry story. It may well be true. That won't help you, sir. We've got enough to see after our own lives. What would've been the good of her saying, 'I'm better than those Pharisees', when at home a girl was in the grip of a demon? Oh, mother, has your boy gone on glue sniffing? Has your girl gone on drugs? It's no good saying that you're better than the woman down the road. That won't help anything. You've got a real problem. It is someone that needs to be saved.

The only way to get saved is first of all to recognize what's wrong with us. We're Gentiles, unclean, lost and, sad to relate, in the power of Satan. Does that seem strong language for you? Well now this is authentic Christianity; this is reality. The Bible says that 'the whole world lies

in the power of the evil one' (1 John 5:19). You say, 'My boy's just a little bit maladjusted.' Well he may be: I'm sorry to hear it. But he and the rest of us are by nature something worse than that. Paul says that he was sent by the living Christ to release men from the power of Satan. That is the power we've got to get free from, if ever we're going to be cleansed. And we shall not get rid of it unless first we face it. That's what repentance means—not merely admitting that being unkind to your maiden aunt is a bad thing. It means that we are in the grip of Satan, lost, and only Christ can save us.

And so first of all, she faced reality, good woman, and admitted Christ's diagnosis. She was a dog. Have you got that? You say, 'I'm not a dog. Be careful, preacher.' Oh, no, not a full-grown dog: just a little puppy dog. Puppy dogs look nice but they grow up to be big dogs; and puppy dogs have got dog nature, be they big or small.

For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom 3:22–23)

Her faith resulted in repentance, facing reality, owning to her lostness; and her faith took the next step. What was that? She cast herself on the grace of God.

Appreciating God's grace

'Yes, I'm a Gentile,' she said. 'Yes, I'm a dog. I desperately need salvation for myself and my daughter and I've no right to it. I admit that I've no claim on it and I don't deserve it. But, Lord, don't forget how big God's table is and how rich it is. He's the God of the Jews but I know how often his grace has forgiven them, and there have been some sinners among them too. If his grace is big enough to forgive Jews, well then there'll be just a little bit over, that might slip off the table for us Gentiles too.' For anybody who had any wealth at all, his table would be so full of food that there'd be some bits accidentally fall off and the old dog underneath got it. 'Lord,' she said, 'I know I don't deserve it but God is so big and so gracious that when he's fed his people Israel, it must be there's a crumb or two left over for me and my daughter.' 'Oh, how delightful,' said Christ. 'My dear woman, you've seen in this moment what rabbis galore have never seen.'

The God who condemns our sin is a God of infinite mercy. He's rich to all that call upon him in truth, for there is no difference—everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Grace abounding over all my sin, for

where sin increased, grace abounded all the more. (Rom 5:20)

I don't care who you are, what kind of a dog you've been, what kind of a bitch, there's none of us really better than the other. Perhaps a bit of religion has kept some of us restrained, but our hearts are the same as everybody else's. And there's a God so gracious that he can cleanse me and cleanse you, freely and for nothing.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. (Eph 2:8)

Another woman and her daughter

You may remember that two weeks ago we were thinking of the story of a woman, her daughter and a king. Now tonight we have a story of a woman, her daughter and the King of kings! In that first story the king didn't want to execute the prophet, but the woman made him do it against his will and she got her own way. You have heard tonight that when this woman came for her daughter, to the great King of kings, at first he took no notice. But she wasn't going to have that: she was going to get what she wanted for her daughter and she got it. Two stories. They tell of two women and what they did about this business of uncleanness. Just listen again, for we ourselves shall be like one woman or the other.

Silencing God's voice

The first woman was already a princess but the chance came to marry the king. She was already married but for a life of pleasure and gaiety and power and influence, she wasn't going to be so old fashioned as to take notice of God's laws. All this adultery business, all the film stars do it, so she ditched her first husband and she married King Herod. But then came God's prophet, protesting against the uncleanness of it. Now how can you enjoy yourself with a miserable Jeremiah like that shouting in your ears that it's against the rules of God? She must silence his voice, so she had him put in prison and Herod said, 'That's enough, my dear. We mustn't go further than that, because it wouldn't be politically wise to have the man executed.' She said to herself, 'Well I'll show him. He thinks he's master of himself. I can make him do what I like actually. I've got the measure of him.' She had a daughter, and she sent the girl in and she danced. It wasn't a very clean dance, for she knew how to get her way. The king was carried away and he said, 'What do you want? I'll give you anything.' She said, 'I want the head of John the Baptist on a dish on this table.' You can't enjoy uncleanness with the word of God ringing in your ear. That will spoil the fun. And so in the end, she had what she wanted and there was the head on the dish and the tongue forever silent; and she had the gaiety and she had the uncleanness. Eventually Jesus Christ came and he made her husband think of eternity and the resurrection, and at last he got his opportunity to see Christ, but Christ wouldn't speak to him. He too was silent. Isn't that what she wanted — silence?

Listen, friend, this is one way with uncleanness. You say it's fun, but think where that woman may be this evening. Says the Bible, there are two destinies. There's a heaven, a glorious, golden Jerusalem, and there is the lake of fire. Says the Bible, curtly, 'Blessed are those that get into that holy eternal city'. Why are they blessed? For all sorts of reasons, but for this too, because outside is the filthiest company you ever imagined. Outside are dogs. Perhaps what I have said, perhaps what the Saviour has said, has cut deep and offended you. It wasn't said unkindly, but uncleanness leads to hell. If I can stop speaking, and shall do in a moment, you can ask Christ to shut up. The danger is, he might do precisely that and let uncleanness have its way with you forever. I say again, hell is a filthy place, because of its filthy company.

Securing God's blessing

What of this other woman? She made the King do what she wanted, didn't she? She had a daughter who needed to be saved from the power of Satan and she came crying after the Lord, 'Son of David, have mercy,' and he took no notice and thus he went on, and it would appear

he wasn't going to give her what she wanted. Oh, but she said, 'This won't do. I'm going to get what I want. I'm going to make him.' Make him? What, make the great Son of David stop and grant her what she wanted? Yes, she was going to make him. How did she do it?

She took her place as a sinner and said, 'Yes, Lord, it's true. I'm a dog,' and she cast herself on the grace of God; and that very day she found salvation. You want salvation? Friend, you can make the very King of kings stop in his tracks tonight. You can stop the very choirs of heaven blessing him, while you make the King of kings do what you want and save your soul. Oh, let us repent of our sins and let us cast ourselves on the grace of God. The great Saviour himself will be delighted to prove the truth of his promise, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

Two Worlds

Reading: Matthew 16:13–17:8

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.' Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but the things of man.'

Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.' He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.' When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Rise and have no fear.' And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

May God add his blessing to the reading of his word.

Introduction

In this series of Sunday studies, we have been studying the witness of the early church to Christ. This evening we continue with that theme as the apostles tell us something altogether fundamental to the church. They are about to tell us just where and how and on what foundation the church of Christ was founded and built. What it is that lies at the very foundation of the church in such a fashion that, were this foundation removed, the whole church would collapse and crumble into ruins. As they tell us how and where the church was founded and on what it is built, they will of course explain to us very clearly what it means to be a member of the true church of Christ.

Where and on what was the church really founded? It was founded here, says Matthew, when God revealed to a certain Simon Peter and subsequently to some of his friends and colleagues, exactly who Jesus Christ really was. For the first time it dawned clearly on Peter's mind, by the influence of God Almighty himself, that Jesus Christ was not merely a prophet like Elijah nor merely a preacher of the law like Moses. He was nothing short of being the Christ, the Son of the living God. There it was that the church was founded—God revealed to Peter and his colleagues exactly who Jesus Christ was and is.

Here we must be very exact. You'll notice what it was they discovered and realized. It wasn't simply what Jesus Christ taught. Matthew has recorded in his Gospel many things that Jesus Christ taught. He records in his early chapters the famous Sermon on the Mount, and in particular that marvellous statement of the golden rule. He reminds us how Christ got his disciples together and told them to love their enemies. And 'whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them' (Matt 7:12). But you will notice that Matthew doesn't say that it was when Peter heard this, that the church was founded. It wasn't that Peter listened awestruck to the moral teaching of Christ and said to himself, 'If we could teach all men to love one another, love even their enemies, that teaching would be revolutionary. Why not start an association and call it *Love the World* and get all men to fulfil the golden rule.'

No, it wasn't then that the church of Christ was founded. Important as the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is, the church is not built upon that nor upon any of the moral teaching of Christ. If you doubt what I say, take an afternoon to read the Acts of the Apostles and gather from the historian, Luke, what message it was that turned the world upside down. It wasn't the Sermon on the Mount. It was this message that we are about to listen to—the discovery of exactly who Jesus is. That he is none less than the Christ, the Son of the living God, to which his glorious resurrection bears witness.

A second thing these Christians tell us in this very context, with great honesty and humility, is that Peter himself, when he had discovered that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, then had to be taught something else. Something else over which at first, he made a most egregious and unfortunate mistake—and that was about what Jesus, being the Christ, the Son of God, was intending to do in our world. For if we could find out exactly what it was that Jesus was meant to be doing and intended to do, then we might have some idea of what the church is meant to be doing and what it means to belong to the church of Christ. So Matthew

tells us that soon after Peter confessed our Lord as the Messiah, Jesus began to tell Peter and the other apostles that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things and be rejected and crucified and be raised again. Peter began to rebuke him. We mustn't be too hard on Peter because, like all of us, he did have his prejudices. He had it pretty well fixed in his head exactly what it was that the Messiah would do when he came and what Christianity would be about.

