

Prayers

Opening prayer

Great and glorious Lord, Creator of all things and Master of the Universe; we honour You as our Lord and Saviour. May each of us confess our sins and may each of us be forgiven, and consequently live our lives as people who are free. Draw us daily closer our God, and to His saving, healing and redeeming grace, we pray. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

Take each moment of your day where there is an opportunity for peace, to give thanks to God for the gift of the day. There may be times when you do not feel like doing this, but the merit of the discipline is that you give thanks to God even when you feel down. This can be a great blessing.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who lead worship in your church.** *Pray for organists and other musicians who play in church services (weddings, funerals) professionally. Pray that they will be inspired by God to use their gifts not because they are paid but because God has called them to this service.*
- *Pray about the exploration of the seas. Much work is done to explore the seas but we do not know enough about how this will affect the oceans. Pray for godly wisdom*
- *Give thanks to God for the Bible, and pray that it will be truly valued and read by God's people today*

Meditation

In a world full of beautiful sights and the marvels of creation,
Save us, Lord, from blindness and insensitivity:

In a world full of air and water, earth and natural elements,
Save us, Lord, from polluting ourselves to death:

In a world full of plants and animals all dependent upon each other,
Save us, Lord, from brutality and destruction:

In a world full of trees, plants and a vast array of vegetation,
Save us, Lord, from exploiting this gift, for greed:

In a world full of people with vast potential for creativity and love,
Save us, Lord, from using others to meet our needs:

In a world full of the evidence of the mighty hand that made it,
Save us, Lord, from treating it as ours alone.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Matthew 17:22-27

²² As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them,

‘The Son of Man is going to be handed over to human hands; ²³ They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.’

And they were extremely distressed.

²⁴ When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and said,

'Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?'

²⁵ He said,

'Yes, He does.'

When he came home, Jesus spoke to him first, asking,

'What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their own children or from others?'

²⁶ When Peter said,

'From others,'

Jesus said to him,

'Therefore the children are free. ²⁷ However, so that we do not offend them, go to the lake and cast a fishhook; take the first fish you catch, and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin. Take it and give it to them for you and me.'

Review

Our passage today contains two reports. The first one is Jesus' second prediction of His death and resurrection, and the second is longer and contains the famous story of Peter, Jesus and the 'Temple Tax'. This was a controversial issue amongst Jews of the day because although they were willing to pay their dues for the Temple, what they paid had become somewhat politicised, as we will find out! Peter was challenged by tax collectors about this, and Jesus took the opportunity to teach him some truths about the nature of God's Kingdom (17:25). The incident was resolved from a practical point of view by a small miracle, which is regarded by some as rather controversial (17:27).

After the troubled events at the foot of the mount of Transfiguration in which the disciples at the foot of the mountain had shown themselves to be weak in faith (17:19), Jesus regrouped his followers. He evidently returned to Galilee, aiming for Peter's house (see 17:25 and 8:14) where they had stayed before. This may have seemed like a return to normality for some of the disciples, but for Jesus, this was only a temporary pause. If some of the disciples were demoralised, then what they were about to hear was not easy, for Jesus immediately spoke to them all about His coming death and resurrection. The first time Jesus spoke about this (16:21) it was after Peter had declared Him to be the Messiah (16:16), and Peter completely misunderstood Jesus, earning a stern rebuke. However, it was crucial that the disciples accept what lay ahead, and as Jesus said this again, the disciples became extremely upset (17:23).

The story about the temple tax, including the miracle of the coin in the mouth of a fish, is something of an oddity in the Gospels, being only present in Matthew's Gospel. Initially, it is difficult to see what this unique story could say to help us understand Jesus' walk to Jerusalem and the Cross. However, it has some interesting features which, when understood, make some important points about the Kingdom. It is also interesting that Matthew describes the issue of the Temple tax as a live issue, and this enables us to date Matthew's Gospel as written quite early on in the decades after Jesus' death. It is a fascinating issue and one we will discuss later in the further study.

