

WEEK 3: THURSDAY

The unique city of Venice is now mainly a tourist destination. People come from all over the world to be amazed at its canals, its tiny side-streets, and the wonderful churches, mansions and art galleries. But in the days before air travel Venice was much, much more. It was where the trade routes met, a city which looked east and west, north and south. There you could see Europe and Asia coming by and doing business. Many different strands of culture met and mingled on those canals, in those streets and churches. Venice was one of the most powerful and wealthy cities in the world.

This passage in Matthew is a bit like that. We may come to it in search of a quick lesson, a theme to ponder, a direction for today's prayers. But this is one of the places where the trade routes of Matthew's gospel meet, looking all the way back to Jesus' birth and baptism and all the way on to his death and resurrection. This is where the story of the disciples, who had followed Jesus and believed that he was indeed the Messiah, washes up against the story of Jesus' deeper vocation, that he had to achieve his mission by going to the cross. This is one of the most powerful passages in the gospel. Get this straight, and you'll see how much of the rest works out.

Begin at the end — and let's be clear, from the outset, how much Jesus' words here have been misunderstood. 'There are some standing here who won't taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.' Many have imagined that Jesus meant by this that the whole space—time universe would disappear and leave him and his followers in a new heavenly existence. Since that didn't happen — certainly within a generation! — they have concluded that Jesus was mistaken. That point of view has been extremely common.

But it completely misunderstands what the whole gospel story is about. From start to finish, Matthew's story is about the strange way in which Jesus became king. The first two chapters make it clear that he is the king from the line of David, at whose birth Gentile sages come to worship. The closing scene of the gospel makes it clear that with his resurrection and ascension Jesus has now 'come in his kingdom': 'all authority in heaven and on earth', he says, 'has been given to me.' Our problem in the modern world has been that we have taken it for granted that Jesus is not, in any sense, currently 'king of the world'. (It certainly doesn't look like it, we tell ourselves.) So we have assumed that he must have been talking about something else. Something that didn't happen.

But the whole point of this story is that Jesus — to the horror of his close friends — was now beginning to tell them that the way he had to become king was through suffering and death. They had just declared that they believed he was God's Messiah (verse 16). Peter had been congratulated on recognizing this despite the fact that Jesus wasn't doing lots of things a Messiah might have been supposed to do (raising an army to defeat the Romans, for instance). But now he was saying something as shocking to them as his words to the Canaanite woman in chapter 15 were shocking to the foreign crowds. The way to the Messianic kingdom is through suffering and death. Why this is so he doesn't yet explain. That it is so he makes quite clear. And if Peter can't see that, then he is being a 'Satan', an accuser, thinking in mere human categories rather than in God's categories.

The challenge to the disciples, then, turns into the challenge to all of us. Following Jesus means losing your life in order to find it. We squirm and struggle against this, like a fish on a hook. Anything rather than this. But it's the only way. Following Jesus means denying yourself, saying 'no' to the things that you imagine make up your 'self', and finding to your astonishment that the 'self' you get back is more glorious, more joyful than you could have imagined. That's how the kingdom arrived through Jesus' achievement. That's how it spreads today. All the trade routes of Christian theology and discipleship pass through this point.

TODAY

Teach us, gracious Lord, to follow you all the way where you lead, whatever it costs.