

## **The Gospel of Matthew: Marriage and Israel's Story**

### ***Part Two: October 2022***

#### **Wedding feast images continued**

Last month we reflected on the invitation to the wedding feast, the disrespect shown to the king by declining his invitation, and the inappropriate dress for a wedding celebration. This month we continue with the wedding feast imagery in Matthew (15:29–37 and 25:1–13), and then we reflect on marriage and the resurrection (22:23–33). We conclude our reflections on Matthew's Gospel with three meditations on marriage and mission.

It is helpful to set the stage for the challenges that Jesus was to face in the passages we will examine this month. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem (21:1–11) is followed by his dramatic entrance into the Temple (21:12–13). There, he drove out the money changers and those who were selling animals for sacrifice in the Temple, thus disrupting the sacrificial system and, in a symbolic way, indicating that the Temple and the whole sacrificial system would come to an end. And it did, when the Romans destroyed the Temple in AD 70. Matthew then recounts a series of challenges on the part of the chief priests, elders, and Pharisees about his authority to do these things (21:23). In that context, Jesus told several parables, one of which was about a landowner, his vineyard, and the wicked tenants who would be deposed. It was in that same context that he told the parable of the wedding banquet that we examined last month.

After Jesus amazed the crowd with his response to their question about paying taxes (give to Caesar what is Caesar's), the Sadducees attempted to discredit both Jesus and the Pharisees, who also believed in resurrection, by posing a ridiculous hypothetical question about the woman who was married to seven brothers. The Sadducees' question is based on the command in the Torah about the Levirate law of marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5–10). According to this law, if a man dies childless, his brother must marry the widow and produce an heir for him. The purpose of the Levirate law was to continue family in an age when death was the norm. But Jesus knew that in the new creation, there would be no more death; hence, there would no longer be a need for procreation—one of the primary purposes of marriage. The Sadducees were misunderstanding the need for the law. It was the wrong question.

When the Pharisees realized that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they took a turn at trying to trap Jesus, by asking which part of the law was the greatest (22:34–40). Jesus then silenced them by asking them a question that they could not answer (22:41–46). That was followed by his devastating indictment of their hypocrisy (23:1–39).

#### **Marriage and mission**

We have a vital mission as married couples! Our marriages are not simply for our own good. Our marriages, as St. Paul says, are intended to make the love of Christ for his bride the Church visible in the world. Our love makes the love of the persons in the Trinity itself more visible. Our

marriages are intended to serve others: our children, our neighborhoods, our local churches, and others in need. What can that look like? What did it look like in the early church?

Christians presented to the world a new way to live human life, and a new family model that became one of the principal factors in evangelization. A second-century Christian wrote a letter to someone called Diognetus<sup>1</sup>. In it, he says that the Christians “marry as everyone else does and have children, but they do not abandon the newborns; they have a common table, but not a common bed” (V:6–7). In his *Apology*, Justin Martyr, an early Christian apologist and philosopher, reminded the emperors that they multiplied the laws about the family, which proved to be incapable of stopping its collapse. He then invited them to come to see Christian families, and promised that they would be convinced that Christians were Rome’s better allies in the reform of society, not her enemies.<sup>2</sup>

But it wasn’t just family life that was different. Two devastating epidemics hit the Roman Empire. One lasted from AD 165 until AD 180, and another occurred in AD 251. The first plague, which killed between a quarter and a third of the population, was possibly smallpox; the second, equally as devastating, may have been measles.

Imagine being in a city stinking of death, piles of dead bodies all around, homes abandoned, the sick left to fend for themselves. All around you, your family and friends are dropping. You can never be sure if or when you will fall sick too. Your priests have confessed ignorance about what the gods are doing; your philosophers are of no help either. Your most famous physician is coping with the epidemic by leaving Rome and hiding out at his country estate.

But Christians have hope. And they have love. They do not appear to fear; rather, they act as if giving their life for the sake of caring for their sick brethren is the equivalent of martyrdom. Many of them die as they live out Matthew 25:34–40. But because they give basic nursing care to the sick, both their own people and their pagan neighbors, many of the sick recover!

Conscientious nursing care, as simple as providing food and water, cut the mortality rate of these plagues by at least two-thirds. Although many Christians died, the believers survived at a much higher rate than their pagan neighbors. And their pagan neighbors survived at a much higher rate than those who did not have Christian neighbors or relatives. The Christians did not fear death because they believed in the resurrection. They put into practice our Lord’s command to love one another.

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1. An apology is an explanation or defense of the Christian life usually in response to persecution. This letter dates from the second or third century. Both the author and the recipient are unknown.

2. For further discussion see Cardinal Reniero Cantalamessa’s 5th Lenten homily: “The Armor of Light.” [Cantalamessa's 5th Lenten homily: The armor of light \(aleteia.org\)](https://www.aleteia.org/en/faith/cantalamessa/5th-lenten-homily-the-armor-of-light). downloaded 9/2/2022.



