

In facing opposition

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Date: 27 August 2023

Preacher: Marcus Evans

[0 : 0 0] The reading is Matthew chapter 13, verses 51 to 58. Have you understood all these things? They said to him, Yes. And he said to them, Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.

And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, and coming to his hometown, he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?

Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?

Where then did this man get all these things? And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, A prophet is not without honour, except in his hometown and in his own household.

And he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief. Let me pray as we begin. Father God, we thank you for this morning. Thank you for this chance now to study your word.

[1 : 1 3] Please open our hearts as we look at it. In Jesus' name. Amen. Now, summertime always features some interesting gatherings of people.

Perhaps some of you made it to Glastonbury, which will be conveniently close to Simon and Rachel Dowdy when they move to Bath for next year. And we'll all be glad not to have attended the World Scout Jamboree in Korea earlier this month, where 43,000 people had to be evacuated at short notice.

Another event that was taking place at the same time was the World Youth Day, a four-yearly gathering of young people from the Catholic Church, which took place this year in Lisbon.

There were over 350,000 participants at that event. And in the lead-up to it, there was a video that flashed across Instagram screens in France and probably elsewhere of Olivier Giroud, Olivier Giroud, the Frenchman who scored in the quarterfinal against England last year.

When he's not scoring for France and AC Milan, he's a devout Christian. And he was encouraging these 350,000 young people as to what they might learn at that conference.

[2 : 2 7] And he finished with a question and said, if you could ask Jesus one question, what would it be? Now, I sent this video to a couple of French friends saying that I now had to forgive them for Olivier Giroud scoring against England in last year's Men's World Cup final.

But one of them, a lawyer, wrote back to me the same day with a text message and he said, my question would be, my question to Jesus would be, what do you expect of me?

What do you expect of me? And I'd like us to hold that question in our minds as we look at this passage. We'll see Jesus visit his hometown of Nazareth and we find that people there do not meet his expectations.

They disappoint him. And more than that, they wound him really. And he chooses not to do many miracles there. And I think in so doing, those people help us to understand what Jesus does expect of us.

Now, as we turn to this passage, let's remind ourselves of the context which Simon's mentioned already, but especially for those of us like the Evans family who've been away a bit over the summer.

[3 : 36] Matthew 13 is a parable, is a chapter of teaching by Jesus, mostly in parables, about his kingdom. It has included some of Jesus' most famous parables, focusing in particular on the theme of growth through the parable of the sower and the parable of the mustard seed.

Jesus predicted that his kingdom would grow exponentially, and the past 2,000 years have shown his prediction to be correct. Jesus also taught that his kingdom will grow in the face of opposition.

Some of the seed in the parable of the sower gets snatched away. In the parable of the wheat and the weeds, wheat represents Jesus' followers, but they are surrounded by weeds, followers of the evil one, fighting against them.

In the less famous parable of the catch of fish, there is a separation between the good fish and the bad that are thrown away, like a scene from Brixham Fish Market. Jesus also taught that the kingdom grows where people make it their priority, like a man who finds treasure in a field and sells all he has to obtain the treasure, or a merchant who sells all he has to buy a pearl of great price, not following conventional investment advice, as Benji reminded us last week.

In our passage this morning, we're at the very end of the section of teaching in Matthew 13, and we've got that in verses 51 to 52, which I'll touch on at the very end.

[5 : 09] But we then move into a section of narrative, and we move into real-life reactions. We're out of the theory and into how people respond in practice. And the first reactions to Jesus after those parables about growth and opposition and priority are not good.

Our passage is one of those sections, and it's a section of the Gospels that I really do not think you could make up. You might have thought that after Jesus' teaching about his kingdom growing from a tiny mustard seed that's barely visible to the largest plant, the people who heard the message first in his hometown would believe and would be part of that growth.

But they're not. The first real-world reactions to Jesus after the parables of Matthew 13 are actually very mixed. So let's pick up the story at verse 53.

