

<i>Date Preached</i>	25-Oct-2020	<i>Date Initiated</i>	13-Oct-2020
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Yr A, Pr 25 (Tr 2)
<i>Main Text</i>			

From today's collect:

" On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. "



This morning, if you will indulge me, I'd like to play a little bit of homiletical catch-up. We are now drawing to the end of a series of readings from the Gospel according to St Matthew that can be surprising to hear and difficult to digest: Jesus at His most critical, His most cagey, even (it seems) His most hostile. Because we will celebrate the Feast of All Saints next Sunday and after that our readings from Matthew will take a more Kingdom turn, today seems like a good time to pause and reflect, collectively, on the Gospel lessons we have heard over the last several weeks: to understand what Jesus is—and is *not*—saying.

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To refresh our memories, just briefly: We began this series of readings with Jesus' refusal to tell the chief priests and elders of the Temple by what (or Whose) authority He was teaching the crowds, and His telling the parable of the one son who says he won't work in his father's vineyard, but does ... and the other son who says yes to his father, but then doesn't do anything: the implication being that God demands more than mere lip service. Next came the graphic parable of the wicked tenants in the vineyard, who eventually kill the vineyard owner's son; Jesus says, in a barbed conclusion, that the kingdom of God will be taken away from "you"—He is speaking to Jewish leaders—and given to a people who will produce fruits for God's kingdom. Then we had the parable of the invited guests who refuse to attend the king's banquet, so he has them killed ... but then he *also* ejects into "the outer darkness" a substitute guest who *does* come to the banquet but fails to wear the accustomed clothing: seemingly, a dismissal of both those long comfortable with the *status quo* ... and those new-to-the-scene ... who wish to have it their own way.

Last Sunday and today, we hear stories of Jesus' being put to the test by various Jewish religious authorities. In both these stories—last week's was about the payment of Roman taxes—Jesus not only fails to take the bait the religious leaders dangle before Him, but He also tells them, fairly pointedly, that they are wrong and, each time, leaves them speechless. And finally, in the reading we *would* hear next week if it weren't All Saints' Day, Jesus begins a diatribe against the behavior of the scribes and Pharisees, which ends up an all-out screed. He calls them hypocrites—meaning, more or less, 'hair-splitters' or 'fly-specking lawyers'—blind guides, lawless, snakes, a brood of vipers. They will not, He tells them, escape Hell, and on account of them, Jerusalem—the very City of the Lord—will be left utterly desolate.

I detect a measure of mercy in our lectionary's omitting the even *more* incendiary, polemical content from this section of Matthew from our hearing on Sunday mornings. Nevertheless, the parts we *do* hear are sufficiently harsh ... seemingly condemnatory, even ... to make us wonder just what St Matthew has done with '*our*' Jesus. As modern Christians, we must also confront the reality

that, for centuries, the Church has used this portion of Matthew's gospel to justify and foment rabid anti-Semitism, which, I can assure you, is the *farthest* thing from Matthew's—and God's—intent. Much to the contrary, I'd like to suggest three lenses ... three 'corrections' of our *initial* hearing of these stories ... that can help us make sense ... without either polemicizing or soft-soaping ... of these very difficult teachings of Jesus.

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The first corrective lens is context: the historical and cultural setting in which Matthew wrote his account of Jesus' ministry. Although it's easy to miss, Jesus' withering critiques and sharp parries are aimed *not* at the Jewish people—at the crowds thronging around Him in Jerusalem—but at the various and vying groups of Jewish leaders of that day. Since well before Jesus's birth, Jewish leaders had been squabbling amongst themselves over various legal and theological points and had splintered Judaism into several sects. Personal invective and cries of "blasphemy" were not uncommon at this time, so the very strong language Jesus levels at the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes and others in these passages may have been neither new nor jarring in the ears of Matthew's audience. Furthermore, the Jewish community was beginning to unravel further over the issues of whether Jesus really was the Messiah ... and whether to allow into the community non-Jewish Gentiles who didn't follow the great body of teachings and customs historically deemed essential to Jewish identity. Matthew's times were, then, a fraught, increasingly polarized period in Jewish history. Writing for a Jewish audience, he had a particular point-of-view: away from over-zealous Jewish interpretations of the ancient religious Law ... and toward a more Gentile-oriented grasp of the newness of Jesus and His divine mission.

As modern readers of Matthew, we are, exposed to some of the vitriol of these debates. To avoid misinterpreting the ire we sometimes find in Matthew's Jesus, we must see that while Matthew took a side in these debates, neither he ... nor Jesus ... *rejected* Judaism in favor of some new religion. Christianity did not exist in Matthew's time, and when it did arise, its lineage was Jewish through and through. There is simply no room, given the context of Matthew's gospel, for any anti-Semitic reading of these stories.

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A second correction to a hate-oriented reading of these texts is to think more theologically ... how God thinks. The Jews were ... and are ... a People of God. God was ... and is ... in covenant relationship with them; and God came to earth, in Jesus, expressly to assist them. It was, we believe, Jesus' mission to reveal **to them** God and God's desire to be in full relationship ... and to eliminate, forever, the unatoned sin that stood in the way of such relationship. As it came to pass, due to human free will, only a portion of the Jewish community accepted Jesus as the Messiah; came to know belief in Jesus and following His Way as the salvation that God so long promised Israel. Another portion of the Jewish community did not. But there is *nothing* in Scripture—including St Paul's letters—to suggest that this non-acceptance of Jesus terminated or cancelled God's long existing covenant with Israel, with the Jews. *God does not break promises*. God continues to reveal Godself to the Jewish community, in a process only God knows the ending of.

To understand God's faithfulness is to know that God does not, in Matthew or anywhere else (for that matter), condemn or reject the Jews or their faith. However we may hear Jesus' words in this section of Matthew, they are *not* His casting a covenant people into oblivion, His separating them from God's love and care. They are the sincere ... even impassioned ... pleading of a steadfast,

promise-keeping God, revealed in Jesus, for the Jews to take up God's new promise in Christ: not because He was their *last* chance, but because He was their *next* chance ... in a line stretching back to Abraham and Moses and extending to a far horizon that God alone can see.

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The third corrective lens in our attempt to understand these difficult passages is our own self-examination. The important lessons that Jesus speaks to the Pharisees and Sadducees He also speaks *directly* to the modern Church. Jesus preaches against the hard-heartedness of a shirking son and the closed-mindedness of wicked tenants not just to Pharisees, but also to a Christianity more concerned with its institutional self-preservation than the salvation of humanity. He reminds not just the chief priests of the Temple, but also a Church that has grown complacent in the face of endemic poverty, injustice and oppression, that God calls us not just to a system of beliefs and sayings—much less any vaunted insider status—but to an entire Cross-shaped way of life: Along with the invitation to the banquet comes the expectation that we will not just show up and eat ... but will also do what the King has commanded. Jesus' warning against a legalistic, gotcha-style of religion that values being right and prizes its privileges instead of fostering humility and seeking the reconciliation of all ... He speaks not just to the scribes of Jerusalem but also to the Episcopalians of Connecticut.

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Filtered through corrective lenses of historical context, God's persistent faithfulness and our own need for self-examination, all the warnings Jesus has spoken these last several weeks ... far from applying only to one people in one ancient time ... and an *infinity* away from justifying any type of anti-Jewish hatred or oppression ... are spoken directly to us, as well, and we would do well ... we would, in fact, do *Christ* ... to take them very much to heart.



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