MAKING SENSE OF MATTHEW 25:31-46

GRAHAM FOSTER
STEEPLE CHURCH AND MARY SLESSOR CENTRE, DUNDEE

In his short story, 'Where Love is God is',[1] Leo Tolstoy describes how Martin Avdéich, a cobbler, endures a period of religious questioning and doubt (presumably not unlike Tolstoy's own) which culminates in an evening of Scripture reading and meditation. He drifts into sleep and dreams that the Christ is saying to him: 'Expect me, I will come tomorrow.' The next day dawns and during its course Martin shows kindness to a needy old man, to a destitute young woman and her infant, to an old woman and to the rascally boy who has stolen some fruit from her. As the day draws to a close he feels disappointment that his expectation of receiving Christ has not been fulfilled. However, in a further mystical experience he comes to realize that the Saviour had in fact come to him in the needy strangers whom he had met and that in receiving them kindly he had welcomed the Christ. The punch-line of the story is: 'Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers you did it to me.'

These words occur, of course, in Matthew's Gospel chapter 25, verses 31 to 46. Tolstoy's story represents what has come to be a popular understanding of this Matthean passage. According to this understanding the essential message of the pericope is held to be that Christ is present, even although unrecognised, in the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless stranger, *etc.* In attending to their needs the 'righteous' – so they are pronounced to be in the end-time judgement – discover that they were in fact doing something good for Christ, the Son of Man. They will be rewarded accordingly. Those who failed to respond as the righteous did suffer a correspondingly grievous fate.

A Common Interpretation

So common is this interpretation that it is often merely noted in the passing in Christian discourse. For instance, I recently heard an Old

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[1] Tolstoy wrote the story in 1885. It appears in English translation in *Twenty-Three Tales* (London, 1956), pp. 131-46. A version for children, with adaptations but essentially the same message, was published by Lion Publishing (1976) with the title *Papa Panov's Special Day.*

Testament scholar deliver a sermon on Deuteronomy 10:18,19. In these verses there is a clear command to love and care for the stranger. The preacher took this up as the main thrust of his exhortation. In the flow of his delivery there was brief reference to Matthew 25:35, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me'. The implication was quickly drawn that in caring for needy strangers we the hearers might find, to our surprise, that we were caring for Christ himself.

Another example may be found in the writings of Jürgen Moltmann. In a section of his book, *The Spirit of Life,* in which he stresses the empathy of God and the solidarity of Christ with the vulnerable and the victims of life he states: 'According to Matthew 25, the Son of Man-Judge of the world identifies with the least of his brothers and sisters to such an extent that whatever happens to them, happens to him.'[2]

In the one instance an Old Testament scholar and in the other a systematic theologian adopt, without question, a certain understanding of the Matthean passage, an understanding which is frequently assumed in Christian preaching and writing, both at the popular and the more academic levels.

This interpretation is not lacking support amongst some modern, that is twentieth-century, New Testament scholars and commentators. Sherman W. Gray[3] reports from an examination of hundreds of writers from 1900 to 1986 that 34% take this so-called 'universalist' view of the passage. Gray also notes, however, that prior to the modern era this view occurs very rarely. For illustrative purposes I choose a few representative instances from twentieth-century scholarship.

- A. H. M'Neile in his commentary on Matthew (1915): the love and sympathy of the Son of man for all sufferers is profoundly expressed in the phrase 'these my brothers'.[4]
- J. C. Fenton (1963): 'The distinction [between the blessed and the cursed] is made according to whether a man has, or has not, shown mercy to the oppressed.'[5]

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2 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life* (London, 1992), p. 129.

3 Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25: 31-46: a History of Interpretation* (*SBL Dissertation Series*, 114; Atlanta, 1989), p. 348.

4 A. H. M'Neile, *The Gospel according to St Matthew* (London, 1915), p. 371.

5 J. C. Fenton, *Saint Matthew* (London, 1963), p. 400.

- E. Schweizer (1976): 'Jesus awaits us in all who are poor, homeless, alone'.[6]
- F.W. Beare (1981): 'the thought now is that Jesus looks upon every kindness done to a person in need, however lowly, as a kindness done to himself.'[7]
- G. Bornkamm (1982): 'the Son of Man calls the underprivileged his brethren.'[8]
- P.S. Minear (1982): 'He [the Son of Man] identifies himself first of all not with me but with my neighbour.... Only when the Lord is absent can people love him by loving their neighbours. And his love is best attested when the neighbour is "one of the least".'[9]