He had been brought up with the stories which all Jewish schoolboys knew from their religious education lessons. He had been told many times about those great heroes of the Jewish faith, the Maccabees. In centuries past when the evil Gentile imperialists had come invading the land and banned the Jewish religion, the Maccabees had raised a guerrilla army and in the name of God they had fought the Gentile imperialists and overlords. Against all odds and with the help of God, they had defeated those Gentiles and forced them to give up. The Jews had cleansed their temple and maintained their religion and in the end, got themselves political freedom. Peter and some of his colleagues were hoping that Jesus Christ was going to give a repeat performance of that. Indeed, we are told that one of the apostles had been a member of one of these guerrilla armies: Simon the Zealot, as the Bible calls him, was a Canaanite and a political revolutionary.

So it was that when Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, Peter had it in his head what was going to happen. Jesus would eventually go to Jerusalem, he would convince the authorities of the rightness of his cause, he would raise an army and he would push out the hated Romans who were oppressing the poor. Driving out the Romans and the tax collectors and all that crowd, he would get the nation political freedom. He would break the structures of society and, in their place, give the Jews their freedom and fairness; and every Jewish citizen would have a beautiful house and a big back garden and a chariot or two, and life would be supremely wonderful and free.

When Peter heard Jesus Christ say that he was going to Jerusalem and, instead of doing that kind of thing, he was going to be rejected and crucified, Peter was so bitterly disappointed that he took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. 'No, Lord, get that out of your mind. Excuse my talking plain, but you know I've invested my life in you. I gave up my job to follow you. I've sunk all my money in the good of your cause and if you're going to get it into your head that you're going to be rejected and defeated and die and be crucified and all that kind of thing, what's going to happen to my money and all the time and expense I've invested in you? No, Lord, you need to think positively. Not that you're going to Jerusalem and going to get rejected and killed or anything like that. No, say 'I'm going to be a success and all the crowds will come and support me.' And leading the crowds against the Romans, you'll turf the Romans out and a few of those Jews at the top, like Caiaphas, and put the common people in their place. We shall get our rights, politically and religiously and economically and socially. What a tremendous success it's going to be.'

When Peter thus thought and rebuked the Lord Jesus, the Lord Jesus not only in turn rebuked Peter, but indicated that Peter's notion of what Messiah was meant to be doing came from no less a source than his satanic majesty himself. That is not what the Messiah was going to do and it certainly wasn't what the church was meant to be doing either. To correct Peter's mistakes then, two further lessons had to be taught him at this very time.

Two worlds and two ages

First, Peter had to be taught that there wasn't just one world but two. Listen to our Lord:

On this rock I will build my church, and . . . I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (16:18–19)

Two worlds, earth and heaven, and the church's business is to be the link between the two so that, following her God-given ministry, she might in God's hand be the means and the messengers that prepare men and women living in this world to find that world above, God's heaven. In all God's programme for the Messiah, this stands preeminent—not the improvement of conditions here, but the preparing of men and women for their great heaven above.

My dear friends, if your circumstances are difficult, you have all my sympathy: I wish they were ten times better than they are. But though your life were a virtual paradise here, should you miss God's heaven, your life here will be nothing short of disaster. I would be playing with your soul if I put your physical, social and political wellbeing first, and didn't put first the preparing of your soul for the great eternity beyond, for God's heaven. That's what the Saviour came to do.

Not only had Peter to be reminded that there are two worlds but, secondly, there are two ages of time. There is the present age and the coming age. Messiah came the first time in what the Bible calls this age, this present world, and men rejected him. But listen to what he says:

For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father. (16:27)

Christ is coming again. The first age was when Christ came the first time. There will be an age to come, when the blessed Lord returns. God doesn't want to keep you down, so make what you can of this age. But know this, it's only temporary and our world awaits the promised coming again of Jesus Christ, God's Son. To get ourselves ready for that coming is life's chief business. The Apostle Paul understood it exactly the same way as Peter understood it. Hear it from the way he wrote to some of his recent converts, explaining to them what happened when they got converted to Christ, and what it means to become a member of a true Christian church.

You turned to God from idols to serve the living and the true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven. (1 Thess 1:9–10)

What are *you* waiting for?

You say, 'I'm waiting until I can get a mortgage actually: waiting until I get a house.'

'I'm waiting until I get married.'

'I'm waiting until I get my business established.'

'I'm waiting until I get through my degree course.'

Yes, all good and proper and God bless you in it, but if that's all you're waiting for, you've missed life's purpose. What you should be waiting for, primarily, is Christ coming again.

Escapism and reality

Well I know what you'll say — at least I know what a lot of people do say and what they tell me. 'Preaching about heaven and about the second coming is not really relevant to our modern world. That's all pie in the sky. At best, in fact, it's a form of escapism. The church would make a better impression if, instead of talking about heaven, it would see its real business to be in politics to improve man's social condition now. All this talk of heaven, after all, is escapism.' Is it really? I want to tell you, it is those who are not ready for the second coming of Christ that are the escapists.

Madam, suppose you and your husband have to leave your home one of these days to visit your elderly parents in England and look after them. Your house stands vacant for six weeks, and when you come back you find to your horror that somebody appears to be in your house. You find the front door is locked and your key won't work anymore. A young couple have come and broken into your house and installed themselves as squatters. You come round to me, because I'm a solicitor, and you say, 'There are squatters in my house. I want you to go and deal with them.' So I go to the house and I knock on the door. The young couple come to the door and I say, 'I'm a solicitor.'

They say, 'Come in. you're just the person: we want a little advice. We've got a little problem with the damp on the wall here and we'd like to get it fixed. Could we get a grant for getting it fixed? And then to be honest, our marriage isn't working too well. Could you give us a little marriage guidance advice perhaps? We'd be a little bit happier in our new home.'

And I say, 'Well, I'd do any of these things for you in their proper turn but there's a prior thing you need to get settled.'

'Oh, what's that?'

'This isn't your house, is it? Has the owner said you could be in this house? Can you not get that settled first? Are you on proper terms with the owner?'

And they say, 'We don't care about the owner. We're not interested in whether there's an owner or not. What we're interested in is the damp on the wall and it's spoiling the wallpaper. You could help us a lot if you would get yourself down to those practical things.'

What would you have me say? I know what I'd be tempted to say, 'Look here, you can't afford to live as an escapist like that. You know jolly well this isn't your house and you're trying to forget about the owner and what the owner will do one day. While you busy yourself with the wallpaper, that's putting your head in the sand. You can put what locks you like on the front door. One day the authorities will come and you'll have to meet the owner.'

Oh, friend, you may think my parable is not good. It isn't good compared to the ones the Lord Jesus told. He said about his nation that they were like tenant farmers — as though a man had planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants while he himself had gone into a far country. Presently he sent servants to collect the rent and the rates from the tenants, but they had got it into their head it was their place, so they kicked the servants out. Last of all, the owner of the vineyard sent his son, saying, 'Surely they'll respect my son.' But when they saw him coming they said, 'This is the heir, let's get rid of him and we could own the place.' And they killed him and slung him out. Said Christ, 'What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard would do?' (see 20:1–16).

Whether it is the Jewish nation or the world at large, or our own private lives, here is our basic trouble. Friends, stop being escapist: let's face a fact or two. Did you make yourself? Did you make this world that you now inhabit? What is the use shutting your eyes to the fact that you're in somebody else's house? And let me ask you, how are you getting on with the owner? This is our world's prime problem. It has a thousand secondary problems but its prime problem is this: it is trying to live as though there were no owner. Jesus Christ came to tell us that there is an owner, there is another world. He is the Father's Son and he's come to claim his world. Men have thrown him out. They try to make out that thinking of heaven and the second coming is all escapism. It isn't escapism, this is the reality, for one day Jesus Christ will come again to take what is his.

Let me forget about the world for a moment. Let me ask myself and you ask yourselves, if tonight Christ came to the door of my life and put his key in the door, wanting to come in, would he find it open? Would he find himself welcome, or would he find my heart shut against him? What am I to do about it? How can I get ready for his coming? How can I become a true member of his church? Let Matthew tell us, first by telling us exactly who Jesus Christ is, then what we have to do to get right with him.

The transfiguration

To help his disciples understand what he was saying—that there are really two worlds and two ages—our Lord Jesus took them up a very high mountain. There he was transfigured before them. What a tremendous experience it was. How enlightening. How it put everything into a different perspective. Down here in this world, Peter was becoming very uncomfortable. The scribes and the Pharisees and the leaders of the Jewish nation were beginning to whisper into Peter's ear, 'Now, Peter, a little religion is not too bad in its place, kept in proportion, but aren't you taking things a bit too far—giving up your business and following this Jesus? We have to tell you, Peter, that we don't like your Jesus particularly. Indeed, if he comes to Jerusalem again and begins to spread his doctrines, we will see that his campaign is stopped, for we will crucify him. We gently advise you, Peter, don't listen to that Jesus: you'll ruin your life. You want to have fun and to be a success, don't you? Don't you follow that Jesus for, we're telling you now, all the time and energy and love you invest in him will be lost.'

Isn't that what our world whispers in your ear? Have you never felt the power of the world's argument? Sometimes it seems so convincing. It isn't all fun with the world. Oh, Christmas time perhaps, it's not bad singing a carol or two, or even at Easter maybe: an Easter egg can be eaten with some enjoyment! But really to take Christ seriously, you'd be losing your mind to invest in Christ. He might send you out as a missionary or something, instead of becoming the leader in your profession in this country! It might make you feel you had to come to church when you could be out playing tennis! Feeling all sorts of restrictions, cutting down your fun, making it difficult in business.

If the world has never whispered it to you, it was whispering it to Peter when Christ took him up the mountain. Says Matthew, 'Oh, there's another world up there. A world of glory,' and they watched until the face of the Saviour was transfigured like the sun in its strength. There was Moses, the great lawgiver, and there was Elijah, for this was the great world of

eternity and ultimate reality. And as they watched, awestruck, there came a cloud and out of that cloud, a voice that Peter to his dying day remembered as vividly as when he heard it, the voice of almighty God, saying, 'This is my beloved son; listen to him.'