The Temple Tax was strongly enforced in Jesus' day, and was justified by Moses' command to raise money as a religious duty and for the upkeep of the 'tabernacle', the tent complex in which the Ark of the Covenant was kept (Ex 30:11-16). All Jews paid the tax, and it was regarded as an honour, and a matter of Jewish identity. However, the question put to Peter by the tax-collectors was something of a trick question, because rabbis and scribes did not pay the Temple tax, so the question itself required Peter to declare whether he regarded Jesus as a rabbi. By replying that Jesus did indeed pay the tax, Peter did not give his questioners the answer they wanted, and yet he was consistent with what he believed. For Him, Jesus was the Messiah, not a religious teacher!

When Jesus was alone with the disciples, he took the opportunity to speak to Peter about this, and focussed not so much on the meaning of the tax, but on the same issue of who should pay and who should not. The gist of Jesus' comment in verse 26 is that in God's Kingdom, all are children of the King, and this privilege is free. To illustrate this, he sent Peter out to catch a fish and find a coin to pay the tax for Himself and Peter. It was not so much a matter of getting out of paying the tax, but an illustration of the fact that despite all the problems and pressures, the Kingdom of God that Jesus was bringing, was one that was free. Indeed, Jesus implies strongly that the Kingdom is free for all. It was something Peter needed to hear from the Lord.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Why did Jesus speak about His death a second time?
- Why does Peter have a central role in this story?
- What can we find out about the date of Matthew's Gospel?
- Further details about the strange matter of the Temple tax
- Why did Jesus perform the miracle of the coin in the mouth of the fish?

Notes on the translation of the passage

V22 *'as they were gathering ...'*

The phrase is quite rare in the New Testament, and although we read the term 'gathering' many times in the Bible, the Greek word used here is rather different from the one usually used, and implies that they were crowding around Jesus. Indeed, we do not even know who was gathering! It does not say. We assume that Matthew is talking about the disciples, and this is quite logical, but it is just possible that a crowd of people came to see Jesus as He returned to Galilee. This would make the announcement of His death and resurrection more remarkable, rather like a public announcement! On balance, I think this unlikely.

V27 *'you will find a coin'*

The word for a coin here is 'stater'. This is a silver coin worth about four 'drachmas', or the equivalent of a shekel. It would therefore have been sufficient for two people's 'Temple Tax' as the passage clearly says (17:27).

Why did Jesus speak about His death a second time?

We have already commented that Jesus needed to reinforce the message that He was going to Jerusalem. Some may have thought that the return to Galilee meant a change in Jesus' overall plan, but this was not the case. Also, Jesus wanted the disciples to accept that His journey would also be their journey, and that their mission goals had changed. From now on the work in which they were involved was not a mission to demonstrate the Kingdom to those all around, as it had been when they went out at Jesus' command (10:1f.). Now, they were involved in the Mission of God by which the Messiah would save all humanity.

It is likely that the disciples' distress (v23) was because Jesus continued to speak of suffering and death. Jesus talked of being 'handed over to human hands', and this phrase was graphic, implying that He and His mission would be grasped by the Jewish and Roman authorities. Jesus was always one step ahead of everybody and everything, it would have been difficult for them to imagine that He would be forced to come under the authority of others. Nevertheless, their experience with Jesus surely told them that He did not make light of such matters or talk about things without purpose. Their response showed at least some understanding of the situation, unlike Peter's rejection when he first heard of it (16:22). However, it is also possible that they were upset because they realised that not only would the authorities seek to kill Jesus, but if they succeeded, the disciples would be left in a situation of real hardship.

One thing they were not able to do was to see past the death of Jesus to what He meant by being 'raised'. The learned scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees argued and were divided over the reality of the resurrection, so how could they know what it meant unless Jesus taught them or showed them? If they knew what this meant, they may have been able to express some peace or even joy, instead of distress. It is not easy for us who know about the Resurrection to put ourselves in the place of those who lived before it happened. I suggest that we should be sympathetic to the disciples who, despite their failures, had to exercise an enormous faith in Jesus just to keep up with the pace of events and hold on to their discipleship, in what were becoming quite extreme circumstances.

Why does Peter have a central role in this story?

