

The Challenge and Choice of the Kingdom

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[0 : 0 0] But we're going to turn now to our words for this morning, turn to our Bibles, Matthew chapter 13. We're continuing our series in Matthew's Gospel and we're reading from Matthew 13 verse 51 through to chapter 14 and verse 33.

So do follow along in your own Bibles there. Matthew 13 beginning there at verse 51. This is Jesus addressing his disciples.

Have you understood all these things? And they said to him, yes. And Jesus said to them, therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a house who brings out his treasure, what is new and what is old.

And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there and coming to his hometown, he taught them in their synagogue so that they were astonished and said, where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?

Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? Are there brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?

[1 : 2 1] Where then did this man get all these things? And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, a prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.

And he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief. At that time, Herod, the Tetrarch, heard about the fame of Jesus.

And he said to his servants, this is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him. For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife.

Because John had been saying to him, it is not lawful for you to have her. And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people because they held him to be a prophet.

But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod. So that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask.

[2 : 3 6] And the king was sorry.

But because of his oaths and his guests, he commanded it to be given. He sent and had John beheaded in the prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl.

And she brought it to her mother. And his disciples came and took the body and buried it. And they went and told Jesus. Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself.

But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd. And he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, this is a desolate place and the day is now over. Send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food from themselves.

[3 : 4 6] But Jesus said, they need not go away. You give them something to eat. And they said to him, we have only five loaves here and two fish. And he said, bring them to me.

Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the grass. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples.

And the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up 12 baskets full of the broken pieces left over.

And those who ate were about 5,000 men. Besides women and children. Immediately, he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side.

While he dismissed the crowds. And after he dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there, alone.

[4 : 50] But the boat, by this time, was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves. For the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night, he came to them, walking on the sea.

But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified and said, it is a ghost. And they cried out in fear. But immediately, Jesus spoke to them, saying, take heart.

It is I. Do not be afraid. And Peter answered him, Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water. He said, come.

So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and began beginning to sink. He cried out, Lord, save me.

Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying, oh, you of little faith. Why did you doubt? And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

[5 : 57] And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, truly, you are the son of God. Amen.

May God bless us his word this morning. Well, turn with me, if you would, to Matthew chapter 13 and 14, the passage that we read together, which is all about the challenge and choice of Christ and his kingdom.

No one ever stays in the same place after a confrontation with Jesus Christ, with his words and with his works. Jesus always confronts us with challenge and with choice.

And either we move closer to him with a growing understanding of his person and work, or else we're moving away into a growing confusion and ignorance and even hardening against him.

After all of Jesus' teaching in chapter 13, verses 51 and 52 there, if you look at them, they are key verses which are a bridge to the second half of Matthew's gospel.

[7 : 17] Have you understood all these things, he said to them? Yes. And he said to them, Therefore, every scribe who's been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.

So what all of these parables that he's been teaching, along with all Jesus' other teaching, what they teach is that all God's promises, all God's purposes for the whole world, find their climax, find their fulfillment in Jesus himself.

And he is the new treasure that crowns all of the old treasure of God's promises all through the ages. And so the key question is whether you understand this or not.

Will you understand, will you therefore submit to Jesus' unique rule over your life? Or will you refuse him and will you reject him?

And that's the key issue. And Jesus is gathering around himself, through his ministry, a new community of followers who do see, who do understand, who do rejoice in his sovereign lordship.

[8 : 31] And it's they, and it's they alone, who are the true Israelites, the true people of God, the church of Jesus Christ. And we've seen already how Matthew structures the whole of his book, the whole of his gospel, around these key sections of Jesus' teaching, just like the one we've spent time with here in chapter 13, which is all about the real expectations of his kingdom.

And what we're to expect now, and what we're not to expect until Jesus returns. The next main section comes, the teaching section comes in chapter 18.

And there Jesus is explaining, we'll come to it, what the life of that new community, that life of his church must be like. But here in between the end of chapter 13 to the end of chapter 17, what Jesus is showing us, what Matthew is showing us in his gospel, is this developing division that there is between those who will see and who will understand and who will follow Jesus, and those who won't.

