

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW – PART FIFTEEN

From explaining what goes wrong in the kingdom of heaven in us, Matthew moved on to demonstrate by three stories in striking contrast to each other the difference it makes to be in God's kingdom. The first story is of brutality and a callous disregard for human life by a family who always took. The second and third stories are very wonderful examples of a God who gave.

Herod the tetrarch was the son of Herod the Great, who slaughtered babies at the time of Jesus' birth, and the brother of Herod Archelaus who briefly succeeded his father.(Matt.2:22) He had taken his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. John the Baptist, as the last of the Old Testament prophets, was sent by God to rebuke him and remind him that as king, he should have been an example of faithfulness to one wife.(Deut.17:17) John was rewarded with indefinite detention without trial in Herod's prison. Herod was unable to make up his mind what to do with his prisoner. On the one hand his pride made him want to silence John. On the other hand he was strangely drawn by his message and would listen to him preach at times.(Mk.6:20) His indecision ended suddenly at his birthday party. After watching his mistress' daughter dance before him and his guests, and motivated no doubt by a combination of too much wine and lust, he promised the girl whatever she asked. Her mother seized her opportunity to have revenge on a troublesome prophet and prompted her daughter to ask for John's head on a plate. Herod was trapped between the demands of his conscience and his lover, with his curious dinner guests looking on. His pride won and John was immediately beheaded. The severed head was presented to the girl who passed it to mother. Herod had taken, first his brother's wife, then John's freedom and now his life. But John was not silenced. His memory continued to speak to Herod who concluded that Jesus, the miracle worker, must be John resurrected.(14:1-12)

Jesus wanted to be alone in His human grief. His solitude was not to last long. The crowd with all their needs soon found Him, 5000 men and uncounted women and children, and so did His disciples now back from their mission. Compassion as always motivated Jesus to respond to struggling people rather than to demand that they leave him alone for His holiday. At the end of a busy day it was the disciples who urged Jesus to send the crowd away to buy food. According to Mark 6:30, the disciples had returned from their outreach full of 'all that they had done and taught.' Jesus, probably with a quiet smile on His face, told the disciples to feed the hungry themselves. When they admitted they could not do it because of their meagre resources of five loaves and two fish, Jesus took over. Looking to His Father not to Himself, Jesus said 'thank you' and handed out food, first to the disciples who in turn passed it on to the crowd. Jesus loves to feed spiritually hungry people with truth through His followers whenever they are willing to be part of His tea party. Twelve baskets of extra bread meant that every disciple could carry one each, a reminder of how much we have to give when the little we think we have is in the hands of Jesus.(14:13-21)

For the second time that day, Jesus wanted to have time alone with His Father. Once again, as in chapter 10, He sent the disciples off without Him to learn a vital lesson. Because of an unexpected storm, though expert fishermen, they were soon struggling.

Somewhere between 3-6am, at the point of their greatest desperation, Jesus walked across the waves toward them. He was demonstrating a simple principle He wanted them to learn. In the power of His Creator Father, He could walk on top of not only waves but all adverse circumstances in life. Their first reaction was to think He was a ghost and to be terrified. At 3am after a sleepless night most of us will think the worst. Jesus sought to encourage them, as He does us, by a reminder of His presence as a result of which we have nothing to fear. Peter, as often before, was the first to catch on. He asked to be allowed to join Jesus on the waves. The Lord allowed Him to learn that we too, in His power, can walk on top of the circumstances. For the moment Peter too did the impossible, as He looked at Jesus. Then just like us his attention was distracted by the howling wind and the huge waves and he began to sink. Again in his cry for help, he looked back to Jesus who lifted him out of the water and walked with him back to the boat. Jesus rebuked Peter for his little faith despite the fact that Peter had shown more faith than all the disciples. Why? Because Peter's faith had been the double minded kind described by James in Jas.1:5-8 which was 'like the surf, driven and tossed by the wind'. The remaining disciples in the boat responded by recognising who He was, which is real worship.(14:22-33)

Back at shore after a voyage Jesus' friends would never forget, the crowds immediately re-gathered with all their needs, longing for a touch from Jesus. But how could one Man reach all men in need?(14:34-36)

In chapter 15, Jesus faced new challenges and old needs.

15:1-9 Q.1 What was different about this new group of Pharisees? What does this suggest had been going on behind the scenes? What was their criticism of Jesus' disciples? What according to Jesus was wrong with their objection? What example did He give of how they put their traditions ahead of the Bible? How do we do the same these days? How did Jesus' quotation from Isa.29:13 support His answer? To whom was Isaiah talking?

15:10-20 Q.2 How did Jesus now turn the Pharisees' objection into a teaching parable? What two images did He use to explain their spiritual condition? How did He explain His parable? What insight did He give into the real problem of sin?

15:21-28 Q.3 What made this story different from the rest of Jesus' ministry so far? Was Jesus unkind to the mother who approached Him for her daughter? What was He concerned to teach her? Once she learned this lesson what did Jesus do for her? What can we learn from this story?

15:29-39 Q.4 Yet again the needy crowds were back. How did Jesus respond to them this time? What produced this response? What often limits our response to need? How is this story similar to the one in chapter 14 and how is it different? Had the disciples learned from the first occasion as they faced a new problem? Why did the Holy Spirit lead Matthew to put two such similar events into his gospel?