

## **Comforting the disturbed; *disturbing the comfortable***

A brief social analysis of Jesus' encounters in the gospel account of Matthew

### **Introduction**

Across the Church, many Christians with a passion for the Bible are awakening to God's passion for social justice and his hatred of poverty and oppression. Last year, the Bible Society published *The Poverty and Justice Bible* – a special edition of the Bible with over 3000 verses highlighted in bright orange that relate to these issues.

But it begs a question – why do we need a special version of the Bible that highlights the verses relating to poverty and justice? Why have they been sidelined by those seemingly so committed to studying and preaching scripture? There are probably many, many reasons, not least that poverty is a deeply challenging and complex issue and it's an uncomfortable topic for those of us who are rich. But we have also used theological methods that have pushed justice away from our focus and helped to screen out the 3000 verses and ignore their challenge.

Rather than analysing how we have ignored justice, in this brief article I want to highlight one simple theological method that displays God's priorities and concerns for those on the margins and his challenge to those in power.

### **Jesus' encounters with people**

At a Greenbelt Festival many years ago I heard a passionate talk by the Australian activist John Smith. It was at the height of people wearing the WWJD wrist bands – but Smith urged us not to think 'What Would Jesus Do?' but go back to the Bible and look at 'What Did Jesus Do' and live accordingly. He challenged us to go through one of the gospels and list all of Jesus encounters with individuals and groups and note whether they were people who could be considered powerful in terms of wealth, social standing or politics or whether they could be considered on the margins. Then record whether the encounter had a positive or negative outcome.

Being keen, I did as he suggested and wrote this all out on a sheet of paper. Just as Smith suggested, I found that a clear pattern emerges. In the vast majority of cases, Jesus' encounters with the powerful are negative and the majority of his encounters with those on the margins are positive.

### **Jesus' encounters in the Gospel according to Matthew**

Below are listed all of the encounters in Matthew's gospel. Where the outcome fits with this pattern is recorded in green in the last column and where it does not it is marked with red. For two encounters the outcome is not recorded and these have been left blank.

The judgement around whether someone is powerful or marginalised is obviously somewhat simplistic and below I discuss some of the complexities within this analysis. But the pattern that emerges is strong and clear enough to show us a key aspect of gospel truth that can easily be overlooked: that Jesus turned the values of the world on their head. It illustrates more strongly than anything else that the kingdom of God is an 'upside-down kingdom' which has 'brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble' and 'filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty' (Luke 1:52-53).

Person/ Group's Role	Powerful / marginal	Outcome of encounter with Jesus	Positive / negative	Fits the pattern?
The Magi seek the new born King	P	Magi worship Jesus	P	No
Herod the King	P	Herod orders infanticide	N	Yes
John – a prophet in the wilderness	M	Blesses and baptises Jesus	P	Yes
The tempter offers power & prestige	P	Jesus sends him away	N	Yes
Simon Peter – Galilean fisherman	M	Follows Jesus	P	Yes
Andrew – Galilean fisherman	M	Follows Jesus	P	Yes
James - Galilean fisherman	M	Follows Jesus	P	Yes
John - Galilean fisherman	M	Follows Jesus	P	Yes
Galilean diseased, suffering, demon possessed, disabled	M	Jesus healed them	P	Yes
Man with leprosy	M	Jesus healed them	P	Yes
Centurion with ill servant	P	Jesus healed them	P	No
Peter's mother in law	M	Jesus healed them	P	Yes
Teacher of the law	P	Told of the cost of following	?	-
Disciple who wanted to bury his father	?	Jesus says follow me	?	-
Two demon possessed men	M	Jesus healed them	P	Yes
Paralytic	M	Jesus healed him	P	Yes
Teachers of the law	P	Jesus rebukes them	N	Yes
Matthew, tax collector	M	Jesus tells him to follow	P	Yes
'sinners' at Matthew's house	M	Jesus eats with them	P	Yes
Pharisees criticise Jesus	P	Jesus rebukes them	N	Yes
John the Baptist disciples	M	Jesus explains fasting	P	Yes
Ruler (called Jairus in Luke)	P	Jesus heals daughter	P	No
Sick woman subject to bleeding	M	Jesus heals her	P	Yes
Two blind men	M	Jesus heals them	P	Yes
Demon possessed man	M	Jesus heals them	P	Yes
Pharisees	P	Plotted how to kill Jesus	N	Yes
Pharisees and teachers of law	P	Jesus refuses to do a miracle	N	Yes
Jesus mothers & brothers	M	Jesus says his disciples are his family	N	No
Jesus home town people	M	They took offence at him	N	No
Crowds of people	M	Jesus had compassion	P	Yes
Pharisees and teachers of the law	P	They take offence at Jesus	N	Yes
Canaanite woman	M	Jesus heals her daughter	P	Yes