And please do have your Bibles open if you've closed them since the reading. After Jesus finished teaching, he went away and came to his hometown, which we know from Mark's account is back in Nazareth.

He goes to teach in the synagogue of his hometown, presumably among people he knew quite well, a bit like someone coming back to Grace Church after some time away, which I think is true for some people here this morning.

[6 : 26] And they listened to his teaching. And initially, verse 54, their reaction looks very positive. They were astonished.

And they said, where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Wow. This is amazing. And the where means what source rather than what location.

They're not thinking about geography. You might almost expect the next verse to read, and the kingdom of God grew that day as Jesus' hometown received the word.

But it doesn't. There is a complete shift in tone. Verse 55. Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary?

Are not his brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters here with us? Where did this man get all these things? And they took offense at him.

[7 : 26] It's almost as if there's a hidden, hang on a moment, in the middle between verse 54 and verse 55. He seems to have all this wisdom and all these mighty works.

But hang on a moment. That's not possible. We know his brothers and sisters. They're ordinary folk. He's not a prophet. He's certainly got no special powers.

He can't really have the wisdom and the mighty works that he seems to have. He looked like Superman for a moment. But this is just good old Clark Kent.

We know him. We know his family. We know where he's from. He's an ordinary person from an ordinary family with ordinary jobs. There's nothing to see here. And on one level, their understanding of who Jesus is is absolutely right.

He is the carpenter's son. He is Mary's son. These are his brothers and sisters. Jesus is a person. But on another level, they're absolutely wrong.

[8 : 30] They decide that this remarkable wisdom cannot be real. They're a million miles from accepting that as well as being the person who grew up in their community.

Jesus is also God come to earth. Peter would be the first to see that. Actually, just over the page, in chapter 14, verse 33, after seeing Jesus walk on water and calm the storm, truly you are the son of God.

The people of Nazareth cannot accept that Jesus is even a prophet, let alone the fullness of God in bodily form. And therefore, Jesus says, verse 57, a prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and with his own household.

And he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief. Generally speaking, though sadly there are exceptions, home is where we get a better reception than anywhere else.

We find acceptance, we find security, we find love. Not so if you're a prophet or the son of God. Home was a place where he was rejected and people took offense at him.

[9 : 39] Bringing to mind the suffering servant of Isaiah chapter 53, he was despised and rejected in his hometown. It would have been a painful experience and after this point in Matthew's gospel, there was no mention of Jesus going back to Nazareth again.

So what did the people of Nazareth get so wrong? It seems they were over-familiar with Jesus and that prevented them from seeing his true identity. And that's a trap that I think we must avoid.

And so that's my first point there on the handout. Beware over-familiarity with Jesus. Beware over-familiarity with Jesus. The people of Nazareth understood Jesus' humanity all too well.

But they missed his divinity, the difference between Jesus and any other person who's ever lived. They had a partially correct understanding of Jesus.

And this problem is not unique to the people of Nazareth. And if you'll permit me an aside, a relevant one, I promise, I'm going to take you on a journey to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD.

[10 : 48] This was the fourth ecumenical council of the early church after Nicaea, from which we get the Nicene Creed, Constantinople, and Ephesus, a kind of super synod of the church and actually over a thousand years before the Church of England existed.

And the aims of these councils were to achieve an orthodox consensus on key questions of theology, to restore peace, and to build church unity. And I need you to concentrate here for a second, so if anyone's drifted off, please tune in now.

Next book's a bit harder. So the Council of Chalcedon was a response to the Bishop of Constantinople, who was called Nestorius, and he argued that it was impossible for Mary to be the mother of God.

The Greek word is theotokos, because it was impossible for God to be born or to have a human mother. There's some overlap between Nestorius' views and those of Jesus' hometown, but in other respects, Nestorius is much closer to accepting the biblical Jesus than the Nazarenes were.

Nestorius argued that Mary was only the mother of Jesus' human nature and that God was the father of the divine Jesus. He wanted to keep Jesus' divine nature and his human nature separate, but in so doing, he was effectively turning Jesus into two people.

