

Meeting Matthew 20 and 25

These studies are based on the readings from the Gospel according to Matthew chosen in part for the revised Common Lectionary Year A, but designed to be used at any time.

1. Matthew 20:1-16 – The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard
2. Matthew 25:1-13 – The Parable of the Girls and the Wedding
3. Matthew 25:14-30 – The Parable of the Talents
4. Matthew 25:31-46 – The Son of Man and the Judgement

You can do all four studies or pick only those which interest you.

Each study asks you to read a passage from Matthew, offers you a commentary which brings today's thinking into dialogue with the text, and some open-ended questions for you to use as springboards for your own discussion and action. The questions are deliberately very open, so you can have space to bring your own experience and questions to the text and take it where you need to go, which may differ from group to group.

If you are coming together as a group, make sure

- everyone can see everyone else
- everyone is included and is encouraged to participate as they would like
- there is room for people to agree, differ, be clear or confused, and be accepted
- people are encouraged to value each other's input, to listen without using that time to work out what you are going to say and without interrupting, and when discussing a question to keep the focus on the question

You will need at least one Bible translation. NRSV is probably best, but others might include NIV or some other new translation.

The sessions are designed to last around 60 minutes and encourage you to explore not only what the texts meant on the basis of the latest historical research but also what they might mean for living today.

Making these studies work for you and your group.

Adapt them to suit your group and its preferences. For instance, you can read the gospel passage and the commentary and then look at the questions *or* you could first read the passage and note anything which popped out for you and then read the commentary, section by section, stopping to talk about anything that arises, before going right through to the end and looking at the questions *or* you could start with a general question on the topic before doing one of the above *or* you may want to circulate the studies in advance, so that people have already read the passage and commentary before they come. Then go through it when you come together in one of the ways mentioned above.

... whatever makes the studies work best for you!

Session One

Matthew 20:1-16 – The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard

“It’s not fair!” Why should those who worked for just one hour in the vineyard be given the same wage as those who worked all day? This is why we need unions. The employer appeals to what employees agreed to and hides behind it. “You agreed to this!”

It seems that Jesus was frequently very daring and confronting when he told his parables, his pointed stories. They usually reflected everyday life but with a twist to make them larger than life and provoke people to thinking further. In fact, some of his parables, like this one, are told in self-defence. He faced criticism for daring to assert that God shows as much love to rogue tax collectors and sinners as he does to the righteous who have served God all their days.



God does not dole out love according to what people deserve, but according to what they need. You can’t equate wages and earnings with how God responds to people in need. At another level, even at the level of industrial relations, it makes sense to think not just about what people deserve, but also about what people need. In humane societies we have unemployment benefits. They are given not on the basis of merit, but on the basis that people need a minimum wage in order to be able to live.

In the ancient world people talked about a day’s wage as what one needed each day to survive. In the parable this is what each receives. To turn our initial comments upside down, this, too, is why we need unions: to argue that the unemployed needed a minimum to enable them to survive. What underlies this practice is the notion that everyone matters. We do not consign some people to the scrap heap. We do not deem them unworthy or write them off as poor because they are just simply lazy. This is not to say that, human nature being what it is, some will not try to exploit the system and cheat, but they are the exceptions. We have learned to be a caring society.

Jesus held fast to his view that God cares and does not write people off. It was a view which had difficulty surviving, including in the movement which he founded, the church as we know it. Even those who have been among its most devout have been tempted to believe that they get what they deserve and so their goal is their reward, their achievement, an assertion of independence. It is as if to say, I don’t need charity. I have earned God’s goodness by my own goodness.

Some people find it very difficult to contemplate that they might be loved when they haven’t deserved it or earned it. If they have learned to love and respect themselves only on the basis that they have won the right to it, then woe betide them when, through disability or aging, they are no longer capable of sustaining that claim and will need to allow themselves to be loved simply for who they are.

In Jesus' stories we must beware of turning them into allegories, that is, of trying to equate the characters with Jesus or God or someone else. The employer here is not God. He is not particularly loveable. This is often the case in Jesus' parables. In one, for instance, he defends his free offer of forgiveness to all by way of telling a story about a rogue slave who in an act of deceit wrote down debts of his master's debtors.

There have been interesting attempts to read this parable as an allegory. One of the most interesting comes from Islam which sees in the groups of employees, first the Jews, then the Christians, and then the followers of Islam.

The final saying, which Matthew probably added to the saying from elsewhere, simply underlines the subversiveness of Jesus' approach. Those who thought they were first will be found not to be first at all. Jesus turns traditional expectations upside down. It certainly has the effect of undermining the hopes of those who saw themselves as deserving. It puts loving and being loved at the heart of humanity. Love is what matters most. Rather than one's breeding, pedigree, wealth and grandeur.