I don't know what the world is whispering to you tonight, but I do know what God is trying to say to you. Friend, if the world is telling you 'don't take life seriously, don't listen to Christ: he might ruin your life', God Almighty is saying to you, 'This is my beloved Son, listen to him. I shall one day give him the whole of this earth for his inheritance. This is my Son in whose hand I'm laying all the world and the vast worlds that whirl in space. Through him I made them. Do you know why I made Alpha Centauri? Do you know why I made the cloud dust in all the great constellations? I made them for him. Made them as his toys. Made them for his glory. Every blade of grass on this earth, I made for Jesus Christ, my Son.'

Yes, this world is out of sorts with God. If the world is saying, 'Don't you listen to him, Peter,' and God is saying, 'Listen to him, Peter', it's obvious that the world is out of sorts with God. This world is out of sorts with that world and it's quite obvious that you can't live for both worlds simultaneously. You'll have to make a choice. You live for this world or you live for Christ. Live for this world, where Christ is not the centre of your life, and you'll gain your life in this world but you'll lose it in that world. Live for that world, let your whole life revolve around Christ and the service of Christ and you'll lose your life in this world and you'll gain and keep it for that world. What's the profit if you gain your life in this world—if you gain the whole world itself—and lose your soul in that other world?

Who is this Jesus Christ? He's not only the one for whom all was made, but there came a moment up the mountain when Peter was so impressed that he had a suggestion to make. (I hope he's got over the habit, for otherwise he'll be suggesting alterations in heaven itself!) He said to Christ, 'Let's make three tents here—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' Maybe he thought Jesus Christ and Moses and Elijah were all of the same rank and seniority. For that, God himself protested and sent a cloud and said, 'Peter, this is my beloved son, listen to him,' And when the cloud went, Moses was gone and Elijah was gone, and they saw only Jesus Christ.

Moses and the law

Jesus Christ isn't just another Moses, and he's certainly not another Elijah merely. Moses was the great lawmaker, but his function down the centuries was to be a schoolmaster that he might bring us to Christ and when he's done that, his job is done. Good old Moses. How he does put the placards up around the place, doesn't he? Just when you're going to do a little bit of stealing of somebody's time then Moses puts a placard up 'You shall not steal'. Perhaps when you're coveting somebody else's something, Moses comes with a little placard and says 'You shall not covet'.

It's like this. You're on a day's outing in the country and you come to this lovely piece of grass and there's a river and you say, 'Now this is what I've been looking for: what a lovely place to fish. Does it belong to anybody? I can't see any house around here. No, I think this belongs to everybody equally,' so across the grass you go and start to fish. An hour or two have gone by and you've filled your sack with fish. You're feeling very pleased. You're walking back across the grass and you come across a little notice 'Please keep off the grass'.

You say, 'Oh, perhaps this isn't common then—perhaps this is private. And what's that placard on the tree there: "Fishing, private".' You say, 'It might be somebody's place. Goodness. What if I were to meet the owner? Is this somebody's estate and here am I with a bag full of fish?'

It's the old prohibitions, the labels, the law that bring to your mind the fact there's an owner and you have trespassed and before you get out of the gate, you may have to meet him. That was what Moses came to do, to put a few placards around our world to tell us that this world isn't ours, to warn us that we have trespassed, and to bring us to Christ. You say, 'Well Christ is the last one I want to meet. Yes, I have trespassed. I'd do anything but meet him: I'd just have to run away.' Moses has made you feel your guilt.

Elijah and a sacrifice

Let Elijah do something else for you. Every Jew was expecting that before the Messiah came, God would send Elijah to convert the people and prepare them for the coming of Messiah. They got that idea from what Elijah had done beforehand in history. You remember the story, how when the people had gone astray from God and got themselves mixed up with all sorts of horrible idolatries and were in danger of the judgment of God, then came Elijah to bring that people back to God. How did he do it? On that mountain, he offered a sacrifice and as he stood by that sacrifice he called, as a prophet of the living God, 'Oh, God, show this people that you're real, and not only that, but show it in such a way as to bring their hearts back to you' (see 1 Kgs 18:20–39). Elijah, as you know, was only a forerunner and a prototype, but let that good man point you to Christ.

Why did Christ come into a world of guilty squatters living without God, living to please themselves, living as though this world were their world, their own little self-contained flat? Why did the Son of God come? That you might have a chance to meet the owner, whose law we have broken. More than that, he came that he might show us what God is really like and turn our hearts back to God. That's why he came. Why must the Son and heir be crucified? Friends, to show you what God is like.

Are you trying to live as though he didn't exist? Are you trying to keep him outside the door of your heart and the path of your life because you think he's going to be a tyrant? Christ came to show you what God is like and bring your heart back to him again. God doesn't know any better way than this, friend—his own Son dying on Calvary. Go on, kick him. Make it clear to him that you are his enemy. Do you know what God is like? Oh, friend, I do. God is like this. He made the world, then he died for it. That's what God is like.

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5:8)

He died to bring us back to our senses, and to show us where our salvation is.

Getting right with God

You ask, 'What have I to do to get this Jesus Christ, to get right with that other world, to get right with God? What have I got to do?' Three things, friend: they are simple but we'd better take them slowly, because people become confused about them.

Denying yourself

Said our Lord Jesus, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (16:24). That's what we've now got to do.

You say, 'Now I realize what you're coming round to: it's like a sermon for Lent—to tell us to deny ourselves, to go without some sugar in our tea or something like this, for the period of Lent.'

I'm telling you no such thing, friend. There are more serious things to be done.

Taking up your cross

You say, 'Well, I have a crotchety old grandmother and she is such a trial. She's my cross.'

Don't talk nonsense.

'Notice I've got arthritis, but I'm trying to bear it nicely and pleasantly. That's my cross.'

That's foolish. Nothing to do with your cross.

What does it mean to take up your cross? What did it mean for Christ when they put a cross upon him? They put a cross on him because they had condemned him to death and they had denied the holy and the just. He was absolutely holy and absolutely just, but they denied it. He never once denied himself. It's impossible for him to deny himself, says Scripture. He was holy. He never denied it. He was just. He never denied it. He never once admitted to any sin, nor confessed any sin. But men denied that holy Saviour: they said he was a criminal worthy of death, and they got a cross and put it on him. You will notice he never picked it up. Never once did he take up his own cross and never once did he admit he was guilty, but they put it on him and then crucified him on it.

Do you want to get right with him? Then, says Christ, you'll have to take up your own cross. Don't wait for anybody to put it on you. Take it up yourself. You say, 'But am I bad enough for that?' You are indeed. Your world, your parents, maybe your schoolteacher, your friends will say, 'Don't be so silly. You're a nice girl. You're pleasant. Yes, you've got one or two little faults, but you're not that bad. Do the best you can and you'll arrive in God's heaven, surely.' Friend, I must warn you that if you carry on that way, you'll end in God's hell. The situation is grave. Why did Christ die for us? Because we are sinners exposed to God's wrath.

Admitting your guilt

Let the world tonight tell you that you're not so bad. Friends, you'll have to deny it. You'll have to deny yourself. You'll have to say, 'No, I do not deserve God's heaven. I am not righteous. I am not good. I deserve to be condemned by God's holy law and what's more, if Jesus Christ had to die for me, I must have died myself.' And you'll have to take up your own cross and say before heaven, earth and hell, 'That's me, a sinner, condemned, unclean and worthy of God's condemnation.' Friend, if you will deny yourself like that and take up your cross, the moment you take it up and admit yourself worthy of condemnation and death, Jesus Christ will be alongside you to bear the cross for you so that you may go free. As the chorus has it,

There's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin,

There's a door that is open and you may go in:

At Calvary's Cross is where you begin,

When you come as a sinner to Jesus.³

And do it now. Jesus Christ has died on a cross. Come tell the world why it is. I want to tell you, men and women, why Jesus Christ God's Son died, spiked to a cross. He did not deserve it. It was I who deserved it. You say, 'But you weren't so bad, were you?' I was indeed. I'm not exaggerating. It was I who deserved to be there and I want you to understand it. I take up my cross and Jesus bore it for me. Why did Jesus Christ die, friends? How it is between you and him? Did he die for his own sin? 'No,' you say, 'he died for mine.' Then, friend, tell the world. Tell God. Deny your own merit. Take up your cross. Come daily and follow the Saviour.

³ E. H. Swinstead (1822-1950), 'There's a way back to God', (Copyright Unknown).

[The Truth About the Death of Christ](#)

Readings: Matthew 26:26–30; 27:33–54

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.' And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots. Then they sat down and kept watch over him there. And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.' Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him now come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, "I am the Son of God."' And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, 'This man is calling Elijah.' And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, 'Truly this was the Son of God!'

May God bless his word to all our hearts.

Introduction

In the course of these Sunday evening studies in the Gospel by Matthew, we have been considering together the witness of the early church to Jesus Christ our Lord. Maybe some of you have felt, as indeed many people in this world feel, that while the witness of the early church to Jesus Christ may be interesting, there is the danger, indeed the probability, that their witness to Jesus Christ was the pure invention of the early church—a story they made up in order to start a religion and, to put it crudely, get themselves good jobs as the high priests and apostles of that new religion.

The temptation to be cynical and unbelieving is nowhere stronger than it is with the doctrine that lies at the very heart of Christianity. There are all sorts of doctrines that are associated with Christianity, but the central doctrine of Christianity according to the early church is this: 'that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Cor 15:3–4). It is that part of the gospel perhaps which people find most difficult to believe, for consider what it implies. It implies that in Jesus Christ, we have the Son of God, God himself incarnate, having invaded our planet in order that he might come and die for our sins in accordance with holy Scripture.

That in itself sounds to the modern man exceedingly fantastic. It is easier to believe in the Jesus who was a remarkable prophet and went about preaching to people that they ought to do good and keep the golden rule; who offended the Pharisees maybe by rebuking their cynicism and hypocrisy. But to be asked to go that second step—to believe that Jesus Christ was God incarnate, come to die for the sins of the whole world—that many people find considerably more difficult. And of course there is the other point. The validity of his death for the sins of the whole world depends on this second stupendous thing—the witness of the early church that, on the third day after his death and burial, Jesus Christ rose again from the dead.