So faced with the constant challenge, the constant choice of Jesus and the message of his kingdom, Matthew shows us here, it's a sobering picture of division.

Despite all Jesus' compassion, despite all his care for the crowds, he taught the great crowds. They were on the beach. Remember, he was in the boat at the beginning of chapter 13. He's taught them. Then, as we see halfway through chapter 14 here, chapter 14, verse 14, he had great compassion on the crowds, and he healed their diseases, and he feeds them all miraculously.

[10 : 18] He's given them every opportunity to see who he is and to respond. And yet, what we still see is two ways very clearly diverging.

Some refuse to understand. And they determine for themselves a path of stumbling on in blindness and ever-growing ignorance.

They're on the road to unbelief. But then there are others who, despite their questions, despite their perplexities, they do follow Jesus on a journey of growing faith and growing understanding.

And that division, those two ways, well, it's just been the same ever since. And so that means that the question for every one of us here this morning, every one of us listening, is the same.

Which road are you going down? We'll never be static. We're never going to be in the same place. Remember back to chapter 13, verse 12, to the one who has, more will be given.

[11 : 29] That's the response of faith, isn't it, that leads to more and more faith and understanding. But, to the one who has not, even what he has, will be taken away.

That's the unbelief that only leads further and further away from Christ and his kingdom. So as you leave church today, will you be seeing more and believing more and trusting more in Jesus and submitting more to his call on your life?

Or, will you go away that bit more blind and more ignorant and more unbelieving and more resistant to Christ and his call on your life?

It'll be one or the other of these. There is no third way. So we need to pay attention, don't we, to Matthew's message here. And in it, in our passage today, he explains and he illustrates very clearly these two different paths.

And he challenges us. Don't make the wrong choice. Don't go on the wrong path. So first of all, Matthew gives us two accounts that show us clearly the way of stumbling into blindness and ignorance.

[12 : 43] And that's from chapter 13, verse 33 to verse 12 of chapter 14. And it's tragic, but it is unmistakably true that there are others who despite having every opportunity to respond to the message of salvation and sometimes despite knowing extraordinary privilege from the Spirit of God, nevertheless, they will force the mercy of God to be withdrawn from them.

because the light of Christ cannot and will not shine any longer because of their willful rejection and willful unbelief.

And we see that here in two scenes. First of all, in verses 53 to 58, we see that reaction from the crowd. And then in the first 12 verses of chapter 14, we zoom in for a close-up of exactly the same thing, but we see it playing out in the life of an individual man, of Herod, as he faces the challenge, the choice of Christ and his kingdom and as he wrestles with it in his own conscience.

And of course, human nature has not changed in 2,000 years. And these same pictures can be seen still, just the same today in the 21st century. So we need to pay attention.

That's why Matthew's written this for us. Look at verses 53 to 58. And we see here a community rejecting Jesus en masse. An extraordinarily privileged community.

[14 : 15] Verse 54, he taught. The Son of God himself taught, where? In their own synagogue. Brilliant preaching. Perfect doctrine in every way.

If ever there was a place that was going to be revival through the Spirit of God, it was there. But it didn't work out like that.

Actually, that might be a good thing to remember, mightn't it, for those who are desperately seeking the key to revival. What is the reaction? Well, they were astounded at his words and his works, verse 54.

But, look at verse 55. What do they say? Who does he think he is? We know all about this Jesus. He grew up amongst us.

We're not going to listen to him. He's not special. He's certainly not unique. Why on earth should we listen to him? Why should he tell us what to do? What a cheek.

[15 : 17] And so, verse 57 says, they took offense at him. That word, take offense, scandalizo, it's where we get our word scandalize. It means literally to trip up, to stumble.

They stumbled, you see, they were floored by his claim to a unique authority over them. They refused that authority.

They refused his deity. And they said, well, he's just a man. He's just like us. He's not God. He's not unique. We're not going to submit to his words. No way.

We're going to de-platform him. We're going to unfriend him. We're going to cancel him. Very contemporary, isn't it? People are still being offended in just the same way by what Jesus dares to say to society and dares to command.

