

WEEK 2: THURSDAY

To get the full flavour of what's going on here, you should really read not just Matthew 12, but Isaiah 42 as a whole. Actually, even that isn't really enough, because Isaiah 42 is a key passage within a much larger unity, Isaiah 40:55 . . . maybe you should set aside some time later on and read those 16 chapters right through. Imagine yourself in Matthew's congregation. Ask yourself what he's trying to tell you by quoting from that great prophecy.

We have already seen that for Matthew, and for Jesus himself, Jesus' public career was the fulfilment of the ancient prophecies. Not just 'fulfilment' in the sense of a few random long-range predictions that were now at last 'coming true' in an isolated fashion. Rather, 'fulfilment' in the sense of a mountain climber who, after several days of hiking, sheer rock faces, ice floes and so on, is now standing on the summit ridge with the peak of the mountain at last in sight. 'Fulfilment' in the sense of a couple who have endured a long engagement while one was called away on urgent business and who now, at last, can hear the wedding bells ringing as they make their way to the church. Jesus is the 'fulfilment' of scripture in that sense. He brings its long, winding story to the place it was meant to go all along.

When Matthew quotes these verses from Isaiah 42, then, he isn't just suggesting a distant resemblance between Jesus' commands to silence (12.16) and the humble behaviour of Isaiah's 'servant of the Lord'. He is indicating that this 'servant' passage and the others like it, which reach their own climax with the servant's death in chapter 53, are a key part of the build-up of the ancient story. It is all driving forward, looking eagerly ahead, to an ultimate moment in which all the meaning built up over the centuries would be displayed in one extraordinary burst of fulfilment. Every bit of the 'servant' prophecies points to Jesus, Matthew believed. Here, nearly half way through his gospel, he wants to rub our noses in the fact. He could assume that many in his audience would know the whole section of Isaiah quite well. We, who probably don't know it quite so well, may need to catch up.

The point he is making, underneath it all, is that of a different kind of kingdom, an alternative model of kingship. John the Baptist had misunderstood what Jesus was up to, hoping that he might be the sort of leader who would mount a rescue operation and get him out of prison, and he had to be put right. James and John, later on in the story, were eager to have the best seats when Jesus became king, and they too needed to be put right (20.20—28). In the same way, Matthew is keen to point out here that Jesus is redefining what God's kingdom looks like, and hence what being God's Messiah might actually mean.

In fact, of course, what he says here is exactly in line with the Sermon on the Mount. The meek will inherit the earth, and Jesus is leading the way. God's kingdom belongs to the humble, and Jesus is showing how it's done. The kingdom of heaven belongs to those who suffer, are persecuted, and even killed, because they are following God's way . . . and Jesus will go ahead of them in that, too. Matthew, by quoting this passage here, is pointing forwards all the way to the climax of his gospel, when Jesus will be 'enthroned' as 'king of the Jews' by being nailed to the cross.

There is, to be sure, great comfort for us in all of this. If God's kingdom came the same way that earthly kingdoms come, by force of arms and military victory, the weak and the vulnerable would

once more come off worst. But God does things the other way up, and we should all be thankful for that. In particular, those of us who struggle from time to time in our faith and discipleship should take heart from Isaiah's words, applied here to Jesus: he will not break a bruised reed, or quench a smouldering wick. His task, and his delight, is gently to fan into flames what was smouldering, gently to strengthen and firm up the weak, bruised faith, hope and love that we have at the moment. Let that be our prayer this Lent.

TODAY

Humble Lord Jesus, as you reach out to us in your gentle love, help us to find the way to bring your kingdom in our own day.