In our modern scientific and cynical and unbelieving world, these things sound too fantastic to consider and therefore some say that these are fairy stories—the invention of the church, a late addition to the message of Jesus Christ. He went about as a thoroughly good man and an exceedingly powerful prophet, telling people to be good. When the Jews got the upper hand and crucified him, then the Christians, to cover their disappointment, invented this story of his atoning death and his glorious resurrection. Well if that is how people feel about it, and many do, let us tonight come back to the records of the early church and see what we may find there about this stupendous story. It's no good putting our head in the sand. None of us wishes to follow cunningly devised fables. Let us, as far as we can, ascertain the truth of these things.

Truth or fiction?

Is this great doctrine of the atoning death of Christ an invention of the church? Are these words that we have read in Matthew's Gospel some fairy-story religious make-believe,

invented by Peter, James and John and their collaborators? A first survey of the material will perhaps immediately make us pause. Is this story an invention of the church? Let me take two details from it that Matthew tells us.

Disciples who fled

Matthew, the great Christian apostle, tells us himself that at the critical moment when Jesus Christ came to die, all his apostles without exception ran away from him and deserted him. Some wonderful founders of a new religion based on Jesus Christ, they were!—if this story is true. Do you suppose they invented it, if it weren't true? They not only tell us that in the hour of his critical need, when he was being arrested, tried and then crucified, every one of them ran away, but they tell us that when they heard what he had to say about himself and his death, they denied him and dissociated themselves from what he said. Or at least one of them did, and he the chiefest. Curious story, isn't it?

Do you suppose they invented it if weren't true? Come, how would it sound for somebody coming round your door representing some politician and he's recommending the politician to you that you should vote for him, and he says, 'You know, when he was around, I ran away from him and denied him and disagreed with what he was teaching.' But there is something else that should make us pause.

Forsaken by God

Suppose these records are an invention of the early Christians who come to us with this story of a Jesus and they made it up and added a lot of tinsel and fairy story and exaggeration and myth. Now they come to tell us about it and they say that in that crucial moment when Jesus Christ hung upon a cross and his enemies were strutting past the foot of that cross and mocking him and appealing to him, 'Come down from the cross, you Jesus. You say that God desires you and you're God's Son. Prove it to us and come down from the cross.' The story goes, from the pen of Matthew, that as his enemies said that, Jesus Christ admitted that God had forsaken him. Do you suppose the early church made that up? That it isn't true? The two questions are surely enough to make us pause.

An atoning death?

Let us therefore pursue a bit further this doctrine of the atoning death—that the central point of what Jesus Christ claimed is that he was God incarnate, who had come to lay down his life as a sacrifice for human sin. How do we know that that is what Jesus Christ actually claimed and not the make believe of the church? For one good reason, amongst many others. It is traceable in history. Even the hostile critics of the Christians like Tacitus, the Roman historian, recorded for us that right from the very beginning the Christians used to meet one day a week at least, and they normally met on what they called the first day of the week, and they met to celebrate their Jesus Christ.

The evidence of history is that right from the very first, they remembered him in a very special way. As they gathered, central to what they did was that they took bread and divided it among themselves, and they took a cup of wine and divided that, as they all drank some of it; and they did so—notice the symbolism—as a memorial that their Jesus Christ had been

forsaken by God. Do you suppose that they would have invented the ceremony and thereafter celebrated it every week, if it weren't true? Why bread and wine to remember the Lord Jesus with? They tell us that it doesn't go back to them, it goes back to Jesus himself. They did it because he told them to do it.

Bread and wine

If that is true, it is indeed an interesting thing. When Jesus Christ chose for his people a means for remembering him and summing up and considering what was central to all his mission, he chose the ceremony of eating bread and drinking wine—a memorial of his death. He could have had a memorial that, as the Christians gathered from time to time, one of them should stand up and, in the name of Jesus Christ, read the Sermon on the Mount. And Jesus Christ would have been remembered as a great ethical teacher. But that isn't what they did. He could have arranged that his early apostles, as they met together, would have formed a dramatic group, as the manner of some is nowadays, and re-enacted one of his great miracles. Jesus Christ would have been remembered as a miracle worker. Though he did do miracles, that isn't how he asked himself to be remembered. So that people might perceive what lies at the very heart of Christ's work and message, he asked that they should take bread, remembering that he gave his body for us; and take wine, remembering that he shed his blood for the forgiveness of sins.

The first day of the week

We are told that they did it on the first day of the week which, historically speaking, is an exceedingly interesting thing. The early Christians to a man were Jews, brought up through all their centuries-long tradition in observing one day a week as a holy Sabbath, and that day was the seventh day of the week. How did it come that all of a sudden and overnight, these Jews began to meet on the first day of the week? Why should they need to change, now they were Christians as well as being Jews? They sang Jewish hymns based on the psalms when they were Jews; and now they've become Christians, they would still sing hymns based on the psalms. Why would you need to sing them on a different day?

Before they became Christians, they met together and read the Old Testament Scripture on a Sabbath. Well now they've become Christians, they meet together and they read the Old Testament Scripture. Why should they do it on Sunday now, as well as Saturday? That they did so is a plain fact of history. Let them tell us what made them take this new day. From that day, you see, they tell you Jesus Christ rose from the dead. We keep this feast to remember how he died for us, was forsaken of God, but we do it on a Sunday, because on that day he rose from the dead. All his claims were vindicated and God indicated that his sacrifice for our sins was accepted.

An unexpected death?

Let us think just a little bit more, as we read this ancient story from the early Christians—this idea that Jesus Christ's central mission was that, being God incarnate, he died for our sins and rose again for our justification. That goes back to Jesus, but now let us hear from the apostles themselves what they thought of it when first they heard it. Matthew tells us an interesting

story which, among other things, points out to us that the early Christians, right up almost to the eve of our Lord's death, were not expecting him even to die.

The woman with the ointment

We are told that two days before he was crucified, he was in the house of a certain Simon the leper. While he was at table, there came a woman who anointed him with exceedingly costly ointment. The apostles were drawn into a criticism of this act, led by Judas himself. They said, 'This ointment could have been sold for a very large price and the money given to the poor. Why this extravagance? Why this waste of ointment—using such exceedingly costly ointment simply to anoint the Lord Jesus?' And our Lord's reply was this, 'Gentlemen, generally speaking your concern for the poor is good, but let me point out to you that you have the poor always with you. You haven't me always' (see Matt 26:6–13). Two days and he would be dead. They never realized it.

'What this woman has done,' said Jesus Christ, 'will be heralded around the world wherever the story of my death is told.' A wonderfully perceptive woman—streets ahead in perception of the apostles themselves and streets ahead, maybe, in her devotion to the Saviour. Two days before he died, she came to anoint him for his burial. Why not leave it until he was dead? Ah, because he would then rise again, that's why!

As for the apostles, let me put a proposition to you. They weren't expecting him to die, were they? Do you suppose if they had really understood he was about to die two days from now, they would have begrudged the money? You, sir, love your wife. She's already had a new automatic dishwasher this year and the latest carpet sweeper and she's had a new bathroom suite in the second bathroom. If you please, she now wants a cruise round the western side of America in a private yacht! It's going to cost £10,000. What do you say? 'My dear, it's a little extravagant.' But suppose that the day before she asked you, the medics had told you that she would be dead in six months and that nothing you could do would help her now. If you'd like to go on a holiday, well it was okay to take her, and you knew it was the last time. Would you begrudge the money for the cruise, if you had it?

Do you suppose the apostles of Jesus Christ, some of whom would have laid down their lives for him, would have begrudged him this sum of money if they had known it was the last time they had to show their gratitude before he died? The plain fact is that they weren't expecting him to die. His atoning death wasn't a story that originated with them.

The disciples and their desertion

I'll tell you something else. Not only were they not expecting him to die, when they saw he was determined to, they disagreed with him. Read Matthew's account again, how at length they came to the garden of Gethsemane and Matthew is at pains to tell us precisely when it was and at what juncture they all forsook him and fled. 'It was like this,' says Matthew, 'we were there in the garden and presently through the murky darkness, there came the troops with their blazing torches and Judas with his treacherous kiss. When we saw what was going to happen, one of our number called Simon Peter drew his sword.' Valiant man. What chance had he against a whole gang of soldiers? He didn't care: he would fight for the Messiah against any odds. Isn't that what the Maccabees had done? Against fantastic and impossible odds, they had taken on the Hellenistic rulers and their armies and God more than once had given

them mighty victory in the battle. Some of them had perished but what did they care—they went down in the martyrs' memorial roll book.

Peter would do the same. He would fight for Messiah. Surely God would give him the victory. But to his great chagrin and grief, Messiah told him to put his sword back into its sheath and forbade him to fight, even to protect Messiah himself. He said to Peter, 'Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?' (Matt 26:53–54). If he had struck down his enemies, how would the Scriptures be fulfilled, for the Old Testament had said that he would be wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace would be upon him and by his stripes we would be healed (see Isa 53:5). When the apostles saw that he wouldn't let them fight and that he was determined to let the soldiers arrest him and go to his death then, says Matthew, they fled—'If he's not going to fight, we're off.'