The next few verses come as a surprise after the intensity of the previous discussions between Jesus and the disciples. We are suddenly switched from a painful dialogue about the death of Jesus to what seems to be a trivial dispute about the 'Temple Tax', and it is an intriguing story! If we remember that Matthew was writing for an early Christian community with a large number of Jews, one or two features of the story are of particular interest.

Firstly, the action in this story revolves around Peter. It was Peter that the authorities approached to find out about Jesus (17:24), and Peter who answered Jesus correctly (17:26), enabling Him to make an important point (17:26). After the rebuke Peter had received from Jesus earlier (16:22f.), his positive response to Jesus shows a considerable degree of humility. From early days until now, some have seen this story as proof that Peter and his successors in the leadership of the church are the proper human 'route' to find Jesus. This is stretching the story too much, and it is better to assume that Peter's predominance in the

story demonstrates that Jesus had forgiven Peter's earlier stupidity (16:22). This was important, and enabled the story to move on.

What can we find out about the date of Matthew's Gospel?

In Jesus' day, the Temple Tax was paid for the upkeep of the Temple in Jerusalem. Most people paid this willingly because they appreciated the Temple even though Herod the Great has effectively inflicted a mortgage on the entire nation for generations. However, the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 AD after disturbances and anti-Jewish feeling throughout the Roman Empire. Then, after its destruction, the Romans demanded that the Jewish people paid the same level of taxation but the civil authorities diverted it to pay for the upkeep of the Temple of Jupiter Capitolis. This was a direct insult to the Jews, and from then on, quite naturally, they regarded the tax as a punitive insult.

Because of this, we must conclude that Matthew included this story because he was writing before 70AD. If Matthew was writing after this date, then he would have surely left out this incident because the whole matter of this tax would have been painful for both Jews and Christians. Some might suggest that Matthew would have included it just because it was true, but Matthew clearly selected which stories of Jesus he told very carefully, and for specific reasons. For example, he left out a considerable number of stories of Jesus that are found in Mark, a Gospel he clearly had access to when he wrote.

The good thing about this is that if Matthew was written before 70AD, it makes it all the more likely that the Matthew who wrote this Gospel is indeed Matthew the Tax-Collector who was a disciple of Jesus. It may seem a small point to many, but is important that we use good arguments to back up what we believe about the Gospel. Many independent literary analysts in the past 150 years have suggested that the Gospel could not possibly have been written by Matthew the disciple. This suggests it was.

Further details about the strange matter of the Temple tax

So what were the authorities attempting to do by approaching Peter to ask about the Temple Tax? Moses' original command was to pay for the upkeep of the Tabernacle (see above), at half a shekel per person per year, roughly equivalent to two days pay. It was reinforced by Nehemiah (after the Babylonian exile), and the amount required then was one third of a shekel per person annually 'for the service of the house of our God' (Neh 10:32). The going rate in Jesus' day was Moses' higher levy of half a shekel, and it was required of every male over twenty. As the Jewish community was increasingly spread throughout the Roman Empire, the raising of this tax was an essential means of keeping in contact with all Jewish people. The days were long since gone when the majority of Jews lived together in Israel. The majority lived in the towns and cities of the Empire, even in Jesus' day, and before AD70, the Temple tax bound Jewish people together across the whole known world.

Peter's positive response to the enquiry about Jesus' payment of the tax may have avoided any trap set by the tax-collectors (see above). However, it seems that there was more to the issue, because Jesus picked it up again as soon as Peter arrived back 'home' (17:25). Moreover, Jesus' questions picked up on the issue of identity. Peter may have been proud to say that he and Jesus did what all good Jews did, but Jesus had other things in mind, and was thinking about God's Kingdom and His own coming death (17:22). It is ironic that Jesus, the Messiah, should have to pay a religious tax to the very authorities who were attempting to kill him!