One of the hermeneutical methods explicitly used by some of these writers is to identify a prominent theme in the gospels, or specifically in Matthew, and then to show how Matthew 25:31-46 fits in with that theme and how the pericope may therefore be interpreted in the light of it. Fenton, for instance, understands the passage in terms of the emphasis he detects in Matthew that the righteousness required in the kingdom of God consists of deeds not words, deeds of mercy not sacrifices of the Law.[10] It is, however, legitimate to ask whether this is the correct theme to bring to bear on this passage, or whether it is sufficiently nuanced to allow the distinctive elements of the passage to be heard. If it is an inappropriate theme or if it is insufficiently precise then the effect will be to silence the peculiar features of the passage rather than let them speak. One would expect the meaning of Matthew 25:31-46 to cohere with the rest of the Gospel, but the possibility of a fresh idea or insight emerging from the passage must also be allowed.

A 'Fitting' Interpretation

There is another, equally significant, kind of fittingness which should be noted. The line of interpretation highlighted above also fits in with some overlapping trends evident in the churches in this century. I think for instance of the tendency in some parts of the church in the 1960s to

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6 E. Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew* (London, 1976), p. 479.

7 F.W. Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Oxford, 1981), p. 495.

8 G. Bornkamm in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, edited by Bornkamm, G. Barth and H.J. Held (2nd edit. London, 1982), p. 37.

9 P.S. Minear, *Matthew the Teacher's Gospel* (New York, 1982), p. 183.

10 Fenton, *Saint Matthew*, pp. 400f.

develop Bonhoeffer's 'religionless Christianity' in a variety of theologies in which transcendence was subsumed under immanence. God is found in the world. The sphere of Christian service is the world rather than the church, especially the suffering world. This was further taken up in the 1970s and beyond by the prominence given in liberation as well as liberal theologies to God's apparent 'bias to the poor'. Mother Teresa provided a vivid illustration of this. She was often quoted as saying that in caring for the poor people who die on the streets of Calcutta she was caring for Christ himself. Added to this is the churches' loss of confidence in dogma and the consequent shift in emphasis from beliefs to behaviour as crucial for our relationship with God. This is well expressed in the Sydney Carter song, 'When I needed a neighbour, were you there?...and the creed and the colour and the name won't matter, Were you there?' Tolstoy's story may be regarded as representing a nineteenth-century version of similar convictions.

Matthew 25:31-46 could be construed as supporting such so-called secular understandings of the Christian gospel. It was very appealing to find in the passage the idea of a Christ unencumbered by doctrine, identified with the poor sufferers of the world and eliciting a response as free as Christ himself from doctrinal baggage. An *incognito* Christ served by *incognito* Christians? E. Schweizer illustrates something of this when in the commentary quoted above he moves from exegesis of the passage to application and writes:

> There can be a genuine, if incomplete faith that consists only of carrying out God's will towards the poor and lowly.... The man who has such faith worships God and enriches himself though he intends neither.[11]

Equally interesting in this respect is that in the 1970s when the conservative evangelical movement in Britain rediscovered a sense of calling to social action alongside the preaching of the gospel it looked to Matthew 25:31-46 for a dominical proof text. John Stott wrote a booklet, *Walk in His Shoes*, published by IVP in association with Tear Fund in 1975. In it he declares that the basis of the Son of Man's separating judgement between sheep and goats would be the presence or absence of good works of love towards the needy of the world.[12] Stott thus concurs with the understanding of the passage found in the volume on Matthew in

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[11] E. Schweizer, *Matthew*, p. 480.

[12] John R.W. Stott, *Walk in His Shoes* (Leicester, 1975), p. 19.

the Tyndale Commentary series written by R.V.G. Tasker published first in 1961 which sets forth a 'universalist' view.[13] Although the more recent commentary on Matthew in the Tyndale series by R.T. France[14] interprets the passage in a different way (see below) it seems that Stott's understanding of it in relation to the Christian's concern for a world of need continues to have wide influence in the conservative evangelical constituency.

Universalist or Particularist?

It will be apparent, then, that this interpretation of Matthew 25:31-46 is a popular one, so much so that it is seldom questioned. Nonetheless, the question of whether this is a proper interpretation remains to be asked. The fact is that in recent years it has been seriously questioned among New Testament scholars.

