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Speaking Words of Wisdom (Matthew 11. 1-19)

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‘Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities’. These are the words with which our reading began and, in Matthew’s gospel, this form of words (more or less) occurs five times: ‘now when Jesus had finished saying these things’; ‘when Jesus had finished these parables’, and so on. Narratively, such phrases clearly function to close one chapter and open another. They lead us into the next part of the story.

Theologically, commentators suggest, this five-fold division of Jesus’ teaching ministry ‘may be Matthew’s way of relating his gospel to the five books of Moses’.¹ As Stanley Hauerwas puts it, ‘For Matthew, Moses prefigures Jesus by giving the law; but Jesus is greater than Moses because he now *is* the gift of the law’. And yet, Hauerwas goes on, ‘the status of Jesus’ is not easily recognised.

This confronts us with a key irony in the gospels. The basic assumption of the Hebrew and Christian traditions is that God is communicative. God wills to be known and loved, and so God acts to reveal God’s being and purpose. Scripture depicts God speaking to humankind through angels, epiphanies and prophets. God communicates divine presence through creation and teaches the divine way by means of the law. The Christian tradition holds that this divine self-communication reaches its fulfilment in Jesus. He not only passes on or conveys the word of God (as a prophet might). Rather, he is the Word of God, the Word made flesh. His words, his action, his being not only speak of or for ‘God’, but make God bodily present. As the Letter to the Hebrews put it, ‘Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son ... He is the

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), p.113.

reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word' (Hebrews 1. 1-3).

But what does this really mean? How does it matter? And if it's true, why is it so hard for this Word of God to be recognised and received? One way of reading this section of Matthew's gospel is as an extended reflection on these questions. I'm hoping we can explore them in coming weeks.

The reading we just heard raises one of the main issues. How are we supposed to discern whether what's happening through and around Jesus truly bespeaks God, enacts God? John the Baptist is wondering the same thing. He's sent his disciples to ask: 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'

You'll remember that when John baptised Jesus in the Jordan, he seemed to have no such doubts (Matthew 3.14). But now, he's less sure. Historically, theologians have worried about John's apparent uncertainty here. According to Frederick Bruner, the likes of 'Origen, Chrysostom, Jerome, and Augustine in the early church, and Luther, Calvin, and Bengel in the Reformation churches, did not enjoy seeing a hero of the faith asking a doubting question'.² Thus, it was piously suggested that John asked it only for the sake of his disciples, so as to lead *them* into his own unshaken faith. More recent commentators are, however, less squeamish and perhaps more psychologically astute, interpreting John's request for reassurance as an entirely natural reaction to events. After all, John is in prison facing death and King Herod, representing the corrupt old order, remains firmly entrenched in power. From John's perspective, this is probably not how he imagined the near fulfilment of God's purpose for the world.

Jesus answers John's disciples by inviting *them* to pay attention to what's happening around him: 'Go and tell John what *you hear and see*, the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them'. Notice this is not merely a catalogue of pastoral success or even a 'by their fruits you shall know them' kind of

² Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Vol.1 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), p.506.

argument. It's an explicit laying claim to the fulfilment of messianic promise as envisaged by the prophet Isaiah. 'See, your God comes ... then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb shout aloud'.³

John's disciples go away, presumably back to their master. But Jesus takes advantage of this teachable moment to expand and deepen his claim, and to challenge the crowd to make John's question their own. 'What did *you* go out into the wilderness to look at?' In fact, what do you think is unfolding in your midst here? When you went to see John, were you just caught up in a spectacle – curious about a madman shaken by the wind, or a prince in fine clothing ... No? Then what? Did you think you were seeing a prophet? Well, you're right about that ... But don't you think that has implications? Don't you think that means something? In fact, if you really saw who John was ... not just any old prophet, but the last of the prophets – the one of whom it was prophesied that he would go ahead of the Lord to prepare his way, then you would be closer to recognising who I am. Let anyone with ears, listen!

So why don't you get it? What's stopping you from paying real attention, from realising this moment? Jesus accuses his hearers of being derailed by their assumptions, their preconceptions, their disengagement. Some of you, he says, complain about John's behaviour – for he came neither eating nor drinking, calling you to turn from your futile ways, and you say 'he has a demon'. Others of you are complaining about me – 'the Son of Man came eating and drinking', and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard', way too free with his favours – hanging out with sinners and tax collectors. You're like children in the marketplace, each wanting to play your own game, fulfil your own agenda, pipe to your own tune ... and you fail to recognise and refuse to participate in what's actually here.

And what *is* actually here? This is where Jesus' discussion with his contemporaries gets really interesting.⁴ The clue is in his reference to wisdom, as in

³ Bruner, *Matthew*, p.508.

⁴ See James Alison, 'Like children sitting in the market place: a teaching on Wisdom, vanity and desire' in *Broken Hearts and New Creations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010); and Br. Keith Nelson, 'The

‘wisdom is vindicated by her deeds’. The notion of ‘wisdom’ on which Jesus draws here is found in the priestly tradition of Israel, and in books such as Proverbs and Job, Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon. In this multi-faceted tradition, ‘Wisdom is personified as a Woman of great gentleness and strength, offering food and drink, shelter and instruction, scorned by the masses but taking her stand nonetheless’.⁵ Wisdom is God’s Wisdom, present at the creation of the world, rejoicing in it, and instructing and guiding the human race (Proverbs 8.10-16). So when Jesus implies an identity between himself and wisdom, when he speaks of what he’s doing as performing wisdom, this is a big deal. Far more than a miracle worker or messenger, says James Alison, he’s claiming to be the presence in their midst of ‘the Creator fulfilling Creation’, ‘making creation alive, bursting with potential’.⁶

In the biblical tradition, the opposite of wisdom is vanity or futility. It’s exemplified in this story by what Jesus calls ‘this generation’ who sit in the marketplace, complaining about each other, locked in mutual disappointment and self-justifying recrimination, going nowhere, creative of nothing. Wisdom, on the other hand, is connected with the divine determination that there should be life and meaning, creation and recreation. Wisdom liberates life’s energy, makes life flow. To proclaim that Jesus speaks or performs wisdom means not just that he has some sensible things to say. It means that all he says and does effects God – brings life from non-life, meaning from futility, intelligibility from chaos. He is the Word of God. Little wonder that he tells John’s disciples, ‘blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me’; blessed are those who don’t dismiss or discount me or resist my teaching, because I speak and enact life that will lead you to life, if only you have ears to hear and eyes to see.

What’s involved in becoming capable of that will be our focus next week.

Vindication of Wisdom’, 5 July 2020, <https://www.ssje.org/2020/07/05/the-vindication-of-wisdom-br-keith-nelson/>

⁵ Nelson, ‘The Vindication of Wisdom’.

⁶ Alison, ‘Like children sitting in the market place’, pp.96, 107.