

Key idea: Jesus is the promised 'boss' who shows his authority by bringing the outsider in.

1. Authority and pandemics

We are four to five weeks into this COVID-19 pandemic. At this point, we can start to stand back and look at the big picture, and what has taken place so far. As a political tragic, it has been interesting to watch and ponder the interplay of authority and action and the nature of our political landscape. It has been even more interesting watching this whole scene play out in other nations, like America.

Two key questions have emerged as this whole crisis has unfolded, at least in a wider political sense.

The first question is quite clear: where does the authority lie to make nation-wide decisions about this pandemic?

The second question is a little more subtle: which war is being fought here with this pandemic and the response of authorities – the economic war or the health war? What is the real war?

On the first question, Australia has navigated an interesting battle of authority as State and Federal leaders have negotiated areas of responsibility that are often contested, from health to economics through to education and questions about movement. I think Scott Morrison played a very wise card when he helped create a 'National Cabinet' which brought all the key political leaders into a collaboration. But it has not stopped States making

decisions to 'go it alone', on education and border control. It has also not been nearly as chaotic or aggressive as America where Donald Trump and the Governor of New York have battled quite publicly!

On the second question, the issue of which war is being fought has been interesting watch. It has been interesting to watch because of the way the National Cabinet has tried to fight a war on two fronts – economics and health – in which the decisions made in one front have sometimes conflicted with decisions made in the other front. Again, it has not nearly been as chaotic or confusing as in America where the President has simultaneously supported social distancing and then encouraged protests against social distancing policies!

In Matthew's biography of Jesus, we have come to a similar area – authority and pandemics. But, there is no confusion about where the authority lies nor about the nature of the war being fought.

PRAY

2. Matthew's gospel..

We met Matthew briefly last year. He is the man we will spend some time with in three weeks' time, as we spend some time looking at Jesus meeting him.

He was a tax collector for the Roman occupying force. He was a Jew, one of the nation of Israel, the nation descended from the family of Abraham. With all these three factors in mind, it is safe to

say that he was an outsider – he had made a deal with the hated Roman occupiers and he was part of an infamously corrupt profession.

Jesus met him. He was transformed. He came to be one of Jesus' close followers. And he wrote this biography of Jesus so that people could meet him as he truly was.

This biography, like those penned by Mark, Luke and John is described as a 'gospel'. Literally, it is good news because it is news that changes the world.

On the one hand, Matthew wrote for people like himself – Jews, descended from Abraham, God's people, who were waiting for God to do as he promised – to save the world through Abraham's family. On the other hand, Matthew wrote for people like himself – outsiders who were distant from God. In this sense, he was writing for people who were not Jews, who were experiencing a world wracked by sin and broken.

Central to both these audiences was the idea of 'fulfilment'. Put simply, this was the idea that God had made a promise – that he had committed to doing something about the broken state of the world, that he had committed to dealing with the sin of the world through Abraham's family.

The idea of fulfilment is in the opening verse of Matthew – **listen to Matthew 1:1... READ...**

The man that Matthew is writing about – Jesus – is connected to the great promise that God made to have his own king rule the world ('son of David'), and he is connected to the great promise that God had made to deal with the broken state of the world (sin) by bringing his approval ('son of Abraham').

But this is not exclusively for the benefit of Abraham's family – it is for the benefit of any person. The genealogy of Jesus that Matthew presents establishes both his connections to David and Abraham, and God's interest in sinners – remember the five women of ill-repute?

What Jesus has come to do is available to anyone connected to Jesus. This is available to any person – regardless of colour, education, morality, age, work history, background, family history – if they are connected to Jesus. The connection is by 'faith' – by taking Jesus at his word, and living like it (REPEAT).

Matthew makes clear the message of Jesus as he comes – **remember Matthew 4:17? READ...**

Matthew also makes clear the method of Jesus as he begins this work publicly – **remember Matthew 4:23? READ...**

Last year, we followed Jesus as he taught in an astounding way – the reaction to his teaching as he spent time with his close followers, with a crowd listening in (the Sermon on the Mount) was very clear – **look at Matthew 7:28-29... READ.**

3. Outsiders brought inside... (vs.1-15)

As Jesus descends from the mountain where his authoritative teaching was displayed, he is accompanied by a great crowd – **look at verse 1... READ.**

In what is about to happen, we join that crowd in seeing the authoritative actions of Jesus – his miracles – which go hand-in-hand with his authoritative teaching. This man is displayed as the man of authority.