As noted above, Sherman W. Gray traces the history of interpretation of the passage from the earliest periods of the Christian era. Although many varied interpretations have been advanced through the centuries he indicates that there are basically two approaches.[15] The one to which I have drawn attention above might be called the 'universalist' approach. The other, called by Gray the 'restrictive' or 'particularist', does not read in this passage an encouragement to merciful action amongst the needy understood in a general way. Rather, the passage provides some consolation for hard-pressed Christians, the brothers of Jesus, who go out as Christian witnesses among the nations. There they may find a hostile reception with the result that they are hungry, thirsty, homeless, ill-clad, in poor health, perhaps even in prison. In such dire straits the people into whose community they have come may regard them sympathetically, whereas amongst others they may be met with cold indifference. In the judgement those who have actively shown their concern for Christians will be rewarded, for in caring for the needy followers of Jesus they were in fact responding positively to Jesus himself. Those who have not will receive due punishment.

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[13] R.V.G. Tasker, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (London, 1961), pp. 237 - 9.

[14] R.T. France, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Leicester, 1985), pp. 354-8.

[15] Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, p. 9.

Graham M. Stanton neatly encapsulates the alternative approaches thus: 'The nub of the exegetical dispute can be put quite simply. Is this pericope concerned with the attitude of the world in general to the needy (the "universalist" position), or is it, rather, the world's attitude to the church which is in view (the "particularist" interpretation)?'[16]

It might be possible to dispose of the matter quickly by suggesting that those who take a universalist view of the Christian gospel will tend to take a universalist view of the passage and those who take a particularist view of the gospel will tend to take a particularist view of the passage. This does not quite hold good in respect of some in the conservative evangelical community who adhere to a particularist view of the gospel but take on board a universalist view of this passage, with, of course, consequential problems which must be resolved within the totality of this theology regarding justification by faith rather than by works. John Stott, in the booklet referred to above, still referring to Matthew 25, but citing other New Testament texts, handles the problem in this way: 'although our *justification* is by faith only, our *judgement* will be on the basis of works, "good works" or "well-doing"'.[17] The responsible attitude is surely not to come to the passage looking for support for a preconceived theological stance, but to derive an interpretation of the text which makes the best sense of the pericope in its context.

The Four Key Issues

According to Stanton[18] the interpretation of the passage rests largely on four key issues: 1. Who are the people gathered for judgement? (25:32); 2. Who are the brothers of the Son of Man? (25:40,45); 3. What is the nature of the list of merciful acts? (25:35,36); 4. What is the literary type of the passage? Of these it will be seen that the second is most important.

1. Who are the people gathered for judgement? (25:32) They are described as 'all the nations'. Some suppose that these are the nations now evangelised, and therefore 'Christian'. So, in line with the parables which precede this passage it is claimed that we are looking at the judgement of the Christian church. Yet there is no assumption in Matthew

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[16] Graham M. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People* (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 209.

[17] Stott, *Walk in His Shoes*, p. 20.

[18] Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, pp. 212ff.

that all who are evangelised will become Christian – just the opposite (*cf.* 24:9)! Further, it can be argued that the preceding parables have dealt adequately with the judgement of Christians and that a different kind of judgement can be spoken of at this point. (See 4. below.)

The phrase is characteristically used in Matthew to designate the nations beyond Israel to which Christian disciples are to go as witnesses (24:9,14; 28:19). It seems therefore that the passage depicts the judgement of the nations to which the gospel has been taken. It seems also that 'the least of these brothers of mine' are not included in this judgement. They are neither on the left nor on the right of the Son of Man. In judicial terms, they are not in the dock; they are in some sense *with* the Son of Man occupying some other position in the court.

If this is so, it undermines the line of interpretation which suggests that it is professing Christians who are here being judged in terms of their charitable concern for the needy. It also therefore challenges the relevance of questions regarding justification by faith or by works such as are raised not only by Stott but more substantially by Ulrich Luz.[19]

2. Who are the brothers of the Son of Man? (25:40,45) Who are 'the least of these brothers of mine'? In Matthew's Gospel 'brothers' is used to refer to Jesus' disciples (12:49-50; 23:8; 28:10), apart, that is, from references to blood relations. 'Little ones' (probably interchangeable with 'the least') refers to those who believe in Jesus (1:42; 18:6,12,14). There are strong reasons therefore to see this passage corresponding to the concluding section (10:40-42) of the commission given to the disciples to go to Israel with the gospel of the kingdom. There we read: 'And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward' (10:42). Here in chapter 25, albeit in a more developed form, is a similar pronouncement in the context of the wider commission to the Gentile nations. The key references, 1:23 and 28:20, at the beginning and at the end of Matthew's Gospel which indicate that God identifies with his people through Jesus and that Jesus identifies in particular with his missionary disciples reinforce this understanding of 'the least of these brothers of mine' in the passage under consideration.