So he's cancelled. And if he doesn't watch out, he'll probably be charged with hate speech soon, won't he? And that's how it is in our community today, in our culture today, in 21st century Scotland.

[16 : 28] And we've had that Jesus all our lives. Yes, we had it in our school assemblies. Those of us who are old enough to have had that sort of thing in our school assemblies. Or we had it in the boys brigade. Or we had it in our Sunday school. But not anymore.

Not in the new Scotland. Enough of that doer Calvinist past. No, no, no, no, no. That's just the words of men. That's not unique. And if we must tolerate religion at all, well, Jesus just has to take his place among all the rest, doesn't he?

Beside Buddha, beside Mohammed, beside whoever, Gandhi, beside Karl Marx, or Charles Darwin, or all the rest. He's just one among them. Jesus isn't unique.

He's just one among many. He's just a man. That's what the enlightened documentaries on the television tell us, isn't it? That's what the religious discussion shows tell us, where there still are.

Such things hardly are at all now. But you see, Jesus says, no, that's not enlightened. That's not progressive.

[17 : 35] Look at verse 58. What does he say? It's unbelief. It's willing blindness. It's willing rejection of the truth.

That is setting your whole community, your whole culture, on a path to ignorance, to blindness, and to ultimate disaster.

It's very stark, isn't it? Look, unbelief drives Jesus away. He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief.

Well, friends, we have to be honest and we have to be clear, don't we? Scotland has been a very privileged community. Jesus has been taught in our churches for hundreds of years.

We've known huge, huge privilege in our culture, haven't we? Scotland was once called the land of the book. But so often, over the centuries, and particularly over recent decades, willful unbelief has driven Jesus Christ away.

[18 : 44] And now, if you look around our nation, what do you find? It's littered, isn't it, with empty church buildings. And post COVID, I'm sure there will be many, many more church buildings that become empty and are closed forever and ever.

Well, what do you expect? When today, even many of these churches, when they are open, just teach plain unbelief. when they're offended themselves by Jesus' words about all sorts of things, and they want to shut Jesus up in case he offends anybody else.

But these words of Jesus here surely are a real warning to all such favored communities today, and that includes surely the church, I think, in the whole Western world, and indeed the culture in the whole Western world.

Our Western society is more and more and more in crisis. It's collapsing around us morally and economically, institutionally, intellectually, with the absurdities that now passes for university study in so many cases.

So that once the things that were clearly seen to be absurd and irrational and idiotic are now regarded as normal by more and more people in the intellectual classes of our nation.

[20 : 13] But we shouldn't be surprised because if a community, if a culture meets Jesus Christ and his unique claims and his truth and his lordship, if it meets it with scorn and with contempt and with unbelief, there comes a time when Jesus Christ departs and his light with him.

will not do many mighty works in a place like that. And that's what happened to many of these Galilean towns.

We saw it earlier on in chapter 11. That's what happened to the seven churches of Asia Minor that we read about in Revelation chapter 1 to 3. They did not listen to Christ's call to repent and change their ways and their lamp stands were removed just as Jesus promised.

Christ. And still today, 2,000 years later in Turkey, Asia Minor, it's almost devoid of the church of Jesus Christ. And that's happening today.

It's happening in our lifetime. It's happening in the western world. The great missionary churches of the 18th and 19th century which sent missionaries to every other part of the world, the church is collapsing in the west.

[21 : 31] is taking offense at Christ, scorning him, scorning his unique lordship. And what Matthew tells us here is that when communities and cultures do that, Jesus removes himself.

Even that which it has will be taken away. And we better take that seriously, hadn't we? In the church today and in our culture today.

But as well as a corporate responsibility for our community's reaction to Jesus, we all also very clearly bear a personal responsibility for our dealing with his challenge on our own lives, don't we?

And that's what verses 1 to 12 of chapter 14 are all about. Here's an individual man rejecting Jesus and his gospel. And again, we see such a true insight into the struggles of somebody who's challenged by the truth of God and who's wrestling with it but who ultimately stumbles over the message because they find it offensive, an affront to his pride, to his personal autonomy.