Matthew has structured a series of miracles – and we'll come to that in a moment – interspersed with sections on what it means to follow Jesus. The cumulative effect is for us – and the crowd – to see Jesus' authority as a teacher and in action and to ask ourselves, 'What do I make of this man?' Matthew gives us a clear view of his identity, through his authority, and forces us to ask what we will do with that truth.

This is not the time or place to debate the nature of the miracles. For Matthew, there is no question that they occurred. In fact, as a person who had been brought in by Jesus from the outside, these miracles go inseparably with Jesus' teaching – they establish his whole identity as the one promised by God to deal with this broken world.

As Jesus descends from the mountain, Matthew shows us in three miracle incidents. They all seem to occur in the area around

which Jesus worked for the majority of his public ministry – an area centred on Capernaum, in the north of Israel.

The first involves the healing of a man with a serious skin disease (vs.2-4). The second involves a centurion with a very sick servant (vs.5-13). And the third involves the mother-in-law of one of Jesus' closest followers (vs.14-15). The whole set is closed out where it began, with a large crowd surrounding Jesus, except this time he is healing many of demonic-possession and illness – and Matthew's assessment of the situation.

And they all share certain features...

(i) Each miracle involves an outsider

Each of these episodes involves an outsider, someone on the periphery of Israeli society, someone whom Leon Morris describes as 'not accepted into full worship of God by God's people'.

In the first episode, it is a man with a serious skin disease, probably leprosy (vs.2). Those with skin disease were seen as 'unclean', afflicted in some special way by the brokenness of the world. They were excluded from normal society and the normal gathering of God's people – they knew it, they had to make it public, and everyone else knew it.

In the second episode, it is man who is a significant participant in the occupation of Israel – a Roman centurion (vs.5). Most probably a Gentile, this man had two strikes against him – he was a Gentile and he was an occupying soldier. Matthew was familiar

with such men (remember his previous job as a tax collector?) and he knew his place outside Jewish society.

In the third episode, it is a feverish woman (vs.14). Women were not allowed to join with Jewish men in full worship of God by his people – and she was ill!

(ii) Each miracle involves no request

It is important to see that none of these miracles turn on a request of Jesus. The man with the skin disease approaches with a humble statement of fact – **look at verse 2**. The centurion approaches with a similar humility and statement – **look at verse 6**. And Peter's mother-in-law is lying sick – **look at verse 14**.

In none of these incidents is there a presumption on Jesus' obligation to heal – just a bare acceptance (perhaps less clear in the last episode) that he can – and he will, if he desires.

(iii) Each miracle involves Jesus reaching out to the outsider

In each of these episodes, Jesus takes the initiative to reach out to the outsider – in a way that is remarkable. In each action, Jesus himself runs the public risk perception that his action will then exclude him! It doesn't, but his initiative to reach out is at great risk to himself – he reaches out to touch the leper, he volunteers to attend and enter the Gentile centurion's house (which would render him socially unacceptable), and he voluntarily touches a woman (and an ill one at that)!

Here is a level of initiative mixed with compassion that speaks loudly of grace at great personal expense. Jesus is revealed as

the man with compassion and mercy and grace unparalleled, at great personal cost to himself.

(iv) Each miracle involves a display of Jesus' authority

But this grace and compassion is not without substance – it is matched by Jesus' amazing authority over illness and sickness. The leper is healed. The centurion's servant is healed. Peter's mother-in-law is healed. In each, it is the powerful word of Jesus that is foremost and front – he speaks, and these things are healed. He touches, and these things are healed. But our attention is drawn to the word – his authority is in his word! And it is amazing!

(v) Each miracle involves restoration

The outcome is complete restoration. This is important to recognize – it is not just healing that Jesus brings, but restoration – the return to what should be (REPEAT).

This is most striking at the start and end of these episodes.

The leper – the first episode – asks not for healing but 'cleansing' – did you see that there in verse 2? His desire is not just full health but the restoration to full humanity and community that he had lost. That is why Jesus' commands at the end are so important – this man has to traipse all the way down to Jerusalem, and to ask for a certificate of cleanliness from the priests – he desires to be restored to full health, inside and outside, community and individual.

The last scene, which we will come to in a moment (kind of like a closing bookend), is one of darkness and demonic. The close happens in the night and it is like a scene from some horror movie, as all the demon-possessed are brought to Jesus. Faced by physical and spiritual darkness, Jesus speaks – and full cleansing (restoration) happens, as the spirits are driven away. It seems to be a magnificent image of the man with compassionate gracious and merciful authority standing and restoring – not by trick or warfare but by word – and the darkness seems to lift!

