

Great Adventure—Notes on Matthew Chapters 20 & 21

In these two chapters, Jesus is entering Jerusalem, approaching his Passion. Jesus is still telling parables, focusing on the Kingdom. There has been tension between Jesus and the leaders of Israel. He has spoken of their poor leadership and the coming end of their rule. He says that he will replace the Temple with himself, that there will be twelve new tribes of Israel and that there will be a new priesthood.

Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard—Mt. 20:1-16

This parable is not about fairness or a contractual relationship. It is about a covenant and a family relationship, in which God treats all the members of his family the same. God does not reward us according to the length of time that we have been in the Church. Jesus says two interesting things here. First, “Am I not allowed to choose what to do with what belongs to me?” i.e., the reward for those who labor in the vineyard is not theirs by right, but it belongs to God and can be given as he sees fit. Second, the owner of the vineyard addresses the worker as “friend,” moving beyond the master/servant relationship. John 15:15: “No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”

One of the things that Israel always failed to understand was her place in the family of God. She is the firstborn of many nations, but God’s heart and mind is not only on Israel. As the firstborn, Israel is to be an influence on the other nations and to lead them into the house of God, so that they may experience what Israel has experienced. Israel fails to see the banquet laid out before her and fails to understand that there will be many others who will receive the same grace and mercy from God that she has. One who has been faithful for a lifetime will receive God’s mercy and eternal life, but so will the notorious sinner who repents in his final hour.

God lavishes his mercy and love on us as our parents lavish their love upon us. We may tend to measure our parents’ love based on what we get, and we may conclude that we are not loved as much as another if we do not have as much. But God’s love is not any greater for one who has much than for one who has little. The reward that he gives us is himself: his love, his generosity and his grace. We cannot judge the love of God by monetary value and the material things of this world. He gives himself to us equally.

The Request of James and John—Mt. 20:20-28

Jesus asks them whether they will be able to drink the cup that he will drink. He links Baptism and the Eucharist. Mk. 10:38: “Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” This represents their pledge to follow him to the cross. Whenever we receive the Eucharist, we are pledging our allegiance to follow Christ to the cross. He tells us that we will suffer, but that we will also participate in his life. When we take the cup, we die to ourselves. Our “Amen” is a dying to ourselves and a pledge of our lives. Not only are we communing with Christ in drinking his blood, but we are making a covenant pledge: “I will give my life for you.”

In the Old Testament, to “drink the cup” was a metaphor for God’s wrath poured out upon the wicked. See Ps. 75:9: Yes, a cup is in the Lord’s hand, foaming wine, fully spiced. When God pours it out, they will drain it even to the dregs; all the wicked of the earth must drink; Is. 51:17: You who drank at the Lord’s hand the cup of his wrath; Jer. 25:15-16: Take this cup of foaming wine from my hand, and have all the nations to whom I will send you drink it. They shall drink, and be convulsed, and go mad, because of the sword I will send among them.

Jesus’ Passion, endured for sinners, that’s the cup that he will drink. We often think that Jesus did everything for us on the cross, and that we don’t have to do anything. All we do is receive. But Jesus shares with us everything unique to his ministry. He allows us to participate in every aspect of his ministry. That is why we are truly the Body of Christ. Yes, he suffered and died for the sins of the world; yes, he’s the Physician, the one Mediator between God and man, but yet he shares all these aspects of his ministry with us as the Body of Christ so that he will be effective in the world and we will come to know him by doing what he did. When we take the cup we say that I pledge my life for you, Christ, and I will participate with you in the redemption of the world as a member of the Body of Christ. Yes, in partaking of the cup we participate in all the joy and all the benefits of the Kingdom, but we are also pledging that we will suffer with Christ for the sake of the world. That is why Paul says in Col. 1:24, “I rejoice in my suffering for your sake, and I fill up in my body that which is lacking in the sufferings of Christ.” As Pope John Paul II said, “We have a small particle of the infinite treasury of God’s redemption, and we can apply that suffering in other people’s lives.”

People talk about how the Mass is so repetitive and boring. But if you realize what is special about the Mass, you would want to attend Mass as often as you can.

