

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 9, 2017

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year A, Proper 9: Zechariah 9:9–12; Psalm 145:8–14; Romans 7:21–8:6; Matthew 11:20–30**

Today's gospel lesson comes from a section of Matthew where Jesus' words and deeds have been "largely rejected"¹ by the people he has encountered. You and I know that the rejection of Jesus will continue and will grow all the way to Calvary. But in the middle of this story of rejection, Matthew's Jesus has words of hope and comfort for those who persevere in faith.

There's a lot going on in the eleventh chapter of Matthew. Jesus recognizes that whole communities want nothing to do with the good news of the kingdom. Still Jesus is thankful to the Father, his Father, that his words and deeds speak to those who are simple, uneducated. It's only in Matthew that Jesus tells the parable of the workers in the vineyard, where the last are first and the first are last. As in all the gospels, Matthew's Jesus is a shepherd for the helpless. His words about his yoke being easy and his burden

¹ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 168.

being light, words found only in Matthew, proclaim God's lovingkindness in the midst of the challenges and sin of this life.

But I think the most important words we heard today, however, are not the words about the reality of judgment or the grace of faithfulness, but that here Matthew wants to remind us again of who Jesus is—“Emmanuel . . . God with us.”² Jesus says, “All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”³

At his birth, Jesus was hailed by the magi from the east, yet Herod sent soldiers to kill him. After Jesus' baptism a voice from heaven declared, “This is my beloved Son.”⁴ The next voice Jesus hears is that of Satan who went to the wilderness to find him. “Who is this?” is a question that accompanies Jesus through his life. On his cross the evildoers don't know that they

² Matthew 1:23.

³ Matthew 11:27.

⁴ Matthew 3:17.

have answered truthfully with the words, “This is Jesus the King of the Jews.”⁵

From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus has had one message and one deed at the heart of all he says and does: the message—“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand;”⁶ the deed—healing the sick. In Matthew that includes casting out demons. Jesus has neither time nor patience with religious practices of his own tradition that do not lead to repentance and to healing.

The late Scott Peck’s book, *The Road Less Traveled*,⁷ published in 1978, became a bestseller a few months after I was ordained a priest. His second book, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*,⁸ was a bestseller too, but not as successful as the first—both are still in print. *People of the Lie* provoked controversy, not only because of Peck’s embrace of the reality of demonic possession and Christian rituals of exorcism, but also because of his analysis of what he called

⁵ Matthew 27:37.

⁶ Matthew 4:17.

⁷ M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978).

⁸ M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983).

“group evil.”⁹ His example was the story and the cover-up of the massacre in a small, isolated village, My Lai, South Vietnam, in March 1968. Four hundred and four older men, women, and children were executed cruelly by a small company of American soldiers.¹⁰ I suspect the reality of evil was overused, in a sense, in Jesus’ day and is underused in our own.

In Matthew Jesus judges people and religious practices by the standards of truth and love. For Jesus, preparing food for the hungry or healing the sick on a Sabbath day is more important than following a rule, especially a rule that is not about God’s love and God’s truth. In telling of the great judgment, Jesus will make clear that feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, and welcoming the stranger matter for eternity.¹¹

Matthew, writing in the 80s, is part of a generation of Christians who still met in people’s homes on Saturday nights for fellowship, prayer, and food. They are part of a generation that endured and knew the cruel

⁹ Ibid., 212–53,

¹⁰ <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/30/the-scene-of-the-crime> (accessed 9 July 2017).

¹¹ Matthew 25:31–46.

suppression of the Great Jewish Revolt that started in the year 66 and ended with the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. They are the generation of Christians that began to understand that the Lord Jesus would not return soon, yet they longed for him to do that.¹²

I began last week's newsletter began by mentioning a 1970 article by an English priest, Canon Donald Gray, called, "The Real Absence: A Note on the Eucharist," that I had come across.¹³ (A few days later I had a note from Father Alan Moses, vicar of All Saints' Margaret Street, London, who told me that he and his wife had attended Canon Gray's diamond jubilee of ordination to the priesthood. Canon Gray is 87 years-old.) I liked Gray's framing of how Jesus Christ is present and absent in our lives in this world.

He wrote that there is a difference between living for the future and living "from the future."¹⁴ The former is suggestive of a goal to be reached. The latter is a conviction about the journey a person is already on

¹² Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 153.

¹³ Donald P. Gray, "The Real Absence: A note on the Eucharist," *Worship* 44 (January 1970, 20–26).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

that is shaped by a growing relationship with Christ already present but not complete. It comes from our future. It ends with eternal life with Christ and with those we love. I believe you and I are living from the future now by God's grace.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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