Those who value the latter will always subvert the message of Jesus. At times in the history of the church they succeeded in taming it to be the chaplains for their indulgent self-importance and luring church leaders to look like them, wearing crowns and demanding similar submission and adulation. Gone, then, was the simplicity of the little child, not yet inducted into the greediness which begins in childhood, whom Jesus holds up as the model for openness and generosity. For he himself came as the Son of Man not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. By chapter's end, twelve verses after our parable in 20:28, Matthew repeats this wisdom he found in Mark (10:45).

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Jesus defending himself in this parable: can you think of other parables in which he does so?
3. What is your experience of people or yourself having difficulty receiving "charity"/grace?

Matthew 25:1-13 – The Parable of the Girls and the Wedding

Weddings were so important in the ancient world. They were one of the few occasions when you could have a feast – that is, to be able to have the kind of meal we in our world can have every day. It was also a time of joyous celebration. Families arranged marriages for their children, the fathers taking the leading role. No priest or minister was required. Fathers and families were enough.

The bride's father handed her over to her husband. Usually the couple will have met before, but this would have been far from just the next step after dating. Dating was generally disapproved. Contacts were controlled. Betrothals were not engagements parties to celebrate what was already going on, but contracts for who was to marry whom. The woman, usually around half the age of her husband, passed from the control of her father to the control of her husband.

The fathers, for their families, deemed the couple a suitable match, suitable for the wider family. That was important because they would one day be the managers responsible for the earnings and well-being of the family. Of course, the woman, often a girl as soon after beginning menstruation as possible, was less mature and experienced than her husband. And, of course, men went on to conclude that women were by nature less mature, good and valued, but inferior. Thus, they considered them more suited to running the internal affairs of the household while they managed external matters and were overall in charge. It seemed logical to men.

The bride was often dressed up like a queen, clad in a white dress with a crown and sometimes a sceptre. The handing over celebration of joining hands and the seal with a kiss were the public declaration of what was more privately the contract which included such detail as what dowry the woman would bring into the marriage and what might happen to it if the marriage failed, as well as what the man might contribute to help with the wedding costs. Such contracts have survived.

It seems that a common pattern then was for the men, at least, to party – frequently with much alcohol, to the extent that more than one story can have the man so drunk by evening that he fails to recognise with whom he was sleeping, such as Jacob with Leah instead of Rachel. The marriage was consummated when the wedding party made its way from her family's house to his, where she would be waiting for him. In many wedding rituals a march to the groom's house is part of the celebrations as shown in this picture from Germany.



Our parable picks up what was probably a common element in the procession: the hailing of the groom as he reached his house. Matthew has Jesus focus on just this element of the story to highlight the nightmare situation for five of the ten girls of not having enough oil for their lamps. They should have thought about the possibility of delay. The groom could be late, could be stumbling home half-drunk late in the night. The sobriety or not of the groom is not the issue here. It

is, rather, the readiness of the girls. They have let their families down and let themselves down – shame!

If we imagine their world and the shame, then we can imagine what the message is, especially if we share with them the use of oil and fire as images of the Spirit. People spoke of being anointed/oiled with the Spirit and of the Spirit as the source of fire. Luke also uses the imagery: “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks” (12:35-36). Perhaps the saying inspired Matthew to develop it into a parable. In the next study we will see how he took another story which Luke brings much earlier and made it part of Jesus’ final set of warnings.

Matthew’s chief concern has been not so much to report history as to underline its significance for the people of his day, especially his fellow believers. As John the Baptist had said to Jewish leaders in his time that they should not rest on their laurels and think their status as Abraham’s children gave them immunity from being responsible, so Matthew has Jesus challenge believers that having the status of being a believer is not enough. Ongoing openness to the Spirit, enabling the oil of the Spirit to keep the love of God shining in and through you, is what matters most.

This a regular theme in Matthew. In 22:1-10 he transforms the parable of the great feast into a parable of a king’s wedding feast for his son and then adds a final scene where those who were finally invited and decided to come were subject to the king’s scrutiny (22:11-14). One wore the wrong clothes. The meaning is clear: you need to be clothed in the garments of righteousness, in other words, be a person who bears the fruits of love and generosity.

It is therefore not surprising that Matthew turns Jesus’ final address into a warning to Christians about being real about their faith. It is about an ongoing relationship with God. It is not about now having status and privilege.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What difference do you see between marriage then and marriage now? Do they matter?
3. What might being ready mean for us, today?