4. Authority and pandemics (vs.16-17)

Matthew closes with this episode because he wants to make an assessment of what Jesus is doing, and who Jesus is – **look at verses 16-17... READ.**

Matthew's assessment is very clear – Jesus' actions across these three episodes tie to who he is. Who Jesus is is connected to God's promise to deal with the broken state of the world.

To make his point, Matthew states very clearly that Jesus is fulfilling a picture from one of the Old Testament prophets – Isaiah. He is quoting from one of the most famous passages in Isaiah – chapter 53. Here, in one of a number of similar sections, Isaiah proclaims God's purpose to fulfil his promise to deal with human sin and the broken world through a figure called the 'Servant'.

This Servant will come as one of humanity. This Servant will come as the central figure in God's plan and promise to deal with

human sin. This Servant will actually bear the judgement of God on human sin, on himself. Put simply, this Servant will die in place of sinners, taking the judgement that sinners deserve for them.

But Matthew doesn't see this as just a moment in time, when the Servant dies. Matthew understands that the whole issue of human sin (the attitude and action that says, 'I am God and God is not') has fundamentally broken not only humans but the world at large. Part of that whole package of brokenness is illness, sickness, being outside what God designed. So, when this Servant comes, he will display his ability and authority to deal with sin by the authority he displays in his life – he will start to set the world aright, restoring the world, as he completes his job – to deal with human sin.

That is what Jesus is doing: displaying in his day-to-day life his authority and purpose. He has come to deal with sin, and the miracles he commits show his authority to do the whole mission, as God promised.

Now, when you think about that, it shouldn't surprise us, or Matthew's original readers. The promise of God – way back in Genesis 12:1-3 – to Abraham was for the rolling back of curse in the world, and the bringing of blessing – at God's initiative and decision. Looking back on what we have just seen in these three episodes, we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus acts like this – he is showing that he has come to deal with the pandemic of human sin – he has the authority to do so!

Moreover, Matthew's assessment of Jesus' miraculous work is helpful in making sure we keep our eyes on the big picture. The big picture is not physical wellbeing for humans – the real war is dealing with sin, which is at the heart of human and world brokenness. Matthew wants us to have Jesus' authority within the big picture of the real purpose of Jesus' work.

5. Being cured... cleansed... restored...

One of the interesting parts of reading about authority and how to deal with this COVID-19 pandemic is how various people have responded to assertions of authority and various policy decisions. One of the most cutting was from the Governor of New York, responding to one of Donald Trump's assertions of authority – Andrew Cuomo, the Governor, stated that in America, 'We have a President, not a king'.

Matthew has constructed this whole series of episodes to draw out our reaction, by painting very clearly the identity of Jesus and his authority and mission. The presence of the crowd at the start and the end places us with the observers. In the middle episode – the one with the centurion – Jesus actually turns and speaks to the crowd – us – and makes us consider our response.

(i) Identity

Jesus' identity is very clear: he has the authority to deal with the whole package of human sin – and his life is central to that. As he moves to the climax of that event where he will deal with human sin as God promised, he displays his authority clearly, in bringing outsiders in, in restoring broken people, in showing his compassionate initiative.

Is this the Jesus that you know?

(ii) Purpose

Jesus' purpose is clear: he has come to deal with the whole package of human sin. In this sense, he is always bringing the outsider in, by his gracious initiative and at his expense. On a daily level, he is restoring broken people feeling the particularly sharp effects of a broken world in illness and sickness. On a big picture level, this shows his place in God's plans, as the one come to deal with the sin of the world – of all humans who are outside right relationship with God.

Is this the purpose of Jesus that you love?

(iii) Faith

And, smack bang in the middle of these episodes, in the centurion, we have the template of how to relate to this man, Jesus, as he truly is.

Jesus makes clear that 'faith' is the right way to deal with him. Not undefined faith but faith as this centurion displays: faith that is in Jesus, that has heard him and seen him and thought on him, and takes him and his identity and words and actions as true, and acts like it (REPEAT).

To deal with Jesus in faith – taking him as he is and his words and deeds as they are and living like it – means that Jesus is available to all who trust in him. This is the remarkable thing about the centurion – and Jesus wants those around him to know this (see

verse 10?). Dealing rightly with Jesus is not a matter of ancestry, skin colour, education, family history, or a track-record of good deeds and right behaviour. Dealing with Jesus rightly is simply a matter of seeing him, hearing him, knowing his identity and taking that as true, and acting on it – just like the centurion. The alternative is too awful to bear – do you see verse 12?

Is this how you deal with Jesus? Is this how you offer Jesus?