I tell you again, the doctrine of the atoning sufferings of Christ didn't originate with the church. I tell you something more still. When Peter saw that our Lord had allowed himself to be arrested and taken to the high priest's court, he went out of curiosity, perhaps a remaining afterglow of loyalty, to see what would happen, to see the end of it all. There came that tense moment when Peter was listening and he heard the high priest eventually say, 'Tell us,' as he put Jesus Christ on oath, solemnly to tell the truth, 'Tell us, are you the Christ?' The court was strangely hushed. Everybody in the court realized that if Jesus Christ said, 'Yes, I am,' that would be the end of him, for they would judge it to be blasphemy and execute him on that account. Peter was listening. What will he say? 'He'll never say "yes", will he? I mean, when he had an army, a little army with our swords around him, we could have fought for it and proved he was Messiah, then to claim he was Messiah would make sense. But to let himself be arrested and say that he's determined to die and then claim to be the Son of God, well that's suicide.' And Peter listened. 'Are you the Christ? Tell us plainly,' said the high priest. Said Jesus Christ, 'yes'. A little maid nudged Peter's sleeve. 'You're one of his people, aren't you?' 'I certainly am not!'

Do you suppose the Christians invented it? Here is the man who held the keys of the early church. When Jesus was asked if he was the Son of God, Peter, seeing it would mean Christ's death, denied any association. If that story is the invention of the early church, it is an exceedingly curious invention.

A sinless sacrifice?

Involved in the claim that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, come to lay down his life for our sins, is the other claim that, in order to offer a sacrifice for sin, he must be sinless himself. Could you find evidence that Jesus Christ was sinless? For that, ultimately of course, you must have the verdict of God. Interestingly though, there are other testimonies, not just one, that Jesus Christ was innocent and just. You say, 'They are the invention of the early Christians. When they got this idea of putting Jesus across to the world as a sacrifice for sin, then they built up this character that he was excellent and just and perfectly innocent.' That's not the story Matthew tells. Matthew says that in those critical moments when Jesus Christ came to

be tried and then executed, Peter had denied him and the rest had fled. But there were testimonies. Let's consider them briefly.

Judas

There came first Judas who had betrayed him. What will he say? Interesting character, Judas. Will he say that the man is a deceiver worthy of death? You say, 'He'll never, never admit that Jesus was innocent, will he? For if Jesus Christ is innocent, Judas has one foot in hell already. If Judas has betrayed him, Judas has gone past the very last entreaty of Christ and sold the innocent Jesus Christ to his enemies, Judas will one day be in hell.' Already the poor man has got one foot over into the grave and, with a false voice of a conscience almost admitting, he brings the silver into the treasury and says, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood' (Matt 27:4). Friend, don't take it from me just now. Take it from that voice that comes to you from the very lip of hell itself—Jesus was innocent.

Pilate

If you don't want to listen to Christians, listen to Pilate. Says Matthew, at a critical moment in the trial, Pilate took a basin of water and he washed his hands saying, 'I am innocent of the blood of this just person' (Matt 27:24 KJV). So he was 'just', according to Pilate. No cause of death found in him, in spite of all the rigorous trial and examination by torture. No fault found, according to Pilate. But why did Pilate confess it? The crowd were pushing him. The crowd, at least the high priests, had a very cogent case. They only had to tell the emperor that Jesus Christ had claimed to be king and if Pilate didn't crucify him, Pilate would be for execution himself. What does it matter whether justice were done or not done: it's just the life of a peasant? Why didn't Pilate do what thousands of rulers have done and just let the innocent be executed to save his own skin?

But Matthew tells us that at that critical juncture there came a message to Pilate from his wife, which said, 'Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream' (Matt 27:19). You say, 'So you Christians expect us to believe dreams?' No, I don't expect you to believe dreams, but I'm not so sure of some of you. You've given up your Christianity and you think nothing of reading the stars in a woman's magazine and your horoscope and goodness knows what else. If you've given up true faith, there are all the kinds of funny things you might believe. But this wasn't a Christian: this was a Gentile. A strong Roman soldier but a pagan who believed in his pagan world and pagan deities. Call it superstition if you will, he believed in dreams, and if there would be any time when Pilate would speak the truth, this is the moment when Pilate had reason to believe, rightly or wrongly, that the gods had spoken. And if his wife had had a dream and the gods were saying things, then there was somebody more important than the emperor to consider. Pilate decided he'd better make clear where he stood, and he washed his hands, 'I'm innocent of the blood of this just person.' So don't take it from me. Don't take it merely from a voice that is about to be swallowed up in hell. Take it from that pagan voice, now under what he believed was the influence of heaven itself—Jesus Christ was just.

The centurion

There's that centurion too, isn't there? He was a real tough guy. Ladies and gentlemen, let's not be squeamish. It was his job to crucify people. You can't be in the trade of crucifying people without eventually getting very hard and tough. He'd heard them—not one or two but scores of them—shriek as his soldiers put nails through their hands and feet. He'd heard them whimper and he'd heard them curse. What was he interested in religion for anyway? 'The whole stupid parade. Look at those silly, stupid men dressed up in their robes; those pompous hypocrites crucifying somebody for the sake of religion.' The centurion had heard nothing so daft in all his life.

He heard this man and he heard him pray, and he heard him pray forgiveness on his enemies, and he heard him pray to almighty God. And then, to his amazement, he heard him cry with a loud voice—not normal for somebody exhausted with the pangs of crucifixion. Said the centurion, 'You know, I think that man is more than human.' Poor man, he knew nothing of the doctrine of the Trinity and, according to the Greek translation of his words, he said 'Truly, this is a Son of God.'

The resurrection

The story of the atoning death of Christ depends ultimately, for its validity, on the resurrection. For 'if Christ has not been raised . . . you are still in your sins', says Paul (see 1 Cor 15:17). There's nothing in it. Whether just or unjust, if Jesus Christ is in the tomb, there is no Christian gospel. But the Christians say he rose again the third day. You say, 'That's the trouble. The Christians say it. They made it up. If we had some evidence from the world outside, we might consider it, but the evidence comes from the Christians.' Wait a minute, the first bit of evidence didn't come from the Christians. According to Matthew, the first the world heard of the resurrection of Christ, they heard from his enemies, the Jews. The guards who had been at the tomb came into the city and told the chief priests what had happened, and it was common knowledge in the city that they had accepted bribes to say what the chief priests had instructed (see Matt 28:11–15).

All the high priests had gone to Pilate and requested a guard for they said, 'Sir, you know this deceiver while he lived, had said he was going to rise again the third day. It's all part of this charade, you know, this stage-managed thing and, presently, if we don't have a guard, his disciples will come and steal him away while we sleep and they'll put this record about the place that he's risen from the dead. You know how stupid people are; they'll believe any old religion. The more absurd, the better. Put a guard on and stop his disciples stealing the body' (see 27:62–66).

Three days later, a story began to circulate round Jerusalem that that is precisely what the disciples had done. They had stolen the body. How did it happen? Well when the soldiers were asleep, so the story went—marvellous story, for Roman soldiers to be asleep on duty was a capital offence!—while they slept, the disciples came and stole the body. How did they know who it was that stole it when they were asleep? You can't believe that silly story and I'm not asking you to.

You say, 'Why on earth did they invent such a stupid story?' Well obviously because they were trying to forestall the Christians, because if they didn't get their story in first, the

Christians would come along with another story and we're all inclined to believe the first story we hear. So they got in first, they'd forestall these silly Christians who would come along and say he'd risen from the dead. They must scotch it first, because one bit of curious evidence was awkward: the tomb was now empty. So they told their story and got it circulated. The Christians, dear souls, said nothing. Sheer nothing, for the next forty days and more. It was so for a month-and-a-half. The Jews it was who put the story about that the tomb was empty.

Personal experience

If you can't believe their explanation why it was empty, at least accept it from the Lord—that the empty tomb was evidence that the atoning death of Christ is true. But that depends on something deeper than these pieces of historical evidence, doesn't it? We shall need the history and need the evidence for the resurrection, but tonight if we're to benefit from this great atoning death, we shall need evidence that comes nearer than that.

Why should we think that Jesus is the Son of God who came to die for our sins? How shall I know it's true? Calvary is where, if ever God speaks to you or me, he'll speak here. According to the Christians, there is one place on earth central to all human history, central between the eternities that span time, in the centre of the great immensities of our universe. According to Christianity, if God can be found, he will be found here, at the cross of Jesus Christ on the hill of Calvary. Come and stand there a moment, for if God is ever going to get through to you, it will be here.

The mockery

Notice with me that the high priests and others as they pass by had three jeering comments to make on Jesus Christ. Let's hear them. Let's hear the sarcasm. Let's hear the insult. Yes, and you who are Christians, nerve your hearts a bit and let's hear the insult and the mockery of the absurd ridiculousness of the whole thing.

The temple

Now when Christ is spiked on that tree, do you know what these absurd religious mongers said? 'He said he would destroy our temple and build another in three days. Our temple, look at it, built by Herod, enshrining the traditions of centuries of hallowed religious ritual and custom; and to think of this upstart, this religious maniac, supposing he's going to change our religion and upset our temple. What an absurdity. One little, lone man and he cannot even boast that he's been through rabbinic school, and he's going to change the religion of centuries? Well, let's see him do it. Start now, please. We've an open mind. Come down from the cross and destroy our temple now.'

He saved others

'Well there you are,' they said, 'he saved others. You have to admit it: he did effect a cure, here and there. If you have a little personality, a little charisma, a little occult gift maybe, a certain presence, and find some poor old soul, doubled up with psychosomatic disease and highly suggestible, and if you do the right abracadabra, well you can get them cured. Look at all these quack medicine things that people will pay hundreds of pounds for. Well Jesus Christ did a

little of that. He saved others: but he'll have a job to save himself! Come on now, come down from the cross and save yourself and we will believe you.'

God delighted in him?

And finally, they put their ultimate 'proof' on the whole thing and they said, 'It's foolish to play about with true religion and almighty God. He said God delighted in him. Right, let God deliver him.'

And nothing happened. How can you answer it? And presently there came from the cross, torn from the depths of the soul of Jesus Christ, a public declaration that God had forsaken him. Oh, my friend, the church didn't invent that one! What shall we make of it? You say that proves him to have been an imposter: God didn't deliver him. That's one way of looking at it, but there is one other possibility and it is a gigantic possibility that swallows up everything else.