(contd)

Great crowds of sick, blind & lame	M	Jesus heals them	P	Yes
Pharisees & Sadducees	P	Jesus refuses them 'a sign'	N	Yes
Boy with a demon	M	Jesus healed him	P	Yes
A little child	M	Jesus says the greatest will be like a child	P	Yes
Little children	M	Jesus lets them come to him	P	Yes
Rich young man	P	Leaves Jesus very sad	N	Yes
James & John's mother request for prestige for her sons	M	Jesus refuses their request	N	No
Two blind men	M	Jesus heals them	P	Yes
Crowds at Jerusalem	M	Triumphal entry	P	Yes
At the Temple	P	Over turns tables	N	Yes
Blind and lame	M	Jesus heals them	P	Yes
Children singing	M	Jesus encourages them	P	Yes
Chief priests	P	Chief priests indignant	N	Yes
Chief priests and Elders	P	Jesus refuses to tell them his authority	N	Yes
Chief priests and Pharisees	P	Jesus teaches & heals	N	Yes
Sadducees	P	Answer to marriage question astonishes them	N	Yes
Pharisees	P	No one dared to ask any more questions	N	Yes
Pharisees and teachers of law	P	Jesus condemns them	N	Yes
Woman with perfume	M	Jesus defends her actions	P	Yes
Crowd come to arrest him	P	Jesus asks them why they come armed	N	Yes
High Priest	P	Tears his clothes	N	Yes
Pilate, Roman Governor	P	Jesus does not reply	N	Yes
Soldiers	P	Mock Jesus	N	Yes
Joseph of Arimathea	P	Asks for the body of Jesus	P	No

### Those that don't fit the pattern...

Through these exercise, we see that the only powerful people who have positive encounters with Jesus in Matthew's account are the Magi, the Centurion, the 'Ruler' (called Jarius in Luke's gospel) and Joseph of Arimathea. All of these people, two foreigners and two of the Jewish establishment, recognise Jesus' authority and submit to it.

We see that the only marginalised people who have negative encounters with Jesus in Matthew's account are Jesus' mother and brothers, people from his home town and the mother of James and John. What is striking is that even though all of these people could be considered marginal socially or politically, the negative encounter comes when they seek to exert power over Jesus. The love Jesus had for his mother or John could not override his authority as God's son.

### **What does this mean for us?**

Someone once said that there are only two theological questions that matter 'What kind of God?' and 'So what?' In this brief overview, we see clearly the kind of God that is revealed in Jesus - a God who cares for the outcast, who restores those on the margins.

We also see a God who challenges the rich and powerful to use what they have been given for God's purposes rather than for their own improvement.

The UK globally is a very rich and powerful country – and within our country the gap between the rich and the poor is growing ever wider. In this context, what does the gospel of Jesus have to say to our nation? Surely it challenges the injustice of our day, to 'Speak up and judge fairly, defend the rights of the poor and needy' (Proverbs 31:9) and live lives of compassionate service to those around us. As Paul wrote 'Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ' (Galatians 6:2).

Both Jesus' teaching and example show us this way - an uncomfortable and challenging path which leads us to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. As a Church, especially those parts which claim to take the Bible seriously, we will always need fresh eyes to be reminded of the social radicalism of Jesus's gospel. We must not allow the cataracts of complex theology and internal argument to blind us to the challenge to follow our Lord and Saviour.

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