

## NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW – PART SEVENTEEN

The opposing team from Jerusalem were back making the same demand their local colleagues had made in 12:38 for some miraculous evidence of His Messiah-ship. Apparently feeding 4000 men with 7 loaves did not count! Unbelief refuses to see God at work, however obvious. Jesus gave the same answer He had given before, the sign of Jonah.(12:39-41) If they were blind to His miracles, wait for His resurrection! How was it, He asked, that they could forecast the weather but not anticipate the greatest event since Creation? As before, Jesus answered their question but did not waste time on those who did not want to know Him when He could be teaching those who were hungry to understand.(16:1-4)

Somehow after collecting seven basketsful of bread, the disciples had overlooked the need to bring lunch when they re-crossed the Sea of Galilee. For Jesus it was a great teaching opportunity. He warned them to avoid the ‘leaven’ of the Pharisees and Sadducees. They had no idea what He was talking about but instead of asking Him they jumped to the wrong conclusion among themselves. Again He called them ‘men of little faith’ because they had forgotten what He had done twice before. He reminded them of feeding the 5000 with five loaves and the 4000 with seven loaves and how much had been left over. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.(Rom.10:17) As we face a crisis the Holy Spirit brings the words and work of Jesus back to our minds and invites us again to trust Him for His solution.(Jn.14:26) Jesus repeated His warning about leaven and finally they caught on. He was talking about their teaching not their bakery. Elsewhere in the Bible, leaven is used as a similar picture of false teaching and the attitude which motivates it.(Matt.13:33; I Cor.5:6-8; Lev.2:11) We think yeast makes dough more interesting and we suppose that a little human speculation will make the gospel more palatable.(16:5-12)

Jesus continued His teaching dialogue with the disciples by asking them two questions. First He put a very open question which only required them to report what they had heard people say regarding the ‘Son of Man’. Everyone could repeat what he had heard as the public speculated about Jesus being a return or reincarnation of John, Elijah, or Jeremiah. The second question was very personal and required them to commit to a view of Jesus’ true identity. Only Peter dared to open his mouth this time. The others were presumably too scared of being laughed at for giving the wrong response. Jesus must have been thrilled by Peter’s answer, ‘the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ He recognised that Peter had been taught by God not by man. The Lord encouraged Peter with a statement which has caused major disagreement throughout history. Was He saying that Peter was to be the rock on which the church of Jesus Christ was to be built, as many have assumed? Once again checking the rest of the Bible before reaching a conclusion helps us to be sure of Jesus’ meaning. In Deut.32:4,15,30; II Sam.22:2,3,32; and Ps.31:2,3 the Rock is clearly the Saviour. Paul confirmed this in I Cor.10:4, ‘the rock was Christ’, as he explained the Exodus journey in which a rock frequently figured. The Greek word for Peter is ‘petros’, a stone or a pebble. Rock on the other hand is ‘petra’, like the Rock of Gibraltar, a mountain. Coming personally to know and trust the Saviour means that we become part of Him, like him, and that He can now be the foundation for our lives.(Matt.7:24-27; I Cor.3:11) Faith in Christ is the only way out of death and judgement and the only way into heaven. We can be certain on earth about what is already settled in

heaven. As often before Jesus told them again to keep quiet about Him.(8:4; 9:30) If we talk about what we only partly understand we will cause confusion.(16:13-20)

The reason for His warning to stay silent for the moment about His identity soon became apparent. He tried to continue sharing His future with the disciples by telling of His coming crucifixion at the hands of those who had been attacking His ministry but at the same time the good news of His resurrection. Peter only heard the first half of the message because he rebuked Jesus and vetoed the plan. In His strongest words ever to Peter, Jesus told him that he had become a mouthpiece of Satan. As during His temptation in the wilderness, the Devil was suggesting a short cut to His kingdom which avoided the cross.(Matt.4:8-10) Peter was looking at the situation only from a human perspective. Jesus explained to Peter and to us that following Him cannot avoid the cross. Peter, one day, was also literally crucified. We too need to be 'crucified with Christ'(Gal.2:20) in the sense that daily we decide that we are dead with Him to life run by us. There is no other way for true disciples. Any other course will lead to emptiness now and judgement when Jesus returns.(16:21-28)

Chapter seventeen is another chapter containing striking contrasts.

17:1-8 Q.1 What did Peter, James and John see that day up the mountain? What was the meaning of what they saw? Where did the light come from, heaven or within Him? Why might God particularly have sent Moses and Elijah to talk with Jesus at that time? What was Peter trying to create by suggesting building three tabernacles on the mountain top? How would God's words from heaven have helped both Jesus and Peter?(II Pet.1:17-19) Why were the disciples scared of what they saw and heard? What, if anything, does this event have to do with our relationship with God?(Rom.12:1,2; II Cor.3:18)

17:9-13 Q.2 Why, yet again, did Jesus tell the disciples to keep quiet about what they had seen? Are we not meant to be His witnesses? What did Jesus tell His disciples about Elijah?(Mal.4:5) How would it help to answer the question He had asked them in 16:13? How did the explanation about Elijah and John the Baptist relate to the transfiguration which had just taken place?

17:14-21 Q.3 Why do you suppose the disciples had been unable to help the demon-possessed boy? Who was Jesus calling 'unbelieving and perverted' and why? What did Jesus say are the possibilities of real faith? What is the place of prayer and fasting in meeting a difficult situation like this one? How, in your experience, can a glimpse of heaven often be followed almost immediately, as here, by a glimpse of hell?

17:19-23 Q.4 Why did Jesus keep telling His disciples the same thing? Why were they grieved? What does God do for us when we do not get the point the first time?

17:24-27 Q.5 What was the meaning of Peter's answer to the tax collectors? According to Jesus, are we exempt from paying tax to the government as sons of God? A stater was worth 4 drachma. What did this miracle illustrate? What deeper meaning for us might be contained in this story?