[12 : 11] And the early church apparently grew increasingly uncomfortable with this, because the Bible doesn't talk about Jesus as being two people. It talks about him as a single person. The word was made flesh.

He sits at the right hand of God, and so on. So the Council of Chalcedon produced a definition of who Jesus is that has broadly been accepted since and is aligned with what we would say in the Apostles' Creed.

And Gary Williams, a church historian, a number from Grace Church heard speak at Word Alive earlier this year, has summarized the conclusions of Chalcedon. And if you look at your handout, you've got the four bullets that are the summary around Jesus' identity.

I'll just read them out. Jesus Christ is fully God. Jesus Christ is fully man. There is one person, Jesus Christ. There is a communication of properties in the one person, Jesus Christ, such that Mary is the mother of God.

In other words, Mary gave birth to Jesus, who is God, even if she is not the ultimate source of his divine nature. Now let's come back to our passage.

[13 : 23] How would the people of Nazareth have fared against this definition? I think they would have got two out of four right. 50%.

Not too bad. Although I understand that grave boundaries have tightened quite a lot this year. They would have accepted that Jesus Christ is fully man. No problem there.

They would have accepted that he's a single person. Again, no problem. They would have rejected one and four, seeing it as impossible for their hometown boy to be fully God and categorically rejecting that Mary could in any sense have given birth to a divine person.

Therefore, they took offense at him and closed themselves off to Jesus' teaching. As we look at this list ourselves, this orthodox definition of Jesus' identity, which has broadly been accepted for 1,500 years, I wonder whether there are any points where we need to recalibrate our understanding of Jesus.

Do we miss one aspect of who Jesus is because we're over-familiar with another aspect? Speaking personally, I instinctively, though wrongly, feel more comfortable with the first point, Jesus Christ is fully God, than the second point, Jesus Christ is fully man.

[14 : 39] I might be tempted to a shorthand, Jesus is God, which is true, but it's not the whole story. Do you have a bias, an over-familiarity, with one aspect of who Jesus is that prevents you from seeing the whole of who Jesus is?

The Nazarenes could not accept that Jesus was God, which had consequences for them. If I struggle to remember that Jesus is fully man, this also has consequences.

And I'm going to quote here from a book called The Person of Christ, talking about the incarnation of Jesus as a man. In Christ, God enters a whole new range of experiences and relationships.

He experiences life in a human body and a human soul. He experiences human pain and human temptations. He suffers poverty and loneliness and humiliation.

He tastes death. That is what the incarnation made possible for God, real, personal experience of being human. Knowing that Jesus faced temptation and is fully man is important.

[15 : 49] We can pray, lead us not into temptation, knowing that he was tempted in every way, just as we are. There are all sorts of ways in which our understanding of Jesus' full identity may be lacking.

A Muslim person said to me earlier in the summer, we Muslims don't believe that Jesus died on the cross because we don't believe that God can die. What would you reply to that? If you're not sure, then like me, you might want to spend some more time considering Jesus' identity in more depth.

And one way of doing that is to read a book called Silent Witnesses by Gary Williams, recommended, I think, by Adrian Butler a few months ago. Really, really good. Two chapters on the Council of Chalcedon.

And then, if you want to go deeper than that, a book called The Person of Christ by Don MacLeod goes into Jesus' identity in more detail. Perhaps because the people of Nazareth get Jesus' identity wrong, they make another error, and that's our second point.

Beware a lack of faith in Jesus. Verse 58 tells us, And he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief.

[17 : 00] And the word unbelief in the ESV can be translated a lack of faith. There are also hints of that unbelief in verse 57. In the expression translated, they took offense at him. The original Greek apparently means they found in him obstacles to faith.

So as one commentator notes, perhaps the obstacles were in their own hearts rather than actually in Jesus. The expression taking offense comes up 16 times in Matthew's Gospel and showing you that pattern of opposition to Jesus throughout the Gospel.

And we see a direct impact of their lack of faith. Jesus did not do many mighty works there. Verse 58. We're only a few paragraphs away from the feeding of the 5,000.