This would mean then that the basis of the end-time judgement of the nations is not adherence to or neglect of a general humanitarian ethic.

[19] Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 131f.

Rather it has to do with the manner in which the nations treat hard-pressed disciples of Jesus. On the basis of what we read in chapter 10 we are perhaps meant to understand that a response to the messenger of Christ is indicative of a response to the message of Christ. However, it will only emerge at the glorious appearing of the Son of Man that in their treatment of these representatives they were in fact meeting and responding affirmatively or negatively to Jesus himself.

It should be stressed that, according to Matthew 25:31-46, the crucial characteristic of those who have or have not received merciful treatment is not so much their identity as needy in a general way but their identity as needy followers of Jesus. The surprise element in the passage does not arise from the fact that the righteous or the cursed did not know that they were responding to Christian messengers but from the fact that they did not realise that the Son of Man was so immediately present to those who represented him and derivatively therefore also to those who encountered his representatives. The surprise for the righteous will be pleasant, the surprise for the cursed will be unpleasant. It is probably the realisation which comes to the latter at the end-time which is of more importance to Matthew's first readers who will have found in the passage some consolation for the harsh treatment they are receiving in the Gentile world.

Some would argue that Matthew has taken a received pericope which originally had a broader reference in terms of the identification of Jesus with the poor and that he has restricted its meaning, making it more sectarian. Gray, however, questions this procedure as purely conjectural because we have no control mechanisms to test such a unique piece of gospel material.[20] Stanton contends that there are no passages in Matthew or in early Christian literature which identify Jesus specifically with the poor but that there are instances of his identification specifically with his disciples elsewhere within Matthew – as noted above.[21] It might be added that the concept of Jesus' identification with his people appears in at least one other strand of New Testament literature. In Acts 9:4,5: '"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."' Jesus thus identifies with his persecuted people in Jerusalem and in Damascus. It is also noteworthy that in Acts 16 Lydia and the jailer indicate their positive response to the message of Jesus by providing hospitality and care to the messengers (vv.

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[20] Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, p. 355.

[21] Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, pp. 217f.

15,33,34; see also Luke 10:16). Thus, although Matthew 25:31-46 taken as a whole is unique, we find that a crucial element in the passage is unique neither to the passage nor even to Matthew's Gospel. The argument for Matthean creativity at this point is thus seriously undermined.

3. What is the nature of the list of merciful acts? (25:35,36) Six kinds of need are cited in the passage – the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. The list does not quite match up with others that would be current in or around Matthew's day which describe the needy in society generally. There are several omissions, not least the care of widows and orphans. The needs cited are, of course, prevalent in society, whether in the Middle East of the first Christian century or universally in the twentieth. However, there is a more likely match between the items in this list and the kind of problems frequently faced by Christian missionaries as a small, assertive (not aggressive) minority in a society where their unique claims for Christ were not well received. We have evidence for this in Matthew 10:14-20. Otherwise in the New Testament we have the instances already cited in Acts and Luke. Many others could be added from the descriptions of Paul's missionary journeys. Likewise in the Corinthian correspondence Paul himself gives examples of the kind of harrowing treatment to which he and his associates were subject: see 1 Corinthians 4:11-13; 2 Corinthians 6:4,5. There are also of course thanksgivings in the epistles for merciful treatment to pioneering missionaries. Particular note should be taken of Galatians 4:13,14: 'you know that it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first; and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus'.

The idea of non-Christian Gentiles visiting Christian prisoners is sometimes seen as a problem but, as Stanton points out, in the ancient world prisoners were dependent on people outside the prison bringing them food and drink.[22] Physical sustenance was not provided by the prison authorities. Prisons were, thus, to this extent, open prisons and prisoners were potential beneficiaries of caring treatment from sympathetic outsiders, whether Christian or not. Stanton also draws attention to the interesting

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 220.

passage, Joel 3:1-3, in which the nations are judged for their improper treatment of prisoners taken from among God's people.[23]