Herod the tetrarch, by all accounts, was a vile person, a cruel ruler. He rolled over one of the four territories that the Romans had divided up.

[23 : 00] His father being the king, after his death, he divided up among four of them. And Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us that Herod was desperate to get the title of king but was never allowed it.

That probably tells you something in itself, doesn't it, about the man. But in verse 2 here, you see that he's in a state of fear, a state of agitation. And his reaction, do you see, to Jesus isn't the same, is it, as the Nazareth townsfolk.

They said, oh, he's only a man, we're going to ignore him. But Herod says, look, he's a ghost. He's John the Baptist resurrected. He's come to terrorize me with miraculous powers. The thought of Jesus was very unnerving to Herod.

Powerful. He can't ignore him. It's interfering with his conscience. It's disturbing him. And so most likely, he does want to destroy Jesus, to silence the challenge, as he had done with John the Baptist.

And that's likely why in verse 13 we're told that Jesus moves away, moves out of his jurisdiction. And John's fate is in fact the key here.

[24 : 16] Verses 3 to 12 are a parenthesis, taking us back in time to explain Herod's reaction here to Jesus. Because Herod is a man with a very troubled conscience.

And Matthew abbreviates this story. If you read in Mark chapter 6, there's a little more detail. But he makes his point very clearly. Verses 3 and 4 tell us that John had confronted Herod repeatedly because he was immoral.

He was illegal indeed in his sexual behavior, taking his brother's wife to his wife. Well, that's guaranteed to cause trouble, isn't it?

You start questioning somebody's sexual behavior, you start questioning their sexual preference, tell them it's wrong and sinful, boom. You'll have a Twitter storm today, won't you? Well, it wasn't so different then.

And so, urged on by Herodias, his incestuous wife, he puts John in prison. In Mark chapter 6, by the way, we're told particularly that Herodias had a real grudge against John.

[25 : 20] She wanted him dead, total cancellation. But Mark tells us that although Herod hated these accusations of John, he was captivated by what John said, by his message, by his preaching.

And he feared John because he knew he was a man of God, just as the people knew he was a prophet. He knew he spoke the truth. And Mark says that when he heard John, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

He was conflicted. John's message was something wonderfully attractive, wonderfully appealing, even to Herod.

And yet at the same time, it was a terrible challenge to him. It was a moral challenge to change his behavior at the command of God. And of course that kind of challenge shakes people to the core because we know everything must change if we accept God's way, and that's a real challenge.

So we want the message, but we don't want the message. We want to hear it, and yet we also want to shut it out.

[26 : 28] Isn't that right? Well, that was Herod. So verse five says he wanted to kill John, but he feared the people. He knew John was something special from God.

So Herod was a weak man, as many tyrants are when they don't have the guns. But in the end, his weakness and his self-interest and his pride forced him into a corner, forced him to make a decision.

And his ego and his reputation, ably helped by his appetite probably for too much drink and too much female flesh on show and the dancing, well, it meant his decision was made.

Kill the messenger, cancel John, cancelled by decapitation. And it's a pathetic story, isn't it? A weak man, a feeble man stumbling over his own ego, aided and abetted by a dominant lover.

And it's all too common, isn't it, in every sense. He is an individual pulled in two different directions by the challenge of the gospel message, by the demands it makes on his lives, the truth that's in Jesus, touching him.

[27 : 43] And so he tried to hedge his bets, he tried to keep a little bit in touch with religion, but just at arm's length, so he kept John in prison so he could hear him from time to time, keep in touch with him, but keep him in his place.

And people often do that, don't they? They want to sort of keep in touch with church, in a peripheral way, at a bit of an arm's length thing. But you see, that doesn't work because God brings us always to a point where sitting on the fence isn't possible anymore.

And at birth, the feast of Herod's, well it tested his true loyalties, the breaking point. And in the end, his true loyalty was to himself, and to his reputation, and to saving his face publicly.

And so John died. And as one writer puts it, and with him, Herod's conscience is a man who is being hardened more and more and more.

He was still haunted though. And so when Jesus comes on the scene here, he's afraid. He saw Jesus as supernatural, he saw him as scary, he saw him as a ghost come to haunt him.