Session Three

Matthew 25:14-30 – The Parable of the Talents

These days “talent” means a skill or ability that someone has. Hence, we have talent quests. This is all because of what is in effect a misreading of this parable, though a useful one!

A talent was an amount of money, worth around 6000 denarii. A denarius was a day’s wage, so a talent was a huge amount of money. You can do your own sums to calculate how many million dollars that might be today. The stamp pictured here is the product of rampant inflation in Germany after the First World War, its 50 billion marks turned out to be worthless.



Luke, too, knows the parable. You can see both versions set out in the Appendix below. It was in their shared source. As is often the case, it appears that Matthew or his community have dramatically enhanced its detail. Luke’s version is without such elaboration and probably closer to the way Jesus, himself, told the story.

In Luke’s version the amounts given are not talents but minas. A mina was worth 100 denarii, so much less. The parable as we have it in Luke may well allude to the story of Herod’s son, Archelaus, who on his father’s death in 4 BCE, set off for Rome, hoping to be crowned king in his father’s stead. He was instead appointed only an “ethnarch” over part of his father’s territory, two of his brothers inheriting parts of the rest. People hated him. The Romans sacked him for his cruelty after only 10 years.

Matthew’s amounts are “over the top”, as a country, then, might have been worth much less. Parables are storytelling to make a point, where exaggerations and embellishment are allowed, as long as the message gets through.

The message in both versions is based on understandings of money-making in the world of the time. We may assume that Jesus knew it well because many of his parables use commercial imagery and this will have been the case with his followers. Making money was a major priority everywhere, not only in Galilee.

Everyone knew that for normal people, if you had money you should use it to make more money. Economics 101! At least bank it and get interest, but preferably invest it to make bigger gains. And if you had slaves whom you put in charge of your finances, as many did, then they should make money for you. Perhaps the original parable was very close to real experience, playing on stories of what might actually have happened with a master and his slaves.

What is the point of the parable? Make your money work! What is the money symbolising? It is best to see it as the Spirit, in that sense, like the oil in the previous parable. Let the Spirit work, bear fruit, bring good profit. In the currency of the kingdom of God that means, let it reproduce itself in love, compassion, outreach!

It is not difficult to understand how later generations expanded this to the idea that people themselves possess gifts by nature and that they should use them to bear fruit similarly. Personal gifts then come to be called talents and so the new message is: use your talents! Don't bury them! God wants you to use your gifts and also to develop them, to invest in them.

In Matthew this belongs to his major theme that being a Christian is not about status. It is about a living relationship which is dynamic. It is alive and growing and producing fruit. If not, it is dead! Matthew is fond of threats and so, as he often does, portrays the master as casting the slave into outer darkness to weep and grind his teeth.

In the parable the master does not come through as a good person, so this parable, too, is not an allegory in which Christians are the slaves and the master is God. That is not how the parables work. It is typical of parables of Jesus that he appeals to people's daily experience and draws his illustrations from what they knew.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. How can being entrusted with money be like receiving the gift of the Spirit?
3. What is your experience of people or yourself having talents and why do you think some people bury them? – or bury the Spirit?

Matthew 25:14-30	Luke 19:12-27
<p>For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." ²¹His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." ²²And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." ²³His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." ²⁴Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." ²⁶But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."</p>	<p>As they were listening to this, he went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. ¹²So he said, A nobleman went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return. ¹³He summoned ten of his slaves, and gave them ten pounds, and said to them, "Do business with these until I come back." ¹⁴But the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, "We do not want this man to rule over us." ¹⁵When he returned, having received royal power, he ordered these slaves, to whom he had given the money, to be summoned so that he might find out what they had gained by trading. ¹⁶The first came forward and said, "Lord, your pound has made ten more pounds." ¹⁷He said to him, "Well done, good slave! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities." ¹⁸Then the second came, saying, "Lord, your pound has made five pounds." ¹⁹He said to him, "And you, rule over five cities." ²⁰Then the other came, saying, "Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, ²¹for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow." ²²He said to him, "I will judge you by your own words, you wicked slave! You knew, did you, that I was a harsh man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? ²³Why then did you not put my money into the bank? Then when I returned, I could have collected it with interest." ²⁴He said to the bystanders, "Take the pound from him and give it to the one who has ten pounds." ²⁵(And they said to him, "Lord, he has ten pounds!") ²⁶"I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ²⁷But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence."</p> <p style="text-align: right;">NRSV</p>