So there's a pretty stark contrast between these events here in Nazareth. and what will follow very soon afterwards. People often say that musicians or bands who've made it big most enjoy coming back to play in front of their home crowd.

Coldplay at Wembley, Taylor Swift in Pennsylvania, the Beatles in Liverpool. Not so for Jesus in his ministry of teaching and working miracles.

[18 : 16] Home was full of people who didn't understand who he was, who did not believe, for whom he did not perform many mighty works. One question we might ask is whether their lack of faith means Jesus cannot perform any miracles there.

Is human faith like a fuel that is needed for Jesus to perform miracles? I think that would take the necessity of faith too far. There are people in the Bible, think of Legion, the man full of demonic spirits, think of Paul on the road to Damascus, who experienced miracles without showing any signs of faith.

And yet, faith is the ordinary way to gain access to Jesus' help in the Gospels. There are several instances where Jesus says to people in the book of Matthew, your faith has made you well.

Perhaps the greatest example of faith was the centurion and whose servant was paralysed at home who comes to Jesus and Jesus says to him, Matthew 8 verse 10, truly I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.

In Matthew 9 verse 2, Jesus healed the paralytic man lowered through the roof and Matthew notes the link with faith. Behold, some men brought to him a paralytic lying on a bed and when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic man, take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven.

[19 : 35] In our passage, Matthew makes a link between their lack of faith and Jesus' lack of mighty works compared with other places. And I think the question that that brings us, both individually and collectively, is how does Jesus view our faith?

Are we more like the centurion or more like the Nazarenes as we embark on another academic year? Or are we stuck somewhere in the middle in what one commentator describes as little faith?

13 or 15 years ago, we, my wife, Karine, children, we lived in Brussels and we went to a church that was about the same size as Grace Church for about three years.

Humanly speaking, being incredibly crass for a moment, it was different. There was a less qualified, less wealthy, less impressive group of people than we have gathered in this room.

I'm flattering you for a second. Spiritually, they were a strong congregation. And I remember one weekend we had some friends staying with us. They came to church and in the car on the way back, they said to us, you can sense there's a lot of faith in this church.

[20 : 45] I thought it was an interesting comment, evidence of one service. But they could see there was a dependence on God, a trust in him in the way that people prayed, sang, listened.

Ole Hallisby, Norwegian theologian, noted at the beginning of his classic book on prayer that to pray you need two things, helplessness and faith.

And I don't think those are things that come easily to a lot of us here in Dulwich. We might be tempted towards self-sufficiency, over-relying on the competence we think we might have.

I see a danger of that in my own heart, a little faith leading to a lack of prayerfulness. Perhaps it's also a danger we face collectively as a congregation. When our new lead pastor is appointed and ultimately joins us, will they comment on seeing a high level of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ in us as a congregation?

Would it not be great if they do? If they find us excited about what God could do in us and through us in the next week, in the next year? A lack of faith doesn't take away Jesus' ability to perform miracles, but it does seem to place a kind of glass ceiling on what Jesus chooses to do.

[22 : 08] And he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief. And if you're not a Christian here this morning, then putting your faith in Jesus is the path to becoming one.

And please do ask me or a member of the staff team if you'd like to explore that further after the meeting. Thirdly and finally, as we close this series in Matthew 13, our final point, be wise about church growth.

In Matthew 13, Jesus has brought us a series of parables about the growth of the kingdom of God. He's promised us dramatic growth, like a seed falling on different types of ground, some of which produces crop up to 100 fold, like a mustard plant growing into a huge, massive plant, mustard seed growing into massive plant.

For those who work in the city, the kingdom of God grows much more like a venture capital fund than an index tracker. He's taught us that that growth is going to happen amidst opposition, like wheat among weeds.

He's taught us the kingdom's going to grow where people make it their priority, and they're willing to sell everything for that treasure. Growth, opposition, priority. How does this work out in practice?