**Pray**

*God, come to our assistance.*

***-Lord, make haste to help us.***

*Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit*

***-As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.***

**Reading: Matthew 15:29–39**

After Jesus had left that place, he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down. <sup>30</sup> Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, <sup>31</sup> so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. <sup>32</sup> Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.” <sup>33</sup> The disciples said to him, “Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?” <sup>34</sup> Jesus asked them, “How many loaves have you?” They said, “Seven, and a few small fish.” <sup>35</sup> Then ordering the crowd to sit down on the ground, <sup>36</sup> he took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. <sup>37</sup> And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. <sup>38</sup> Those who had eaten were four thousand men, besides women and children. <sup>39</sup> After sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.

**Meditation**

All the gospels have an account of Jesus feeding a multitude with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish (Matthew 14:15–21; Mark 6:31–43; Mark 8:1–9; Luke 9:12–17; John 6:1–12). These meals are meant to point beyond themselves to the Messianic banquet that the prophets had foretold (see Isaiah 25 and 40 for examples). They point to the great banquet that will happen when we celebrate the wedding feast of Christ and his bride the Church. In this story, we get a preview of that feast. What do we see? We see seven baskets of leftovers, more food than a great crowd can eat! We see the bridegroom himself preparing food and helping his disciples serve it. When God throws a party, the sick are cured, the lonely are given a place, and no one goes home hungry.

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**Prayers and Intentions:** *As if talking to a friend, tell the Lord what and who are on your mind.*

**Lord’s Prayer:** *Conclude your intentions by praying the Lord’s Prayer together.*

**Blessing:** May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.

**Unity Prayer:** God, make our hearts one. Amen.



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### Reading: Matthew 25:1–13

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup> **Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.** <sup>3</sup> When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; <sup>4</sup> but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. <sup>5</sup> As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. <sup>6</sup> But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ <sup>7</sup> Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup> The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ <sup>9</sup> But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ <sup>10</sup> And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. <sup>11</sup> Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ <sup>12</sup> But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ <sup>13</sup> Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

### Meditation

What will the kingdom of heaven look like? It will look like a wedding party. But this is a cautionary tale. As the moment for the party to begin approaches, we see the bridesmaids waiting patiently for the bridegroom to appear. Some of the bridesmaids are wise and some are foolish. We are tempted to feel sorry for the poor bridesmaids that didn’t plan very well. Shouldn’t those who were wise have shared with them? Surely that would have been the “Christian” thing to do, wouldn’t it? But this oil is not ordinary oil that can be shared; it is a metaphor for that which we can only do for ourselves. We can borrow many things from one another, but we cannot borrow someone else’s commitment to the Lord, or his or her preparation for the arrival of the divine Bridegroom. That is what we each need to do for ourselves—with his grace, of course. Life in the kingdom of God is about the long haul. So is marriage. And while we cannot borrow each other’s commitment to the Lord, we can live one life together in the Lord. We can support and encourage one another, and thus keep our oil flasks full.

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## Meditation

Jesus had told a parable about the guest who was not dressed appropriately for the wedding of the king’s son. That man was called a fool and thrown out into the darkness (Matthew 22:11–14). It turned out that while all are invited to the wedding feast, not all will participate, because some will choose to dishonor the king. In this parable too the door was shut on the foolish bridesmaids. There are consequences to bad behavior and poor choices.

Jesus’ parables are stories in which we are invited to live. We are invited to find a role. In this parable we are invited to ask ourselves if we are wise or foolish. Are we prepared for the arrival of the bridegroom or not? The hard truth is that some of us are wise, and some of us are foolish. Some of us are ready, and some of us are unprepared. Each of us must ask ourselves: what does it mean that the door is closed?

Historically there was a time when Jerusalem was able to respond to the invitation, to be prepared. But in AD 70 the door was shut; the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. To this day, there is no Temple in Jerusalem.

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**Reading: Matthew 22:23–33**

The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, <sup>24</sup> “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.’” <sup>25</sup> Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. <sup>26</sup> The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. <sup>27</sup> Last of all, the woman herself died. <sup>28</sup> In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.” <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. <sup>30</sup> For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. <sup>31</sup> And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, <sup>32</sup> ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.” <sup>33</sup> And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.

**Meditation**

This is part of a series of confrontations between Jesus and the leaders of the people. Jesus’ action in the Temple had revolutionary implications. Many of the Pharisees who were in the crowd were hot-headed advocates of violent revolution. They believed in the general resurrection at the end of the present evil age. Resurrection, then, was a dangerous idea and fueled the zeal of the rebels. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, because they did not accept the prophets and other writings as scripture. They accepted only the Torah as sacred. So, they designed an absurd example to trip up Jesus and discredit the very notion of resurrection. Clearly, if marriage is permanent and you become one with your spouse, you cannot be one with seven different people in the resurrection. So, since Torah cannot contradict itself and since Torah says nothing about resurrection, there must not be a resurrection. One could almost imagine the smug satisfaction that must have been theirs. They believed they had Jesus trapped. However, they had underestimated Jesus; they had not understood either the Scriptures or the power of God.