4. What is the literary type of the passage? Stanton argues that Matthew 25:31-46 is an apocalyptic discourse rather than a parable. He sees correspondences between it and passages in apocalyptic writings such as 4 Ezra, 1 Enoch, 2 Baruch and the Apocalypse of Abraham.[24] According to Gray, in the Jewish apocalyptic discourses it is common to find that there are successive judgement scenes, first for Israel and then for unbelievers.[25] This corresponds with the pattern in Matthew 24/25 where the passage under consideration is concerned with the judgement of the nations and is preceded by teaching which deals with the judgement of the church. According to Stanton, a recurring theme in these apocalypses, whether Jewish or Christian, is that the wickedness of the pagan nations will be judged and in particular their behaviour towards God's people will be rewarded or punished. So, he concludes, 'Matt 25:31-46 is a final consolation to the recipients of the gospel. God's enemies will be judged on the basis of their treatment of the brothers of the Son of man, however insignificant.'[26]

Making Sense of the Passage

Stanton's phrase, 'a final consolation to the recipients of the gospel', refers presumably to the first recipients of Matthew's Gospel. The passage makes sense if it is understood to be addressed to a striving and struggling missionary-minded Christian minority community in a largely antithetical majority culture. It provides for them an apocalypse, a revelation, of what will be in the end-time. Then it will be seen that their missionary endeavours have not been wasted, and that those who have received them in a kindly way in the midst of their hardships will enter into the kingdom prepared for them. Conversely, those who have stood hard-faced against them (and their message?) will receive their dues. The passage is, then, a

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[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 220, 224f.

[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 221ff.

[25] Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, pp. 358f.

[26] Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, p. 229.

means of encouragement to disciples of Jesus who wish to remain faithful through difficult times.[27]

On the other hand it is difficult to know what sense the passage might have if it is understood to be addressed to those who with little or no knowledge of or faith in Christ are engaged in worthy humanitarian endeavours amongst the needy in society. For one thing, if they have heard or read the passage and have understood it in the universalist sense then they will not be able to respond with surprise at the end-time judgement! More seriously, it is difficult to know what kind of response is expected of them if the passage is supposed to be addressed to them. Will they be spurred on to greater charitable endeavour by discovery that they are in fact caring for Christ in caring for needy others? Will they be drawn thereby to faith or more complete faith in Christ? Whether they are practical or dogmatic humanists it seems unlikely that the passage, taken this way, would have any relevance for them at all. They do not require any religious undergirding to their humanitarian care.

Again it might be asked: What does the passage actually say to *Christian* readers who have come to understand it in a 'universalist' way? Does it teach that they should care for their needy neighbour because in caring for her they are caring for the Lord? But to think in this way is to make the caring action very self-conscious, which is the very opposite of what might otherwise be construed from the passage. Further, there is no guarantee that their needy neighbour is going to feel better if he is made aware that they are helping him because they see Christ in him; he may in fact feel demeaned as a result.

There is a further consideration for those who take the passage in a universalist sense. Whether they take some encouragement for their own actions from the idea that Christ is in the recipients of their care, or whether they find it helpful to be assured that other people without any overt acknowledgement of Christ are nonetheless engaged in doing God's will in the world by caring for the needy, do they also believe that the Son of Man will in the end-time judgement make a division between the sheep and the goats, the righteous and the cursed? If they take other elements of the passage seriously, do they also take due account of this particularist element?

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[27] An interpretation along these lines can be found in David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew* (London, 1993), pp. 242-5, and in R.T. France, *Matthew*, pp. 354-8.

It is no part of the purpose of this paper to undermine the kindly response of humanists or anybody else for that matter to the needy in society. Likewise there is no intent here to criticise specifically Christian concern for those who in our own country and in the world at large are burdened with physical or material need. On the contrary, followers of Jesus Christ who take the teaching of Old and New Testaments seriously will have strong impetus to be in the vanguard of engagement with people who suffer physical and material ills. The point is that this particular passage simply does not bear upon these issues. Rather than press it into the service of something for which it was not intended either by Matthew or by Jesus we should instead attend to its distinctive teaching.

Conclusion

Therefore, before coming to the passage we should, if we are members of the Christian community, heed the warning parables relating to the judgement of the church in Matthew 24/25. Then as we attend in particular to the teaching of 25:31-46 we should first of all take heart that when we seek to represent Christ in the world he himself is very present in our witness. Secondly, we should be encouraged that when non-Christians receive us sympathetically they are perhaps indicating a sympathetic response to the gospel or a willingness so to respond. Thirdly, we should take comfort from the fact that when in this harsh world Christian brothers and sisters – or we ourselves – are treated coldly or cruelly by those with whom we share the gospel, Christ still identifies with us in these circumstances. Fourthly, we should derive consolation from the realisation that the last word lies not with those who ill-use humble followers of Jesus – it lies with him as the kingly Son of Man with whom they and all people will have to do in the end.