

Judgement in Matthew (Matthew 18.23-35)

Neil Millar

This morning we come to the fourth and final sermon in this introduction to Matthew's gospel, in which we focus on the theme of judgment. So, let me start by coming clean and confessing that I cannot believe in a place called 'hell' to which God sends people as punishment for their misdeeds. I am not interested in, and nor can I take seriously the image of a God who tortures the unrighteous, who casts evildoers into outer darkness where forever and there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. I'm inclined to say (at least from this side of death) that if God is really like that, then I'd rather have nothing to do with her.

Unfortunately for me, the writer of Matthew seems otherwise inclined. In fact, in comparison with the other three Gospels, Matthew heightens the theme of end-time vengeance in Jesus' teaching (see Neville 2013,9-10). There are eight parables of eschatological vengeance in Matthew's gospel – four that occur nowhere else – and the picture that emerges from these, writes biblical scholar David Neville (2013.23-4), 'is that those determined to be wicked, unresponsive, or irresponsible will ultimately experience the full force of divine retributive violence'. The phrase 'wailing and teeth-grinding' for example, appears once in Luke's gospel, where it expresses the regret of those excluded from the heavenly banquet, and is found nowhere else in the New Testament. Nowhere else except Matthew, where it occurs on six separate occasions as a solemn refrain underscoring the distress of those who cursed in the future judgement.

Now, the problem to be faced here isn't simply one of squeamishness or personal preference about the way I'd like God to be. If it were just that, then you could legitimately warn me about making God in my own image, about choosing an image of God that satisfies my 'lefty' sensibilities while playing fast and loose with the Word of God. But it's more than that – this has to do with the integrity of the gospel as a whole. As David Neville (2013.17) has pointed out, this is the Gospel in which, 'Jesus pronounces a blessing on peace-makers (5.9), commands non-retaliation alongside love for enemies ... (5.38-48), and conducts his mission non-violently'. Are we to believe then, that the final judgement of God be completely inconsistent with this? Incongruent with the non-retaliatory, non-violent way of life that Jesus both commended and lived? And, if we find it hard to believe that it will be so different, then what are we to make of these difficult texts that pepper Matthew's account?

I don't profess to have a complete answer to this question, but let me offer some points of reference that may be helpful.

To begin, I do believe that Christ is the judgement of God, and that we are *answerable* for our lives; that the choices we make and kind of life we lead *matters*. And I believe, as Matthew's parables persistently teach, that the basis of this judgement has to do with our faithfulness (or otherwise) to God's will and word, with how we treat one another and our world, and especially those most vulnerable, most easily overlooked, most easily disregarded. What so angered the king in the parable we just heard was that his slave would not show mercy, would not 'pay forward' (if you like) the mercy he himself had received. The prophets had told us what God required, to act justly and to love

mercy and to walk humbly with God, and Jesus had done the same. He taught us to live graciously, mercifully, compassionately, and he himself had done so, living in solidarity with his people, practising non-retaliation and forgiveness, even unto death. He is the measure of a good and faithful life, and rightfully our judge. But what is his judgement like?

In human affairs, we're accustomed to equating judgement with punishment. Most of us learnt this young. We disobeyed our parents or teachers, did something wrong, and we were punished – a smack, a hundred lines, withdrawn privileges, detention, etc, etc. Today when certain people do certain bad things (e.g. murder someone or abuse a child) we cry out for punishment to be administered, for vengeance even. But are such violent means effective? Do they bring good, or merely perpetuate the patterns we supposedly deplore? What does violent retribution (legal or otherwise) achieve? Need it be so? I note that, at times, (for example, the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in South Africa) we are capable of *enacting* judgement in the context of forgiveness and reconciliation; and capable of *receiving* judgement as an opening, a restoration, to a more honest, communal, and life-giving way of being. And, if this is so, it means that judgement need not necessitate violent punishment or vengeance, and that questioning Matthew's portrayal of divine vengeance is not the same thing as evading judgement altogether.

