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## **Judgement in Matthew (Matthew 18. 23-35)**

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Let me start by coming clean.

I don't want there to be a place called 'hell' to which God sends people as punishment for their misdeeds. I am not interested in and cannot take seriously the image of a God who tortures and puts the unrighteous to a miserable death, who throws evildoers into a fiery furnace, binding them hand and foot, casting them into outer darkness where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth. I am inclined to say (at least from this side of the fiery furnace) that if God is really like that, then I'd rather have nothing to do with her.

Unfortunately for me, the writer of Matthew's gospel seems otherwise inclined. In fact, compared with the other Gospel accounts, Matthew heightens the theme of end-time, eschatological vengeance in Jesus' teaching,<sup>1</sup> and it is in his gospel that all the violent 'ends' I just mentioned are described. There are eight parables of eschatological vengeance in Matthew's gospel – four that are unique to him – and the picture that emerges from them, writes biblical scholar David Neville, 'is that those determined to be wicked, unresponsive, or irresponsible will ultimately experience the full force of divine retributive violence'.<sup>2</sup> Even the phrase 'wailing and teeth-grinding', for example, appears only once in Luke's gospel, where it expresses the regret of those excluded from the heavenly banquet, and is found nowhere else in the New Testament. Matthew,

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Neville, *A Peaceable Hope: Contesting Violent Eschatology in New Testament Narratives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 9-10.

<sup>2</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 23-24.

however, appears to delight in it, using it as a solemn refrain on six different occasions, underscoring the distress of those who will be cursed in the future judgement.<sup>3</sup>

The problem to be faced here is not simply one of theological squeamishness or my own personal preference. If it were just that, then maybe someone could legitimately remind me not to make God in my own image, not to pick and choose an image of God that reinforces my pre-existing values. But it's more than that – it is a question of the integrity of the gospel as a whole. As Neville says, 'In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus pronounces a blessing on peace-makers (5.9), commands non-retaliation alongside love for enemies ... (5.38-48), and conducts his mission non-violently'.<sup>4</sup> Will the final judgement Jesus brings be completely inconsistent, incongruent with the non-retaliatory, non-violent way of life he has commended and lived? And if we find that hard to believe, then what sense are we to make of these difficult and vengeful texts – including the reading we have heard tonight?

Well, these seem not to be questions to which anyone has found a full and satisfactory resolution. What I want to offer tonight are some points of reference that I have found helpful, and that I hope might be helpful to you too.

First, I do believe that Christ is the judgement of God. I believe that we are *answerable* for our lives, that the choices we make and the lives we lead *matter*. And I believe that, as Matthew's parables persistently teach, the criteria for this judgement of God have to do with faithfulness to God's will, with justice and mercy, how we treat ourselves and each other and especially those who are most vulnerable to our injustice, inattention, and impatience. What angers the king in the parable we've heard is that his slave would not show mercy, would not 'pay forward' (if you like) the mercy he himself had received. Jesus not only teaches this criterion of justice and mercy but he embodies

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<sup>3</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 17.

it – he *lives* his solidarity, compassion, forgiveness and non-retaliation even to death, and so he is become the measure of our lives, rightfully our judge.

In human affairs, we are accustomed to equate judgement with punishment, even vengeance (an eye for an eye, tit for tat). But it need not be so. And even in human affairs, (I'm thinking of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa), we are capable of *enacting* judgement in the context of forgiveness and reconciliation; and we are capable of *receiving* judgement not as punishment but as an opening (even if a somewhat painful one) to a different, more honest, more reconciled life. So this means that judgement does not necessitate punishment or vengeance, and that questioning Matthew's account of divine vengeance is not the same thing as evading judgement.

So what might be going on for Matthew that he employs such a violent eschatology, and seemingly delights in the prospect of ultimate punishment for the ungodly? At one level, we don't know. One hypothesis is that he belonged to a community suffering persecution and that the promise of 'end-time vengeance served to instil hope and assurance in a beleaguered community of faith'.<sup>5</sup> I've certainly been there myself – invoking curses and damnation on those who have done me wrong! Theologian James Alison suggests less of a sociological, psychological explanation and more a theological one. Matthew's image of God, he thinks, is in the process of being subverted and transformed by the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The old apocalyptic language of judgement remains in place but it's losing steam. The real interest in the parables is the way in which a whole different imagining of God and judgement is emerging, based on the dawning recognition that in the crucified Jesus, God has consented to become a victim of human violence in order to unmask it.

Notice, however, that both these explanations of Matthew's violent imagery are *explanations*. They try to give an account which allows us to take seriously his criteria of

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<sup>5</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 26.

judgement (justice and mercy), while not taking so seriously the divine threat of punishment in which this judgement is embedded. I am drawn to some such explanation because, as I have already admitted, I have a *commitment* to a non-violent concept of God. But is my commitment true? Does it, Matthew's language notwithstanding, cohere with the witness of our tradition?

Here it seems to me that Jesus' own practice ultimately *must* be our guide. And though of course we have no account of his life apart from the gospels themselves, these texts are unanimous in testifying to Jesus' practice of 'nonretaliation and love, even of perceived enemies, in imitation of the indiscriminate generosity of God'.<sup>6</sup> Jesus is the one who teaches the limitless forgiveness of sins, 'seventy times seven'; he is the one who goes to his death refusing violent rescue, forgiving his persecutors and returning to his disciples in peace and without recrimination. The 'common story told by all four Gospel writers of how Jesus responded to violence and of what he taught his disciples with respect to violence is determinative', writes Neville. And this means, he continues, that 'the story that Matthew tells contains within itself the wherewithal to deconstruct his own eschatological outlook'.<sup>7</sup>

I think there is one more piece of evidence we can adduce for the claim that God's judgement is ultimately and profoundly non-violent – and that is our own experience. To undergo forgiveness can be an exposing and painful experience – there's stuff we have to look at and acknowledge that we'd rather not see. But the stance of God towards us is always a stance of invitation and welcome (like the prodigal father), willing to forgive and yearning for us to be free. It is not a stance of punishment and fault-finding, but of judgement in the service of our becoming whole. And if it weren't like that, then how would we ever have confidence to open our hearts?

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<sup>6</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 44.

<sup>7</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 44.

It works in reverse too. To forgive another person may be painful for us – a process involving costly letting go, relinquishing our right to cultivate our hurt and brood on fantasies of revenge. But we know, ultimately, that forgiving another enlarges us, and that vengeance diminishes us. We know that being merciful frees us and that refusing mercy keeps us captive, makes us bitter. This doesn't mean we are never angry; it doesn't mean denying our hurt or offering cheap grace. It does mean that our fullest life lies in our capacity for practising reconciliation and grace. And if this is true for us, then why should we think it different for God? Why should we believe the Spirit of God to be smaller than, at odds with the Spirit of life?

This, at any rate, is where I place my faith and hope, and humbly invite you to do the same.