Suppose it were true that this man was innocent as Pilate said, and God has forsaken the just man. What can it mean? That this world is topsy-turvy and there is no hope ever to make sense of its injustice? Or could it be that this was the centre of all history, when God forsook the righteous man, because that righteous man was God's Son: and he died 'the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God' (1 Pet 3:18). Oh, my friend, it's an all or nothing. Between you now and eternity, you'll face the question more than once. This is the claim: Jesus Christ was forsaken of God because he was righteous and had come to die for the unrighteous.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief.

But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace. (Isa 53:10, 5)

This is God paying the price of sin. I tell you, friend, you need it. You're a lost soul and this is a filthy world, full of injustice—in people, in government, in the buyer, in the seller. Deep in your heart there's a conscience that is stained like mine is with sin and guilt. Even if this world tomorrow were turned into a paradise, your guilty conscience would ruin it. You need something for that guilty conscience. Here it is, friend. God forsook Jesus and bruised him that we might be free from guilt. He had not come primarily to tell us to be better, to try harder, to be kinder—though all these things we must try to do. But the Scriptures have told us that there is only one who came to save us, came to die for our sins, to make the sacrifice that would reconcile us to God.

Said the Jews, 'He saved others: why hasn't he saved himself?' I wonder how many would have got converted had he come down from the cross at that moment, seeing such a stupendous miracle? And if I could do a miracle here tonight in this hall, the place would have been bunged full. What good would it do you if Christ had left unsolved the ultimate problem of death itself? Where is Napoleon now, and Brezhnev and William the Conqueror and Churchill? Where are they now? And who will help you after your life of pleasure and ease, when you gasp out your last breath? A few little miracles would be irrelevant and Jesus made no attempt to come down from the cross. Why not? He came, not to entertain you with a few

miracles, he came to deal with your last enemy, death itself—'that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil' (Heb 2:14).

Tonight, I have a gospel to preach to you, not a little entertainment. I preach you God's own Son, who died to break the power of death. And when he said, 'It is finished,' there came an earthquake and bodies of saints, which had thus far slept in the grave, came out in token demonstration of what shall be. On the third day, Jesus Christ rose from the dead—the firstfruits of those that slept—'For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive' (1 Cor 15:22). This is a gospel indeed—of the cross and death and resurrection of Jesus.

The curtain of the temple

One last criticism and one last answer. 'He claimed that he would destroy our temple,' they said, 'what absurdity. That's the kind of wild preaching that appeals to the poor and lower classes, instead of the cultured ritual of our temple and time-honoured ceremonies. The beautiful aesthetics of it, just to stand there to see the priest and his breastplate and the gold and the very appealing sense of incense and the lights and all the gorgeous singing. This cheap little soapbox preacher and his street-corner messages that "you must be born again"—he thinks he's going to change our religion, does he? Well he'll have a job to destroy our temple now.'

He said he was forsaken, and presently the darkness of the cloud passed and he said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!' (Luke 23:46). And, says Scripture, the curtain of the temple was rent from top to bottom. You say, 'You don't expect me to believe that, do you? That's Christian propaganda.' You can take a shorter cut to believing. What did that curtain, that veil, stand for? It was at the very heart of Judaism and it said this: that when you've done your very best and made all the sacrifices, you still couldn't come into the presence of God. There had to be a veil between you and God. Only once in a year could the high priest go into the holiest of all. Man must learn to keep outside and hope—but hope is the best he could do. He could not enter the holiest of all.

Ah, poor religion, and it's the same to this present day. Do your best and when you come to die, with all still uncertain, hope that you might get into God's presence. Jesus Christ came to destroy that barrier forever. How? By being forsaken of God and giving us to understand that God's wrath has been appeased. He has offered a sacrifice that has appeased God forever—so that the way is open into the very presence of God. You say, 'How shall I know it?' Sir, you could know it where you sit right now. Madam, you could experience it right now.

Are you concerned about where you will spend eternity, concerned about your relationship with God, uncertain after all your religion about whether you are accepted with God? At this very moment you could prove the truth of Jesus Christ. Standing before the cross, abandoning all hope and trust in everything else; and in true repentance, believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. And God would show you whether it is true or not, for he would so give you his spirit and the assurance that your sins are forgiven that the very gates of heaven would open to your heart. And you would know in your spirit that you've been accepted—with the right even now to enter the holiest of all.

Knowing that, you wouldn't want a religious ceremony anymore. The Christians eventually left the temple. They didn't try to pull it down. Why did they leave? Who's going

to bother about robes and breastplates and incense holders and veils in a temple here on earth when, through Christ's atoning death, he has peace with God and knows what it is daily to enter the holiest of all on high?

In the end, this is what it comes to. I stand before the cross of Christ to meet my God, about my sin. Here I may find the dawn of heaven, while upon that cross I gaze and know all my sins forgiven and I have acceptance with God for now and for eternity.

The Return of Christ

Reading: Matthew 24:1–31, 44

Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them, 'You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.'

As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?' And Jesus answered them, 'See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, "I am the Christ", and will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumours of war. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of birth pains.

'Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of the many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

'So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the house top not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. Then if anyone says to you, "Look, here is the Christ!" or "There he is!" do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, "Look, he is in the wilderness", do not go out. If they say, "Look, he is in the inner rooms", do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

'Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be

shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other . . . Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.'

May God bless his word.

Introduction

In this short series of studies on the Gospel of Matthew, we have been considering the witness of the early church to our Lord Jesus. In past weeks, we have considered their witness to his person as they tell us exactly who Jesus is: he is the Christ, the Son of the living God. And they tell us moreover how they came to make that tremendous discovery that Jesus was God incarnate. Last week, we were listening to their testimony as to the work of the Lord Jesus. How that his death at Calvary was not simply a martyr's death, but it was that atoning death that atones for the sins of mankind, and we listened to them talking of the resurrection of our Lord that gives validity to that atoning death.

Now, in this final week, we are to listen again to the testimony of the early church. This time, not to his work, nor to his person, but to his second coming, to his return, which is clearly stated and many times repeated, and illustrated by a whole series of parables. The Gospel of Matthew tells us time and time again that it is an integral part of the Christian Gospel that Jesus Christ is coming again. I know that in decades past, among theologians and others, there has been a tendency to regard the doctrine of the second coming as a doctrine on the lunatic fringe of Christianity. All sorts of exciting and excitable books have been written—prophecy mongering, sensational, full of predictions of dates and so forth that have brought the matter altogether into disrepute. There have been many who would say, 'Yes, we believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Yes, we believe in his atoning death at Calvary, and that he can give us forgiveness of sins. But this matter of his second coming was perhaps a little bit of extravagance on the part of the early Christians and is something we can afford to neglect.'

The promise of the Lord's return

Nothing could be further from the truth. Even New Testament scholarship in this last decade or so, has come to perceive that, whatever your view, the records of the gospels depict to us a Jesus Christ at the heart of whose message was his promise and claim that when he went away, he would come again. A moment's thought would show us how the second coming of Christ is and must be a central part of the gospel of our Lord Jesus. Jesus claimed to be the Jewish Messiah, and if you read what the Old Testament says about the Messiah, you will find that it predicts quite clearly what would happen when the Messiah came.

He would execute the judgment of God upon this evil world. He would put down sinful men and command all wars to stop. He would relieve oppression: the widow would no longer be oppressed, the orphan no longer cheated. Evil men would no longer be in control, but righteousness would reign and peace would be universal. Thus did the Old Testament predict

what would happen when Jesus Christ came — preaching sternly the judgments of God upon sin; and preaching with delight those lovely promises that the day would indeed come when men would beat their swords into plough shares and their spears into pruning hooks, and they would learn war no more. Creation herself will be delivered from her bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God.

The plain fact is that when Jesus came the first time, he did not do those things. It is no good hiding our face from it, for the record is quite deliberate. He did not judge the wicked, he did not execute the sinful, he did not break oppressive governments, he did not stop corruption in business, he did not stop oppression in politics. He left this world largely as he found it, with evil rampant and quite unrepentant. Far from stopping evil men, Jesus Christ himself was cruelly tortured, slandered at his trial, unjustly condemned and wickedly crucified. Those who today will argue against us Christians and say, 'Your Jesus cannot be the Messiah, because he did not put down evil' are saying nothing new. Some of us who are old enough to remember the last war with all its horrors, remember how frequently unbelievers, atheists and agnostics used to taunt us and say, 'There you are, you Christians, if your Jesus is the Son of God, why doesn't he stop this war?'

The problem is real. A Jesus Christ who had no answer, no programme at all as to what he was going to do about the evil of this world, could not possibly be regarded as the Messiah. If he would not fulfil the promises of the Old Testament, what good as a Saviour would he be? So our topic tonight lies at the very heart of Christianity. It tells us that the Jesus Christ who came first, not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved, and suffered for our sins at Calvary, not only rose again and ascended to heaven, but as sure as day follows night, will come again.

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. (Rev 1:7)

We are to expect, one of these days, the sign of the Son of Man coming in heaven, amidst cosmic disturbance, sun and moon shaken and sackcloth across their light, universes combust. It leads us on to the next stage of this evolving universe and the second coming of Jesus Christ our Lord.