In the Old Testament, the holiest day of the week was the Sabbath, the day to enter into God’s rest. God had rested from the work of his creation on the seventh day, and Israel was also to cease from her striving and bearing her burdens on the Sabbath. Hebrews Chapter 4 says that Israel had failed to enter into the Sabbath rest because they did not exercise faith in what God had revealed to them. They continued to carry their burdens and they failed to enter the rest that God had provided for them. The Church teaches us that the Sunday liturgy fulfills the Sabbath rest, so that when we come to Mass we are entering into a Sabbath rest, in which we cease to strive and to bear our burdens. We rest in God’s finished work, which is related to the Resurrection. Acts 20:7: “The disciples gathered in prayer on the first day of the week.” Why don’t they meet on the seventh day? Because now the special day is on the first day, the day of the Resurrection. Modern culture puts Monday at the head of the week, but as Christians, we place Sunday at the head of the week. Like Israel, we fail to enter the rest God has for us if we do not lay aside our burdens. The Mass is to be the place where we commune with God, we pledge our allegiance to him through the Eucharist, we take him in, we offer our sufferings to him, and we raise our burdens up to him, but for many of us it has become a burden and a pain. We fight on the way to church, we think about nothing but our burdens while we are there, and on the way home we fight about where to eat. Why? Because we’re not matching faith with what we are hearing, and we’re failing to enter the rest.

The Healing of Two Blind Men—Mt. 20:29-34

These two men would have been begging for money, but when Jesus approaches they ask him for something else: “Lord, let our eyes be opened.” They sensed that someone greater, the Lord, is present. They realize that their need is not for money—they need vision. When we pray, are we fixated on asking for things, or do we ask for vision? Do we ask for wisdom, to see who we really are, what to do with our children, to see through God’s eyes? We struggle not with a lack of things or a lack of luxury but with a lack of vision for our lives. Mother Teresa: America struggles with a poverty greater than that of India, not a poverty of money but an inner poverty.

The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem—Mt. 21:1-11

As he had said in Matthew 16, Jesus goes up to Jerusalem. He is acting out the signs of the Messiah. Read Zechariah 9-14. Jesus is entering Jerusalem as Solomon did in 1 Kings 1:32-40. Solomon entered as a great king; Jesus enters as the Son of David. Both times there is a great crowd celebrating and Jerusalem is in a state of commotion. In v. 5 Matthew combines Is. 62:11: “Say to daughter Zion, your savior comes” with Zech. 9:9: “See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, meek, and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass.” According to St. Augustine, the donkey symbolizes Israel and the colt, the younger Gentiles. The crowd spreads their garments before Jesus. This was a sign of homage to a king in the Old Testament: 2 Kings 9:13. They wave palm branches before Jesus. These had royal significance. In 2 Mc. 10:7, the Israelites welcomed Judas Maccabeus back to Jerusalem with palm branches. The families of Herod and of the chief priests had intermarried with the descendants of the Maccabees, so they would have been distressed that the crowds were welcoming Jesus with palm branches.

Jesus is entering Jerusalem because he is to be the Paschal Lamb, giving his life for the life of the world. The Passover is the central redemptive event in the Old Testament. In Exodus 12, there are specific directions for how the Passover is to be carried out. On the tenth day of the month of Nisan a lamb is to be selected and inspected for blemishes until the fourteenth day of the month, when the lamb is to be sacrificed and eaten with unleavened bread. When Solomon built a permanent temple in Jerusalem, the Passover was to be celebrated there, so it was not practical for pilgrims to bring a lamb for the sacrifice. Instead, a sacrificial flock was raised outside Jerusalem, and on the tenth of Nisan it was driven into Jerusalem. This is the same time that Jesus, the Lamb of God, is triumphantly entering Jerusalem. For the next four days he will be inspected and found to be without fault. In John 19:6, Pilate declares, “I find no fault in him.” After that, Jesus is put to death and gives up his spirit at twilight, the same time that the Passover lamb was to be slain.

The Cleansing of the Temple—Mt. 21:12-17

Jesus uses a very sophisticated method of teaching called “remez,” meaning “hinting.” He references Scripture passages and brings them together to make a point. Is. 56:7: Sacrifices of foreigners will be acceptable, “for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” God is gathering all the nations, including the Gentiles, to himself. He draws them to the new temple, Jesus. Jer. 7:11: “Has this house which bears my name become in your eyes a den of thieves?” The temple was destroyed in

587 BC because Israel failed to listen to Jeremiah and repent. The temple is destroyed once again in 70 AD because Israel fails to repent.

Three Prophetic Gestures

Jesus does three things in Matthew 21 which point to himself as the Messiah. The first of these is the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, as explained above, pointing to himself as the perfect sacrificial lamb. In Genesis 22, Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Abraham tells Isaac that "God himself will provide the lamb." God stays Abraham's hand and substitutes a ram. Ever since then, Israel has been awaiting the sacrificial lamb which God is to provide. We join in the acclamation, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" at the moment in the Mass when we welcome the Lamb of Sacrifice, right before we allow the Lord into our living temples to cleanse them. Jesus makes a triumphal entry in every Mass. The cleansing of the temple is the second of the Messianic signs, and the third is the cursing of the fig tree, a symbol of Israel and the prophets