Peter replied logically to Jesus' question (17:26), however, what Jesus said completely cut across all the traditions of the tax in order to make an important spiritual point about the coming Kingdom. It was God's intention that His own people, His 'children', should be free from such obligations! It was Jesus' way of saying that God's children do not take their identity from the paying of a tax, but from their relationship with the Father! Jesus was the 'Son of God', the disciples were the community of the 'children of God', and therefore, they were all 'family'. Nothing like this is said so clearly anywhere else in Matthew's Gospel, and Matthew told this story to ensure that Christians knew their identity as a disciple of Jesus would thereafter be a matter of relationship with God, and not any tax or other worldly means of identity. The family nature of the Christian community would prove to be essential, a teaching echoed in John's Gospel (8:33,36), and in the writing of Paul (1 Cor 9:1).

Why did Jesus perform the miracle of the coin in the mouth of the fish?

Whether to absolve Peter's conscience or simply to prevent any offence being caused by lack of payment, Jesus resolved the immediate situation by asking Peter to catch a fish, open its mouth and find a 'stater', worth a shekel. It is regarded as a minor miracle, but this would pay the tax for them both, and prevent any further distraction from Jesus' Messianic task. This was not the issue over which Jesus would be brought to the Cross! However, Jesus' approach to this controversial issue is reflected in the principle of 'not offending the weaker person', a feature of Paul's writing (Romans 14; 1 Cor 8:1-13; 9:12) which while controversial, remains an important principle of Christian discipleship. We need to be guided by the Lord in any controversy, of course, but those who insist upon their rights frequently have a very negative impact upon the

witness and mission of the church, and this story teaches us that we should be wiser than this for the good of the Kingdom.

It is odd that Jesus performs a 'miracle' such as this which appears on the surface to be contrary to the idea that the Messiah should not perform miracles for His own benefit; and also the moral principle that we should not expect God to do for us that which we should do for ourselves. Peter could have easily fished for a few days and earned enough to pay the tax. However, these objections to this miracle, which I have found in most commentaries on Matthew's Gospel, demonstrate a modern tendency to look at the money issues rather than anything else.

However, Jesus performed this miracle to help us see some important spiritual principles, concerning His authority, the freedom of the children of God, and the wisdom of not creating unnecessary offence at the Gospel. He did not do it for his own benefit or for Peter; they gained nothing from this 'miracle' and Jesus did not want another distraction as He went to Jerusalem.

Discipleship

Application

It is undoubtedly true that Jesus' main point here is that God's people take their identity from the Father, and from their acceptance in the Kingdom by the grace of God through Jesus. It is of course important for each of us to be identified with a specific 'church' in one place, and the nature of the church today means that whether we like it or not, we cannot ignore the labels of denominations or even 'free' or 'independent' churches. Even the most independent of churches is labelled by people and most advertise their own 'statement of faith' to help people know what kind of church it is and what theology they teach and preach. Yet despite these divisions, our primary 'family' identity is that of being Jesus' disciples, saved sinners who are part of God's work in the world, and part of His Kingdom growing throughout the whole world.

Too many think of themselves as 'Baptist', 'Vineyard', 'Methodist', 'Pentecostal', 'Episcopal', Anglican', or one of the thousands of churches structures in existence today, but find it hard to be specific about what it means to be a 'Christian'. It is indeed hard to know who the 'family of God' is within one town or village, for example. Most Christians do not know if there are Christians living only a few houses or blocks away, or where. Yet Jesus sees this, and God longs to work through His 'family' to change the world and extend His Kingdom. This will not change until He comes in glory!

Questions for groups

1. Compare what the Jews paid for the upkeep of their temple, and what you give for the upkeep of your church.
2. In what ways are you aware of being 'free' as a child of God? Share what you believe this to mean.
3. Do we see the whole of the church as being God's 'family' today? Would this idea help us in any way?

Discipleship challenges

- *Take half an hour to walk or sit in peace, and think about the death and resurrection of our Lord, and what it means to you. This is the one event in history to have truly changed everything, and it rested on the shoulders of one man.*
 - *Fast and pray about the issue of the unity of God's people. This is a constant theme which reoccurs throughout scripture, and needs our constant attention.*
-

Final Prayer

Help us, Lord Jesus, to look back and be happy that we have learned from the past, look forward and anticipate the future you have in store for us with joy, and be content that we do indeed reflect the Faith that has been handed down to us. Bring us to that place of peace, Lord Jesus; AMEN