The prophesy of the Lord's return

If you are not a Christian, you will perhaps say to me that all this kind of thing is the invention of the early church. The early church believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but then when he got crucified and was buried, they felt exceedingly disappointed and to cover their disappointment, invented the doctrine of the second coming of Jesus Christ our Lord. But that is demonstrably false, for it wasn't the Christians who wrote the Old Testament, nor in particular the psalms. Away back in the psalms, one psalm in particular had for centuries prophesied what the programme would be for Messiah when he came. It reads it like this:

The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.' (Ps 110:1)

The verse will bear some investigation. 'The LORD says to my Lord,' prophesied King David. The Lord said to the Messiah, 'Sit at my right hand,' and there was no point in bidding Messiah to sit at the right hand of God, if Messiah had always been sitting there. You don't say to a friend who has come and is now sitting on your settee, 'Friend, sit down,' for he is already seated. Had Messiah been always seated at the right hand of God, never would God have addressed him on this occasion and said, 'Sit at my right hand.' The command itself implies that there was a time when Messiah was not seated at the right hand. Then where was he? He had come, in all the humility of the incarnation, to walk our world and here to suffer for our sins, to bear our sins in his body on the tree. When that great atoning sacrifice was finished, then the decree went forth as God Almighty invited the Messiah, 'Sit at my right hand.' The Messiah rose and ascended to heaven and has since been seated at the right hand of God.

But the psalm had another part of the programme to annunciate, 'Sit at my right hand,' said the divine command, 'until I make your enemies your footstool.' It was never intended that the enemies be made his footstool the first time he came. That was never in the programme. The programme was explicit. He was to come, he was to ascend to heaven, there he was to sit and wait until the time of his second coming and, at his second coming, his enemies would be made his footstool. So then this doctrine of the second coming of Jesus Christ our Lord is no invention of the church. It was the early prophecy of the Old Testament. In as much as the first part was fulfilled and the Messiah came, suffered, was buried, rose again and ascended, most assuredly the second part shall be.

The sign of his coming

What will be the sign of his coming? If we read the New Testament carefully, there are many indications given us of the sign of his coming again. Tonight, I wish to take one of them. As I do so, let me issue the warning that our blessed Lord himself issued, for if there is one thing that brings the doctrine of the second coming into disrepute, it is all sorts of wild and unauthorized prophecies saying that he would come in 1945 or 1984 or something of the sort, quite without any scriptural foundation. Of course, when the date goes by, the unbeliever simply mocks. Let no Christian have any part in predicting dates of the second coming of our blessed Lord. The indications of his coming rest on things much more profound.

If I sow a seed of barley in the ground, one day I shall get barley growing from it as a husk. It won't happen immediately. Presently however, I will see the little green shoot. As the months go by, the stalk will grow and increase and presently there's a corn in the ear. As yet it's green, but eventually by an inevitable law of nature, harvest will come—for what you sow you reap. The warning of our blessed Lord is that the sign of his coming will also be, among other things, the coming to its harvest of human sin. If man will have his way and go his independent course, God will not immediately cut him off, for God is no tyrant. He will warn us if we are disobedient, he will plead with us if we remain unrepentant, but he will never compel us. When the great saga of human sin began, God did not intervene and destroy our planet forthwith, for he is no tyrant. His answer is to let earth have her way, then he warns us that what we sow we reap. As the world sins independent of God, it will inevitably reap the harvest. What will the harvest look like? How near is the harvest?

The abomination of desolation

When our Lord talked of these things to his own Jewish nation, he reminded them of a time in their history and indicated that what happened in history would one day happen again on a bigger scale. And when it happens on that bigger scale, it will be the sign of the beginning of the end. The phrase is a technical phrase: be patient with me while I explain it. Said our Lord, 'When you see the abomination of desolation standing in the Holy Place—let him that reads [the prophecy of Daniel] understand what is meant—then know you are moving towards the second coming of Messiah.'

The *abomination of desolation* was a phrase first used some centuries earlier when the Jews had returned from exile and were in their land of Palestine. There came an imperial ruler, the emperor of the Seleucids, who for all sorts of reasons—political, economic and social—banned the religion of the Jews in Jerusalem. He stopped their daily sacrifices to God and he had an image of a pagan deity placed on the altar of the temple in Jerusalem. He ordered pagan sacrifices to be offered to it and he had himself described as Antiochus 'Epiphanes', Antiochus 'God made manifest'. That attack by man on God himself, that attempt of man to put himself in the very place of God, is what Scripture referred to in that far off day as the 'abomination of desolation'.

Here in the passage we have read, our Lord indicates that what happened on a small scale in years gone by, will yet happen again on a worldwide and universal scale. There will come a time when the western world, if not the whole world, will revolt against the very idea of God and, attempting to throw out the idea that there is a God in heaven, will deify mankind. You may think that sounds fantastic. I remind you again that in the course of history there have, from time to time, risen up political rulers who, for political ends, have sought to compel the populous to worship the state or worship the emperor.

Alexander the Great began to claim divine honours as emperor, but died before he could put the whole scheme very much into operation. After the terrible civil wars that ended the Roman Republic, the Roman Empires began, little by little and then outright eventually, to introduce the worship of the emperor. It seemed such a very good idea. How would they keep their vast, hard-won empire—with all sorts of different people from different religions—and weld them together into a peaceful whole? The Roman emperors decided that they would do it by requiring all their subjects the world through to worship the emperor. Hundreds of our fellow Christians paid the price of refusing to worship the state by being thrown to the lions or being otherwise disposed of.

In more recent years, we have watched the rise of totalitarianism where political states have set themselves up as the final authority, even over religion and God himself. Master Hitler claimed it, and we have lived to see a vast proportion of this world living under communism, whose ideology is based on materialistic atheism. It denies there is a God out there; it demands that the state shall be the final and absolute decider in all matters, even religion. There are Christian churches which have been disposed to accept the authority of the state over the church; those Christians who will not, meet in secret and are fearfully persecuted. I am not talking imagination, I am not trying to deal in scaremongering. I'm simply asking us to face big, literal facts and open our eyes to what is happening in our world.

A large part of our world is given over to materialistic atheism. You say, 'But we're better than that in the West.' Are we? Some years ago, there was a nine-day wonder of a fictional book published by a professedly Christian theologian which proclaimed in its title that God is dead. And the learned theologian who wrote it admitted that he never prayed, because there isn't a God out there to pray to.

The great and famous Julian Huxley at one stage observed that what we need to have in our modern world is a new religion. Julian Huxley, as everybody knows, was an atheistic evolutionist, so why should we need a religion, and what kind of religion would we have anyway? He said, 'There is no God, but people do need a something to believe, something to satisfy their emotions, something to give them purpose and hope.' There's very little hope in a test tube, and how could anybody get excited over a chemical formula? For a hope that would satisfy the human heart and hold out hope for the future of our world, and give man a reason why he should put up with his present suffering, why he shouldn't be cruel, why he shouldn't be selfish, why he should be altruistic and work together for the common good, to give him something to aim for, to hope for, to believe in—and so the great and famous scientist concluded that we will have to have a new religion, because if we don't then people believe in utterly nothing. Will one of them foolishly press the wrong button and blow the whole world up, before we can reach our paradise? So we shall need a new religion.

A new religion?

What kind of religion? If you were going to start a new religion, what would you invent? I don't know what kind of religion the learned Huxley would have invented, but he did say this—that man must wake up to the fact that man is now God. He said, 'There's no God out there and we men and women have come on to this planet as an accident. The mindless forces of nature without any purpose in their heads, by the colossal series of accident upon accident, of chance upon chance, have produced this planet and us on it.' (But now, hey presto, behold, a miracle, though you mustn't call anything in evolution a miracle, surely!) 'By some colossal great accident, evolution has produced our brains and we can think, and we can do what nature never could do. We can plan ahead, we don't need to go by chance, so let's put our heads together and let's plan. Let's realize that we are God, and have the courage to come forth and control our planet and control our universe, and act like the gods we are. Our future is in our hands and nobody else's hands. Man is God.'

You may think these are strange things, then I bid you open your eyes and ears and hear what's going on in the real world outside. Don't please dismiss these ideas as crazy, for if you don't believe in God, the only hope for mankind is that man should be God. With our planet so perilously poised, some fool or other could push a button and blow our planet to smithereens forever. If there's no God outside, man would need to hurry up to be God and try and control them that there might be a future for mankind. Since there would be no God, how would you weld the nations together? How would you ever bring them to the state where they can say, 'Peace, peace'? Said the scientist, 'You must give them a new religion.'

Man worship

But what should it be? It won't be going back to worshipping caterpillars or cows, will it? If there is to be a new religion, it will be the worship of the highest thing that atheists know —

and that is man. There will come such a day and the dominant world ruler of the biggest imperialist system, in order to produce peace among the many, will ban the worship of a God out there in heaven, and will institute the worship of man. Man represented by himself, so when you see that 'abomination of desolation' standing in the holy place, then know that the second coming of Christ is drawing near. I'm not saying that our Lord will come in power and great glory tomorrow. I am saying that anybody with any eyes will see how Eastern atheism is going, how the modern West is virtually godless. I am pointing out to you that man's sin is coming to its ripening flower, the finale.

The temple of your heart

There is no God. Man puts himself in the place of God and worships man. You say that you can't believe it would ever happen. Madam, sir, might I speak to you personally? The world outside is very often not much more than the individual heart multiplied millions of times, so let's take it on the smaller scale, the level of the individual. In your heart, in mine, there is a temple: there is a part of the human personality which is central and in that central shrine of the human personality, there is a throne. On it tonight, ought to be enthroned Jesus Christ our Lord. Tell me, friends, what sits on the throne in your heart? What do you really worship? What do you bow down to? What are you serving every day of the week? What's your ultimate goal?

Perhaps you say to me, 'Sir, I don't wear my heart on my sleeve, but if you must know, in my heart of hearts, in that central shrine of my heart, there sits enthroned God and Jesus Christ his Son.' How marvellous. Or do I hear you say, 'No, I'm not a Christian. I don't really believe in God. I don't know whether there is a God.' And on your heart's throne then already there sits man—you, taking God's place. What will happen when the King comes? Numerous parables talk to us about these things. Very briefly, I want to take one or two of them.

When the King comes

What will happen when the King comes? One parable tells us that there will be reward for the King's servants, and another parable tells us that when the King comes, there will be inspection for the guests. Another parable tells us that when the King comes, there will come the judgment of the nations.

