

Our faith is in a mysterious God whom we will never understand in this world. It is only in the life to come, when we meet God face to face, that we will understand. St Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 13, "Now I know only in part, then I will fully know, even as I have been fully known.". Faith is to be enough for us now. Because Jesus rose from the dead, for each of us, we can therefore have faith in his promises becoming a reality. Even though the resurrection is completely mysterious, there is a bodily reality about it, which the disciples witness to, through their stories of touching Jesus' wounds, eating the breakfast he has cooked and sharing food and discussion with him. We can grasp that reality of Jesus' human presence, even though it was a humanity that was already a bit mysterious. How he is part of a Three in One God is too much for us to really comprehend, perhaps?

In her book on Matthew's Gospel, Margaret Davies points us to some key points in this last section of Matthew's Gospel. The Gospel was written long before the later discussions that led to the various Creeds of the Church that we recite still today. The Christian community of Matthew, Davies suggests, had not worried about these complexities of the nature of Jesus and God. The Jewish Scriptures told people to imitate God's desire for justice, generosity and peace. If they did this they would be called 'sons of God'. By being committed and obedient to God, Jesus' disciples will also follow the same path that Jesus has during his ministry. That kind of commitment, where disciples do not just talk about following the commands of God, but actually live the life of Jesus in the here and now, is the path to eternal life. Do it, don't just say it, we might summarise?

People became disciples through baptism, and this was clearly what went on in this early Christian community Matthew was writing for. They were not baptised, as John had done, but in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God was Creator, the disciples had known the Son and they had received the Spirit, energising and guiding them to proclaim Jesus' divine and redeeming nature. Once they had received the Spirit, the new Christians would be enabled to take up the committed and obedient life of a disciple, practically going out and putting Jesus' commands into action. This seems to be how Matthew's community understands things?

This emphasis on the practical nature of being a Christian, or a disciple, is a feature of all the Gospels. Often, in Christian churches in our own time, we find a picture of discipleship that people are being called to today that is perfect. If you are not working for the Gospels or praying 100% of the time, there is something wrong with you? There can never be any room for doubt or questions: these things are the mark of a failed disciple? It leaves a picture of someone who is actually not human, I think, and says more about our own churches' feelings of inadequacy and guilt? Again, the community of Matthew is realistic. Only 11 disciples go to meet Jesus because one of them actually betrayed him! The rest of them had mainly fled into hiding when the going got tough and they deserted Jesus; or in the case of Peter, denied they had ever known him! All through the Gospels Jesus berates the disciples for their lack of faith: their continual misunderstanding of what he's trying to teach them, their distracted thoughts about who will be greatest or how rich they will be in the Kingdom of God!

The 11 are all too human. They go to sleep when Jesus is agonising in the Garden of Gethsemane over the terrible choice he has to make. They arrived at the mountain in Galilee, which echoes the meeting of great Prophets with God, himself, and Jesus' own Transfiguration when he shines with the glory of God on the mountain. It makes the statement that Jesus is God, present on earth, and the disciples stand in his presence. Having got there, "they worshipped him: but some doubted". I spoke the other week about how confusing the idea of dividing God into Three must have been for a Jewish community becoming Christian? God had always been one and indivisible so they would have had no theology or way of coming at an understanding of what Jesus was saying? It is very realistic, very human and essential to comprehending what being a disciple of Jesus is about, I would suggest.

When we compare our own poor faith and deeds to those of the disciples, we are enabled to think, "perhaps I'm not all that awful after all!?" Being a disciple of Jesus is difficult. Anybody who tells you to "take up your cross and follow me" is not inviting you to an easy stroll on a Sunday afternoon! We don't understand what the Trinity is about? St Patrick famously picked up a 3-leaved Shamrock to explain the nature of Father, Son and Spirit being part of the same plant, the one God. But we still don't really get it! We mean to do good and sometimes we manage it, but often we don't! We do something for a while that is good, and we feel would please God, and then we do something that would clearly upset God! That is why Jesus emphasises the importance of being honest with God and receiving forgiveness. Jesus wins forgiveness for us on the cross, because we can't. In Matthew 18 it describes how church members would be treated compassionately, when they have sinned, and given ample opportunity to repent (v15ff). Jesus famously tells Peter that he must forgive "77 times": 7 is the perfect number in Jewish theology. God knows that is how he will have to deal with people. They will never be able to cope otherwise.

This gospel is one of hope. Earlier in the gospel Jesus has spoken about how hard things will be because of persecution. Matthew's community is, very likely, a persecuted one? This is a gospel about persevering in bearing witness to Jesus, in a hostile world. The baptised, who make up the Christian church, are real human beings who are a mix of good and bad. They can do much that is brilliant, sometimes, and awful things at others. But being faithful is about persisting, because the strength of faith draws the believer on, ever seeking to get closer to the heart of Jesus. This is about love, yearning, desiring. It is how God views his people and his creation. It is how Jesus feels about his disciples. This intense desire for relationship, for the re-establishment of broken relationships, for service of the poor and needy, for proclaiming the disciples' love of Jesus, are all things that bring us close to some kind of understanding of the nature of God.