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### Meditation

Jesus pointed out that their own admission that God is the God of the living meant that if he was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must be alive. What did that mean? In short, the resurrection of the dead was a two-stage process. The Pharisees believed that resurrection was actually “life after life after death.” When the righteous person died, his soul was somehow in Paradise, or in the hands of God. See, for example, Wisdom 3:1–9, and Jesus’ own statement to the good thief that that very day he would be in Paradise with him (Luke 23:43). The resurrection of the body would be after that time when the souls of the righteous were in the hands of God. Whatever else that meant, it meant that they would be in some sense alive, although they appeared to be dead. For the Sadducees to admit that God was the God of the living, as Torah says, and that God was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as Torah says, was the equivalent of admitting that they were the ones denying Torah by denying the resurrection. No wonder the crowd was amazed.

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## Meditation

Jesus understood marriage as the lifetime commitment of one man and one woman. For him, marriage was about procreation as well as unity. It was in and through a human family that he chose to enter this world. He was born just like all other human beings. The Incarnation and his birth to a human woman/mother speaks louder than any words about the dignity of women and motherhood. It affirms for the duration of this present age the two-fold purpose of marriage, unity and procreation. In this age the two become one flesh, and in doing so, fulfill the command/blessing of the Creator to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. All of this is in keeping with how Jesus understood the creation stories of Genesis. Those stories expressed the will of his Father. Jesus’ special insight was that in the age to come there will be no procreation, but there will be unity. We will all participate in the marriage of God with his bride. We will be one, just as God is one. So, in what sense, then, will we be like angels? It cannot be that we will be pure spirits like the angels, since resurrection means having our bodies restored. We will not be disembodied spirits floating on clouds. Our bodies will be transformed—as Jesus’ is—and we will live in a new heaven and a new earth, also transformed. It will be a new creation in which there will no longer be death. So, we will be like the angels in the sense that we won’t die.

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**Reading: Matthew 22:34–46**

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, <sup>35</sup> and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup> “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” <sup>37</sup> He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’” <sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

**Meditation**

It was a question that Jewish scholars often posed. Which of the 613 commandments in the law of Moses is the greatest? Jesus gives an answer that most of the scholars would probably have accepted. The whole law and prophets are summed up in these two commandments. As much as he probably enjoyed those kinds of debates with friends when he was a young man learning about the law in Nazareth, for Jesus this question was anything but theoretical or academic. Jesus was to demonstrate what it meant to put God, his Father, first, and all of us second, when he gave himself without reservation on the cross in obedience to his Father and out of love for us. How then ought we live out these two commandments? In the fast-paced modern world with all its incessant and unrelenting demands, how do we keep God first? The next question is, how do we keep our closest neighbor, our spouse, in his or her appropriate place as second in our lives? After that must come our children, followed by all the other things that have a legitimate claim on our time and treasure. The good news is that there is grace for all of it!

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**Reading: Matthew 25:31–40**

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup> and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup> Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup> And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

**Meditation**

Christians invented hospitals and other social services. Even before medicines were discovered, the first Christians learned that food, water, a bath, clean clothes, and a warm place helped people get well and stay alive. All around them, people without Christian friends or family were dying. Those first believers did these kindnesses because Jesus said that to do them for the least of these was to do them for Jesus himself. Sometimes the Christians caught the disease and died. But they did not fear death, because they believed in the resurrection and life after death. Eventually, hospitals and other social services became an organized way to put into practice our Lord’s command to love one another. Today, think of some simple actions you can do as a couple to improve the lives of your neighbors, family members, and friends.

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**Reading: Matthew 28:16–20**

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup> When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. **And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”**

**Meditation**

Marriage and family have been under assault for the last 50 years. We are in danger of losing marriage as an institution for social good. Families are fragile, and the social, financial, and personal costs are staggering. We know that strong marriages and vibrant families are essential parts of God’s plan to rescue the world. Remember, the first Christians changed the Roman Empire in large part by the way they lived out marriage and family life. To that end, we must work to strengthen our marriages by focusing on making Christ the center of our marriage and deepening our love and friendship as husband and wife. The good news is that God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, delights in helping us do just that. It is one of the great mysteries of the economy of the kingdom of God that the more we give away this grace and love, the more we will receive. Our mission, therefore, is not just for ourselves, but for the salvation of others. In that mission we will find our own salvation.

While salvation is purely and completely a gift, in this union husbands and wives work out their salvation and have revolutionary power to change the world (see for example, Philippians 2:12–13). Early Christians believed this, and their lives did, in fact, change the world. Sometimes we forget, sin, and make a mess out of things, but Christianity at its best is the best way to live human life.

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