So, what might be going on for Matthew that he employs such a violent eschatology, that he seemingly delights in the prospect of ultimate punishment for the ungodly? At one level, we don't know. One hypothesis is that he

belonged to a community suffering persecution and that the promise of ‘end-time vengeance served to instil hope and assurance in a beleaguered community of faith’ (Neville 2013.26). I’ve certainly been there myself – angrily invoking curses and damnation on those who’ve done me wrong; feeling mollified by the thought that they’ll get their comeuppance eventually! We get it, but it’s not very satisfying is it? In part because it doesn’t seem ‘right’... and isn’t that interesting!!

Theologian James Alison suggests that something else was going on for Matthew. He proffers that Matthew’s image of God as judge is in the process of being subverted and transformed by the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It’s true, he says, that the old ‘apocalyptic’ language of judgement remains in place – images of weeping and gnashing teeth – but it’s also true that this understanding is losing steam. The real interest in the parables, Alison suggests, is the way in which a whole different imagining of God and judgement is emerging; based on the dawning recognition that in the crucified Jesus, God came alongside us, *became* a victim of our violence, *in order to unmask it*. What this early Christian community is learning is that God is not like other rulers (e.g. the Emperor) – distant, demanding and vengeful; that God is love, and that love comes close, to judge, reconcile and restore.

Now, these explanations for Matthew’s violent imagery are just that, *explanations*. They seek to give an account which allows us to take seriously Jesus (God’s) criteria of judgement (justice *and* mercy), while not taking literally the imagery in which this judgement is embedded – violent punishment. I’m drawn to Alison’s explanation because, I’m committed to a

non-violent concept of God. But is my commitment true? Does such a conception of God cohere with the broad witness of our tradition, Matthew's language notwithstanding?

Here it seems to me that Jesus' own practice *must* be our guide. We have no account of his life apart from the gospels, but these texts are unanimous in testifying to Jesus' practice of 'nonretaliation and love, even of perceived enemies, in imitation of the indiscriminate generosity of God' (Neville 2013.44). For example, Jesus is the one who teaches the limitless forgiveness of sins, 'seventy times seven'; the one who goes to his death refusing to call down violent rescue, forgiving his persecutors and returning to those (who deserted) with word of peace, not recrimination. The 'common story told by all four Gospel writers of how Jesus responded to violence and of what he taught his disciples with respect to violence is determinative', David Neville writes, which means, that the very story that Matthew recounts works to deconstruct his own eschatological outlook.

There's one more piece of evidence to offer for the claim that God's judgement is ultimately non-violent, and that's our own experience. Truly to undergo forgiveness is an exposing and painful experience – facing and acknowledging stuff we'd rather not see. But the stance of God towards us is always of invitation and welcome (like the father in the story of the prodigal sons). The God we are getting to know, the God we proclaim (week by week in church) is willing to forgive, is yearning for our fellowship. God's judgment we're discovering is not full of fault-finding and reprisal, but of compassion,

mercy, love. It's judgement in the service of reconciliation... wholeness... well-being. If it weren't so, then would we ever have confidence to come?

There *is* weeping as we undergo the judgement of God, I know it myself. When we truly realise who we've been (and not been) it's devastating. We weep in recognition of our sin, we may even grind our teeth, but not forever, for as the Psalmist (103) says:

*The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in loving devotion.*

God will not always accuse us, nor harbor anger forever.

*God has not dealt with us according to our sins
or repaid us according to our iniquities.*

Yes, 'weeping *may* last for a night', but thanks to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, 'joy comes in the morning'.

And friends, here I stand, Matthew's language notwithstanding, proclaiming and trusting that God is always and everywhere merciful. I can do no other. Amen.

References

Neville, D (2013) *A Peaceable Hope: Contesting Violent Eschatology in New Testament Narratives*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.