[23 : 20] Well, maybe next summer there'll be a series on Matthew 14. I don't think that's been decided yet. In the meantime, let's quickly scan ahead to some more real-life reactions. We've seen that the first reaction in Nazareth is not good, a poor reaction to the word of God, even when taught in the synagogue by Jesus himself.

Afterwards, Matthew 14, verses 1 to 12, we see an even worse reaction. Herod has John the Baptist beheaded and his head brought to a dinner guest on a platter.

And then, as the chapter moves on, we have three positive reactions and we have the feeding of the 5,000. We have Jesus walking on water, calming a storm, Peter putting his faith in Jesus, even if imperfectly. We have Jesus healing the sick at Gennesaret.

The kingdom of God does not grow in a linear way. Church growth is a discontinuous function. And someone who studied math can correct me after the service if needed. And if you zoom out into church history more broadly, we see the same pattern.

Two weekends ago, we were in Split in Croatia where a Roman emperor called Diocletian built a huge palace next to the Adriatic in 295 to 305 AD using 90,000 slaves, a Wembley Stadium's worth of slaves.

[24 : 43] He was an emperor who took rights away from Christians and he carried out a huge persecution of Christians, the last and perhaps the most brutal persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire.

He ordered Christians to participate in sacrificial rites to Rome's gods, then he tortured or killed many people who refused to do so. And sadly, this type of brutal experience still faces some Christians today.

Only eight years after Diocletian died, having built this palace that now forms much of the beautiful historic town center of Split, his son, the Emperor Constantine, passed the Edict of Milan ending that persecution of Christians and then Constantine became a Christian himself and brought the Christian faith to the Roman Empire and the church grew massively, though sometimes also grew too close to the state.

There are today estimates of over two billion people in the world who would call themselves Christians. No one has more followers on any platform. Yet as we know and experience opposition to the Christian faith remains real.

And I think the parables of Matthew 13 give us insight into the non-linear way in which Jesus' kingdom grows. So when we pray, as we do in the Lord's Prayer, your kingdom come, this is the pattern, this is the set of outcomes that we are to expect.

[26 : 13] Our passage today has shown us that in some places Jesus' kingdom doesn't grow at all. the people in Jesus' hometown failed to understand his identity through over-familiarity and failed to believe in him.

In other places, people did accept Jesus and they did become part of his true family. Matthew 12, verse 50, just a page back, for whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother, Jesus had said.

Let's pray that this coming term will be marked by us having an increasing understanding of Jesus' identity and an increasing faith in him. Let's pray for wisdom as we search for, sadly, a new leader given what we've marked this morning.

And applications close on the 8th of September, so this is a pretty crucial period of time. Let's be wise about how the kingdom grows even when facing setbacks. Now, very briefly before we finish, I'm conscious I've not said anything on verses 51 and 52 at the beginning of the chapter and I don't want Simon's final feedback email this afternoon to have to mention this.

So, let's just quickly look at those two verses. It is this teaching that those verses, in those verses, that Christian scholars, of whom his disciples are the first, will bring out theological treasures, both from the Old Testament and from new teachings such as Matthew 13 itself, which will form the New Testament.

[27 : 43] And this is consistent with an emphasis on continuity between the Old and New Testament found earlier in Matthew, chapter 5, 17. Do not think I've come to abolish the law or the prophets, i.e. the Old Testament.

I've not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. So, Jesus is teaching his disciples that they should teach and that scholars that follow the disciples should teach the Old Covenant alongside his new teachings, which is why we have that pattern here.

Going back to the very start and to my friend's question in response to Olivier Giroud, what does Jesus expect of me? Not the reaction that he received in his hometown.

He wants from us who are Christians here this morning a deeper understanding of who he is, a deeper faith and a wiser understanding of how his kingdom grows.

Let's pray. Father God, as we embark on a new term, pray that you'd help us to deepen our understanding of Jesus this coming term, to deepen our faith in him and to see your kingdom grow here in Dulwich, in Bath and beyond.

[28 : 56] In Jesus' name, Amen.