[29 : 03] Notice it was the opposite exactly, wasn't it, of the Nazareth crowd. They said he's just a man. Herod said, oh no, he's a supernatural being. People will shut Jesus out of their consciousness by believing almost anything but the truth, wouldn't they, when that challenge comes.

But whatever it is, it's just as effective at rejecting Jesus. And verse 13, you see here, it echoes again, verse 58, Jesus withdrew from there. Yes, no doubt, he was removing himself from John's jurisdiction but also it was undoubtedly judicial.

Every single time in Matthew's gospel you read Jesus withdraws, it's from a place of hostility and hatred and unbelief. So friends, take Jesus seriously.

Yes, he is merciful, he is slow to anger, he is abounding in love and compassion. Yes, he holds out his hands of opportunity again and again and again, but not forever.

And if you meet Jesus with persistent unbelief, there will come a time when he will withdraw forever.

[30 : 27] And you're setting yourself on a path of stumbling in blindness and ignorance and that can only end in disaster. There's some very chilling verses in Luke's gospel in Luke chapter 23 about Jesus when he's before Herod at his trial.

And we're told that Herod was excited to see Jesus because he'd heard all about him and he hoped to see some great sign done by him. But there was no sign done before him, not even a word spoken.

We're told he questioned Jesus at length death. But Jesus made no answer, no call, no offer of grace, just a wall of silence.

And that's the end of the road of rejecting Jesus. But it began long before, way back here, in the challenge of John and his gospel message.

And Matthew is saying to us, friends, Jesus is serious. If you refuse him, if you refuse his call upon your life, you are setting yourself on a path that leads only further and further away from the mercy of God.

[31 : 34] Even that which you have will be taken away. So don't refuse him when he's speaking to you today.

Don't keep walking on that road. Now Matthew says, no, don't do that, but instead learn from Jesus as his disciples did.

Not stumbling in blindness and ignorance, but instead journeying on in faith and understanding. And that's what he shows us by total contrast in these next two stories in verses 13 to 33.

And the message is equally clear. Wherever there are those who, despite their perplexity, despite their doubts sometimes, despite being unsure about the way, whenever there are those who are looking to Jesus and listening to Jesus and following Jesus, he will lead them on and he will nurture even the little faith that they have into greater faith and understanding, which at last does see clearly the light of truth and the glory of Christ that will fill their lives.

For the one who has, says Jesus, more to them will be given and he will have an abundance. So in stark contrast, you see, to the blindness to who Jesus is and the unbelief of Herod and of the Nazareth crowds, here we have two great signs that open people's eyes and to open their understandings and to open their hearts in faith.

[33 : 13] And again, first it's with a crowd and then with an individual. They're well-known stories, aren't they? But in putting this narrative together, Matthew's emphasis for us is very clear.

He's showing us that stark contrast between the path of growing unbelief and separation from Jesus for those who reject his message and the contrast with a path of growing understanding and faith for those who will hear him and learn from him and the disciples here who are following him.

That's the focus in both of these accounts here. Jesus is teaching them to see more clearly who he is and to trust him for everything.

Notice in the first story of the 5,000 who are fed, the emphasis again is on the crowds. Verse 13, it's the crowds that follow him. Verse 14, there's a great crowd and that crowd needs feeding.

In verses 18 and 19, he feeds the crowds, the crowds. He has compassion, says verse 14, on the crowds. And by the way, in Matthew's gospel, that word compassion is always used by Jesus of his view of those who are on the outside, outside his inner circle, those who are still in the darkness and in the confusion.

[34 : 28] So here's a wonderful picture of Christ's compassion for the lost and for the helpless. He wants to save them. And it's a picture of Christ's power. He is able to save them.

That's such an important thing for us to remember, isn't it? Jesus wants to save the lost and Jesus has power to save the lost. And he will save them, multitudes of them.

But you see, all the focus here of the lesson of this miracle, notice, it's aimed squarely at the disciples, isn't it? All the way through, Jesus is interacting with his disciples here.

Look at verse 16, the challenge there, you see. They don't need to go away. He says to them, you feed them. How are we going to do that? Well, verse 18, you see, bring those loaves and fishes to me.

