

TFTD 23.31. Wednesday March 29

Matthew 23

Locking people out



Jesus said, You keep locking people out of the kingdom of heaven! For you neither enter [yourselves], nor permit those trying to enter to go in. Matthew 23.13

This is probably the most difficult chapter of Matthew for us to read today. It's a bitter denunciation of the religious teachers of Jesus'

day. You should respect what they teach, Jesus says, because they sit in Moses' seat (v.2). But teaching the law is one thing: living up to it is quite another.

But there's something missing in this chapter. Where is all the love that Jesus has just identified as the key to fulfilling God's Law (22.37-40)? What happened to loving your enemies (5.43-48)? We need to be careful to read this material in its historical context. It is not an attack on Judaism as such — in fact Jesus consistently shows great respect for the Jewish Law and compassion for ordinary people trying to live their lives by it (cf. 5.17-20). It doesn't even make much sense as an attack on the Pharisees. They were a reform movement within Judaism, in some ways the closest of all the first-century sects to Jesus and his followers.

Matthew's "woes" probably reflect the bitterness of sectarian in-fighting after the fall of Jerusalem, when his small Jewish-Christian church was engaged with other Jewish sects (the Pharisees among them) in a life-and-death struggle for the heart and soul of the nation. It's a sobering example

of the in-fighting that so often disfigures the best in religion. We can see it down through the history of the church, in the polemic of the post-Reformation era — or even today. Nothing is more calculated to lock the doors of the kingdom than squabbling on the doorstep — keeping out the very people who long to find a way in.

And there are warnings here for all religious leaders — especially in the church. The danger of “hypocrisy”: literally, “acting a part”, hiding behind a mask like the actors on the Greek stage. The danger of “straining out a gnat to swallow a camel” (v.24) —getting hung up on trivial details and losing sight of what God’s law is really about (v.23). And the danger of getting obsessed with our own status as leaders, enjoying the trimmings of title and authority but forgetting the golden rule of the kingdom of heaven: “The greatest among you will be your servant, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (vv.11-12).

There are many ways of locking people out. The King is coming into his own — but are we ready to receive him? Are we ready to put our own resources at his disposal? Are we ready for Jesus’

vision of the kingdom of heaven, a place that has room for excited, noisy children (Matt 21.14-15)? — or are we too busy telling them to be quiet? Are we prepared to open the doors of our holy places to broken, imperfect humanity? Or are we too busy putting up barriers at the entrance, too busy saying, ‘Change this, buy that, talk our language, your currency isn’t good enough here’? Or are we just like the big indifferent city, just too wrapped up in our own lives to notice his coming?

True and humble king, hailed by the crowd as Messiah: grant us the faith to know you and love you, that we may be found beside you on the way of the cross, which is the path of glory. AMEN

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