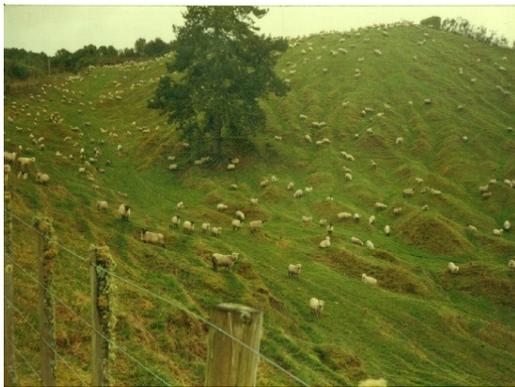
Session Four

Matthew 25:31-46 – The Son of Man and the Judgement

With apologies to all goats! This is imagery. Goats, you had a bad press in the ancient world. It was easier to control sheep. Sheep were also often used as an image for God's people, Israel, who were sometimes like a sheep without a shepherd and for whom God was their shepherd, or the king in God's stead.



While this is imagery, in substance it is very particular and challenging, and designed by Matthew to be Jesus' final words to his own day, Matthew's own day. "One of the least of these my brothers and sisters" means fellow believers. In that sense Matthew has Jesus' final words address how Christians should care for one another. Inevitably interpreters have burst open from those confines and interpreted it as applicable to how we respond to our fellow human beings, Christian or not, taking us beyond Matthew's scope, but connecting us to what was more likely the scope of Jesus.



"Son of Man" is a title given to Jesus and which he may have used of himself. It reflects the view of some circles of Jews, that this figure would execute judgement on God's behalf on the day of judgement. Daniel imagines his world history as a series of rulers symbolised by animals, including lions, bears, leopards and goats, and finally a figure like a "son of man", that is like a human being (Daniel 7). This developed into a full-blown expectation about that "son of man" being *the* Son of Man who would be God's agent.

Some also associated that figure with the Messiah. Executing judgement and ruling was also the role of a king. Matthew certainly favours seeing Jesus in this way.

The power of the passages lies less in what it says about Jesus and more in what it says about being a follower of Jesus. What is the basis for assessing true discipleship? Behaviour.

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. (25:35-36)

It puts attitudes and actions of love at the heart of discipleship. This fits what Matthew has had Jesus (and also John the Baptist) say from the beginning. Good fruit grows on a healthy tree. The fruit we look for is love and that must mean taking human need seriously: hunger, thirst, shelter, hospitality, caring for the sick, visiting those in prison. Matthew's focus is fellow believers, but surely the same applies to all in need.

One element is especially striking: the king says that their treatment of people in need was for him like their treatment of him: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are

members of my family, you did it to me.” Believers often saw themselves as a family and so this made sense as an appeal to caring for one another.

The story also has a way of going off the rails, at least in the hands of some interpreters. For some people use it so say: we should look at other people and see Jesus in them and that is why we should help them. Showing love is another way of honouring Jesus. If I am on the receiving end of such love, I might sometimes feel that it is not me who is being loved but Jesus and I am enjoying collateral benefit. The story depicts the opposite. Those caring really did care for those in need and were caught by surprise by the king’s words. They were not doing it to please and help him. They were doing it because they cared!

Another misreading is to see the story setting up a way of achieving God’s favour or earning the Son of Man’s respect and praise. I will be accepted and justified if I work hard at loving people. That will gain me credit with God. Then, too, my love for others will be perverted into being just love for myself. I do it because there is advantage for me on the day of judgement. I don’t want to be “loved” like that either because that is about people just using my need as a stepping stone to their own glory.

God’s goodness offers us forgiveness and acceptance without any preconditions. This is justification by faith alone because of God’s grace, God’s generosity. When I believe that, then I can stop worrying about trying to earn my justification. I can allow myself to be loved and thus freed to be able to be loving towards others. Logically it makes sense, but, more significantly, at the level of experience we know that the more we open ourselves to love, the more love flows from us. We become healthy trees bearing the fruit of healthy humanity: care and concern for others.

These final words have a cutting edge designed to challenge complacent believers who think that being “saved” simply means having been converted or that the life of faith presents itself in these terms: “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?” (Matthew 7:22). Jesus’ response to this according to Matthew will be: “I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers” (Matthew 7:23). Thus, the same challenge which meets us at the end of the Sermon on the Mount meets us again here in Matthew 25 in what Matthew presents as Jesus’ final message and which still has relevance today.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Have you met or experienced the approach which says: love people because you see Jesus in them? Why does it not fit the reading?
3. What implications do you see in this passage for how we can understand the mission and purpose of the church, generally, and you church community, in particular?