On your own, of course, you're totally helpless to feed thousands of people, but bring your helplessness to me, and it's a very different matter. Then, you see, look at verse 20, then they can feed a multitude.

[35 : 38] Jesus alone can give them that power that they themselves lack. And that's what he's teaching them. He's teaching them to depend totally on him and his power.

And I love verse 20. Gives the light, doesn't it, to all those pathetic ideas that liberal scholars used to like to use to try and explain away this miracle. Remember, we were taught this in school.

Oh, everyone forgot they were hungry because Jesus' teaching was so spellbinding. Well, that doesn't give you 12 baskets of leftovers, does it? Of course, this was a real miracle.

It was witnessed. It was tasted. It was a miracle by thousands of people. But it's also a miracle with deep significance because it echoes amazingly the Old Testament scriptures in so, so many ways.

All to do with God's promises of the wonderful things that there will be when he is present in the midst of his people. It echoes the manner that God fed Israel with in the time of the exodus in the desert.

[36 : 41] Especially it echoes the promises of the prophets for the great banquet of the Messiah King when he comes. If you read later on Isaiah chapter 25 and 26, he speaks about a feast of rich food for all peoples.

And on that day all the peoples, Jews and Gentiles, will gather and they'll say, this is the Lord. Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation. And Matthew's saying, look, this is a picture of that.

It's a promise of what Christ's compassion and Christ's power will accomplish for all peoples. It's a foreshadowing of what he would accomplish in his death and his resurrection, his power and his compassion together, working salvation for the lost, to feed the spiritual hunger of men and women, to quench their thirst for salvation, for life, as it truly is meant to be.

I think it can't possibly be an accident that in verse 19 here, the four verbs that are used, he blessed, he broke, he gave, and they ate.

It's exactly the same four things in the account of the Last Supper, isn't it, in the upper room? You can read it later on in chapter 26. What he's saying, you see, he is. But for those who don't refuse him in unbelief, for those who come to him, Jesus is saying, bring all your inadequacy to me, and I will do wonders with them, to amaze everyone.

[38 : 21] It's a wonderful message. It's a wonderful message for those of us who are so acutely conscious of how little that we have in our hands to do the tasks that Jesus has called us to do.

But bring them to him, and this transformation. And then you see in verse 22, this next story continues the same journey of faith and understanding for the disciples.

And here it's a very private lesson. He deliberately sends them off in the boat, and the whole event is focused on Jesus nurturing the little faith that he says is all they had there in verse 31.

one. Here's these disciples. They've seen so much. They've heard so much. And yet still they're perplexed, aren't they? They're unsure. But they're still following Jesus.

They're still with him. And Jesus says, to such as these I will give more, and they'll have an abundance. So notice verse 25, Jesus came to them.

[39 : 27] He's not withdrawing from these disciples, he's coming to them. And verse 27, in spite of their fear and their confusion, he calls them. He's not silent with them.

Fear not, he says. And in doing so, he reveals himself to them. First in word, verse 27, it's I. That's so significant. Literally, he's echoing the words there of God to Moses at the burning bush.

I am. It's the name of God, the name of the Lord. And then in his actions, only the Lord himself walks upon the sea, tames the storm.

We sang it in the psalm, the sea is his, he made it. And you see what Matthew's telling us, when people are following Jesus, however haltingly he leads them on in an ever greater journey of truth and of faith and of understanding.

And look here, verse 33, the result is a foretaste, isn't it, of the great confession. Truly, you are the Son of God. That was the testimony of the voice of God himself at Jesus' baptism, wasn't it?

[40 : 35] And at the transfiguration. This is my son. It'll be Peter's confession in chapter 16. It's the great climactic confession at the cross of Jesus by the centurion in chapter 27.

Surely, this is the Son of God. See what Matthew's saying, that's understanding, isn't it? That's faith. And that is the dividing point in the road between these two paths that only ever divide more and more and more.

Faith and trust in Jesus as the unique Son of God, that is a path that leads on in an experience of ever deeper understanding and knowledge about Jesus' presence, about his power in your life.