Reward

When the King comes, there will be reward for his servants (see Matt 19:27–29). What a generous reward it will be, for our Lord is on record as saying that all those who have trusted him and have worked for him and have lived for him and have sacrificed for him, when he comes again they shall be rewarded, and what is the going rate for reward for sacrifice? The Lord said that they would receive 'a hundredfold'—a hundred times whatever they have sacrificed for him. The King is coming and if you are loyally working for him, seeking to promote his interests and his kingdom and serving him, when he comes, there shall be reward.

Let me just point out a thing that we could easily get confused. There are people who think that the way we get salvation is by doing our best and working for Christ. That is not so, and

I'm happy to remind you that Scripture makes it very clear. We don't earn salvation by working for the Saviour: salvation is altogether a gift.

To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness. (Rom 4:5)

You don't have to work for Christ to be saved. You could never work for salvation in all your lives. Yet if tonight you come in repentance and faith and you surrender to the Saviour and receive him as Lord, that very moment he gives you eternal life, free and for nothing, and with it, forgiveness of sins and the certain promise of heaven at last. All as a gift. You do not have to work for salvation. Then the other side of the story is that anybody who has got salvation, and really got it, would want to work for the Saviour. 'That's how you can tell them,' said our Lord in this parable, and anybody that constantly refused to work for the Saviour would simply be demonstrating that he had never been saved at all.

Come, friend, and listen very carefully to what our Lord had to say to the Pharisees, the religious people of his day (see Matt 21:28-32). He said, 'I've a little parable to tell you. There was once a man who had two sons and he said to the first son, "Go today and work in my vineyard." The son said, "Yes, sir, I will go", but he didn't. The father said to his second son, "My boy, go today and work in my vineyard" and he refused but afterward he repented and he went and worked.' Said our Lord, 'That's how it is with you, gentlemen. You Pharisees, up to your ears in religion and respectability and thereby making a loud profession that you serve God, but when it comes to working for the Saviour, you know you're not prepared to do it. You're not even saved.'

How different it was with the harlots and the publicans. When first they heard the command of God, they said, 'Work for Jesus? Certainly not, what a nonsensical notion. We're going to see life's pleasures and enjoy ourselves.' But afterward, having seen the seamy side of life, they were brought to repentance and the former rogues and vagabonds, jailbirds and swindlers, some of them got converted and, trusting the Saviour, they went and worked in his vineyard.

You say, 'I'm a very righteous man.' I didn't ask you that. Are you involved in the work of Jesus Christ? Did you ever speak to anybody about his soul? Did you ever preach the gospel to anybody? Did you ever give out a gospel tract? Did you ever do anything for Jesus Christ? You say, 'That's not my business.' Oh, it is, sir. If you are a believer in him, are you helping in any way the cause of the Saviour? You say, 'I come to church.' I didn't ask you that. Are you involved personally in positively doing something for the sake of Christ and the kingdom of God? You say, 'Why are you so vehement, Mr Preacher?' For this reason, because if you're not involved in working for the Saviour, you cast great doubt on whether you are saved at all.

The King is coming and I can think, as you can, of some notorious sinners and jailbirds and disreputables who got converted and, to this day, they're immersed in the work of Christ. And we, so respectable and calm, are we working in the Lord's vineyard? What are you doing? If I ask you this night what are you doing for Christ, could you tell me what you're doing? If we're not working for the Saviour, we cast a doubt on whether we've ever been converted and whether we are saved. When the King comes, there will be reward for his servants.

Inspection

When the King comes, there will be inspection for the guests. Our Lord said that the kingdom of God is like a banquet which a king gave in honour of the wedding of his Son. How delightful, and I'm sure that's not exaggerated or out of proportion. The Lord was always saying that salvation is like a banquet. Heaven will be like a banquet that a king puts on for his son. When the Prince of Wales got married the other year, I can't now tell you how many millions it cost. When God's Son gets married and the marriage supper of the Lamb takes place, I tell you, the whole universe will be hung with bunting! And then there will be a banquet that will more than satisfy every desire of the human heart. For God didn't make our desires in order to mock them: he gave us desires that he himself at last might fulfil them.

In the parable of the Wedding Feast (see Matt 22:1–14), our Lord said that when the banquet was held, the king came in to see the guests. He found there a man, not having a wedding garment. He said, 'Friend, how could you come in here not having a wedding garment?' The man was speechless and was cast out. What does it tell us? Well, it tells us that if we're to be in that final banquet in God's heaven at last, we must be prepared for it. Just imagine the stupidity, the impertinence and the effrontery of a man who is invited to attend the wedding of the king's Son and to attend the banquet, and he walks in in his old dungarees and his working clothes just as he is, never thinking for a moment that you have to prepare for it. Would you do it, sir?

Madam, because you're the leader of the women's WI or something, suppose you were issued with an invitation to attend the wedding of Prince Charles and, living near the palace, you said, 'Yes, I shall be delighted to go.' So the day came and when you got up in the morning you decided to do a bit of gardening. Suddenly at 4:55, you remembered you're supposed to be at this wedding thing. You say, 'Right, I'll just nip round,' and with the mud on your boots and your skirt all torn and your jumper all filthy and mud on your hands, you just walk into the palace. You can't!

There are some people who think that you can get into God's heaven without any preparation. They don't know how. Ask them if they're going to God's heaven and they'll say, 'Well, I hope so.' Are you prepared? 'Well, I don't know.' They seem to think that one of these days, who knows how, they will just walk into God's heaven, just as they are—all unprepared, never born again, never been saved, never been washed in the blood of Christ, never been given the robe of righteousness from the Saviour. They just imagine they can live and somehow enter heaven at last without any preparation.

This shall not be done. The garment of salvation is free. None of us could prepare ourselves. If you want to be prepared, you must come to Christ. We must receive the garment of salvation and the robe of righteousness: for we need to come and receive it, we need to prepare ourselves, we need to be saved. Oh, friends, have you got your garment? Are you ready to enter the kingdom of heaven?

Judgment

When the King comes, we're told there will be the judgment of the nations (see Matt 25:31–46). They shall be gathered before Christ and he shall separate them like a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats. It is a famous parable because it is much quoted nowadays in connection with things like Oxfam. Let me say that I think Oxfam is a very good thing, but

people misunderstand that parable, because therein our Lord says to the sheep, 'Come and inherit the kingdom, because I was naked and you clothed me, and I was in prison and you visited me, and I was hungry and you gave me to eat, and thirsty and you gave me to drink.' And people have said, 'There you are. If you want to get into heaven that's what you have to do. You have to give a pound or two to Oxfam now and again and feed the wretchedly hungry in the third world. If you do that, you are feeding Christ and you'll get into heaven.'

I must tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that's a lie. Of course you should be feeding the hungry in the third world. But to suppose you're going to get into heaven simply by sending a contribution to Oxfam is a cruel deception. The criterion of the King is this, 'as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me' (v. 40). Who are his brothers? Not all men are the brothers of Christ. The brothers of Christ are only those who have been born of the same Father, have been born of God and are God's sons by birth. They are Christ's brothers and what our Lord is saying is that when he comes, he will discern the attitude of heart towards him by what has been men's attitude of heart to Christ's brothers. Let me give you an example.

There was a group of Christians in the early days who were preaching in the temple, and they were preaching in the name of Jesus. Saul of Tarsus came along, and he listened to them until his blood began to boil and eventually he put his hands on them and, with the authority of the high priest, he hurled them into prison and he tortured them and made them blaspheme. Had you said to Saul of Tarsus, 'Why are you doing that, Saul? Don't you know that these Christians are brothers of the Messiah?', he would have been so flamingly angry, he would have tortured you as well! 'Brothers of Messiah? Of course they're not brothers of Messiah. I don't believe that Jesus is the Messiah.'

Do you believe Jesus is Messiah? Then, says the King, 'You will show whether or not you believe by the way you treat those who have believed. Do you stand with the Messiah's people? You say, 'I can be a Christian without coming to church.' I suppose you can, but it's a very doubtful thing to do. If we want to show Messiah that we belong to him, then one of the ways we're expected to do it is to stand with his people.'

Repentance

The King is coming, and the King himself said, 'Make sure you're ready.' As I end, I'll tell you a story (see 2 Sam 19). Long centuries ago, King David of Israel suffered a rebellion at the hands of his son, Absalom. The rebellion was so fierce and so well supported by the people in general that the king had to flee from Jerusalem out into exile. Eventually, usurper Absalom raised his armies to fight the king, and the king raised his armies and there came a colossal battle. The king won and Absalom, the usurper, was defeated. The news began to spread and it came to the city of Jerusalem, and the city was in a panic. David had won. The king was coming. The people in the city had sided with the rebel. What would happen to them?

There was debate and much embarrassment. What were they going to do? 'Brazen it out,' said somebody. 'Don't be a fool,' said another, 'for if the king comes and finds us still on the side of the enemy, then it must be disaster.' At last one man hit upon a solution. He said to the others, 'Why do you say nothing about bringing the king back? Before the king gets here, why don't we send a message out to the king and say, "David, it was all a mistake. We were

deceived, we supported a rebel and we were on his side. What fools we have been and we repent of it. Know this, David, before you come back again, we've repented of it and now we accept you as our king. Please forgive us.'" And that was what they did, and they were ready for the king when he came, and he forgave them.

The King is coming. Do I speak to somebody here who is still on the side of the rebel? You've never been saved, never received Christ as Lord. What are you going to do then if the King arrives and you're still on the rebel's side? Listen, before the King arrives, why don't you speak a word about bringing back the King? You don't need to speak aloud but just where you sit on that seat. As we close with prayer, why not lift your heart to Jesus Christ and say, 'Lord, up to now I've lived my life for myself. Up to now, I've been on the rebel's side. Oh, but Jesus Christ, I do repent. I want to come over to your side. I do receive you as King. Forgive me and save me.'

For the King is coming. Why not speak a word about bringing back the King?

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.