And in a ministry that shares this with others, bringing new treasures out of old and blessing people. Path of faith or of unbelief.

Rejecting Jesus, deaf to his word, which leads only into ever greater darkness and stumbling and blindness and ignorance. Until at last, all light is gone and Jesus withdraws and there's just that wall of divine silence.

[41 : 56] And friends, that is still the fork in the road. That's still the challenge and the choice that Jesus Christ puts to us every time we hear his voice today.

However many times we've heard it before. He confronts you. He's doing it today. forcing a decision. Belief or unbelief.

Following on more in trust or walking back in disdain and disbelief. It's the same question that faces every one of us every day.

Will I hear his voice or will I close my ears and my heart to Jesus Christ? And that's the challenge you face, I face every day. Striking, I think, that when we read these stories, there's no discernible difference in moral quality in a way between these disciples and all these others who reject Jesus.

They're just the same people, the same weak and fickle flesh. Look at the reactions in the feeding of the five thousand story. What can he do with five loaves and fishes? What can a man do with that?

[43 : 05] He's just a man. Just like the people in the Nazareth synagogue thought. Or in the boat. Look at verse 26. The disciples said, oh, he's a ghost. That's just what Herod thought.

They're not different in their physical makeup, in their emotional, psychological makeup. These believers and unbelievers. The same frail flesh and confusion.

But you see, doubts and uncertainties and frailties, that's not the same. There's willful rejection, there's out and out unbelief, turning your back on Jesus.

Thank God for that. Otherwise, where would any of us be? Where would any of us stand? There are those who do not want to hear Christ's voice, who are willfully hardening themselves day by day in blindness and in unbelief.

believe. And for them, this chapter is a very stark warning. The ultimate end of that path is in disaster. Verse 58 here, verse 13 are clear.

[44 : 17] Jesus withdraws himself from people like that. For the one who has not, even what he has, will be taken away. friends, if that is you, if you're drifting in that direction, don't think that you can ignore Jesus like that ever.

Not even a little bit. Starting out on that road is a dangerous, dangerous place to be. And there are people who are doing that.

But there are also those who want to hear Jesus, who do want to find the truth about him. Might have many doubts, perplexities, many fears, sometimes all sorts of confusion, all sorts of uncertainty.

Nevertheless, for everybody who is like that, this chapter is the most wonderful, wonderful encouragement. Look at verse 30. Even in the midst of weak faith, confusion, doubt.

Everyone who calls out to Jesus, as Peter did, Lord save me. They will be heard. And they will be saved because Jesus loves to lead on, even weak faith, even a little faith, on that road of steady understanding to great faith, to salvation.

[45 : 37] And he will gently go on, opening your eyes, opening your heart to the wonderful truth of knowing him truly, the son of God, the savior that he is. So that's you today.

Let me tell you just as firmly, Jesus loves to respond. He loves to respond to words like Peter's here in verse 28. Look, Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you.

If you're real, Lord, make me come to you. And when you ask that of the Lord Jesus, he always responds the same way, just as he does here in verse 29.

Come. Come to me. Because it's in his person and it's in his presence that all your confusion can be lifted.

And you'll see him as he truly is, the son of God, full of the powers of the world to come. The power to save you and me, even when we're sinking and nearly gone.

[46 : 42] And to lead us into that place of ultimate security, ultimate safety, ultimate peace. So don't let familiarity breed contempt of his words.

Like these crowds in the synagogue in Galilee. And don't let your reputation or your pride or your reluctance to change your life, don't let that hold you back from Jesus as it did for Herod.

Let Jesus lead you on in faith and in understanding today and tomorrow, every day, every day of your life. Walk with Jesus, not away from him.

And you will know how deep and how wide his love can flow. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that your word is to us a clear challenge and that it offers us a distinct and definite choice.

Does so every time we hear your word. And so this very morning, you are speaking to challenge us. And the choice that you want us to make is that we should follow you and walk with you, never walk away from you.

[48 : 09] So help us, Lord, every one of us this morning, everyone listening, help us to determine in our hearts that we will walk with you, whatever that way will take.

And help us as your people here together to help one another always to be walking that way. For we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.