

Matthew 8:11

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[0 : 00] Turn with me this evening to the scriptures that we read in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 8. And I want us to build our thoughts around this evening, something that's said in the context of Jesus and the encounter with the centurion.

We're in response to the incredible faith of this man. And Jesus went on to say in verse 10, I tell you the truth, I've not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.

I say to you that many will come from the east and the west and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

Amen. This morning we shared together something perhaps of what we would describe as our Christian experience.

We sought to share with ourselves how we might, as it were, explain what the Christian faith means to us, what God's amazing grace has done for us.

[1 : 34] And by so doing, it should in a sense stir all of us to more and more wish to relate these wonderful blessings that we've known to other people.

And it should, I think, also stir us to continue to see the importance of evangelism.

Stir us to appreciate that despite the circumstances that so often prevail around us, this wonderful old message of the love of God to a lost world is a significant message.

And it's because of that I want us this evening to look at something of the implications of what Jesus here related as a consequence of the faith of this centurion.

A man who culturally was so different from the Jews. A man whose profession in many respects would have put him, humanly speaking, beyond, it seems, the obvious contact with the church.

[3 : 00] And yet along this man's journey of life, he's come in contact with the Christian message. How, we're not told.

But something has happened in this man's life to convince him that this Galilean is indeed the saviour of the world. And this Galilean is not just a man who speaks majestic language about the kingdom of God that is perhaps so embryonic in his understanding at this stage.

He's convinced that this man also has the power to do what eye has not seen nor ear heard, particularly in respect to the healing of his servant.

And the faith of the man moves, our Lord. And it causes him to use the centurion's faith as a picture, we might say, of what shall be the experience of other men and other women, of other peoples, as this same wonderful message of God's love to a lost world, is encountered.

And all the context, in a sense, splits itself between two great privileges and blessings. I want us to look at the first part of that in verse 11 only.

[4 : 49] Particularly what is shared with us in these words, I say to you that many will come from the east and the west and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

Because the first wonderful picture that Jesus is giving us there, by way of encouragement, by way of consolation, by way of motivation, is the picture of what we might describe this evening as the scale of his redeemed people.

Because he tells us something of the size, something of the dimension, of what he will see as his kingdom. And he uses the word many.

Many will come from the east and from the west. Now that seems a strange word almost to us in Scotland this evening.

Because we're so familiar with the reverse of that. The whole mindset struggles at times to get round the perception that God's kingdom is indeed many-fold.

[6 : 23] Because we look out and so often we see small and struggling congregations. We look at our statistics and these statistics, so often in Scotland at least, impress upon us that rather than many, the church is small and it's in decline and it's almost in free fall in regards to declension.

We look around Scotland and we so seldom hear of the grace of God at work in people's lives these days.

We so seldom hear of men and women, boys and girls, being converted. I'm not that old and I'm not that many years a Christian.

But I can go back 30, 35 years in my early days as a Christian and I can remember so frequently here and there hearing of men and women, boys and girls, under the sound of God's Word whose lives were touched and whose lives were changed.

We hear that so seldom these days. And it's in the light of that experience that these words are incredibly challenging.

[8 : 00] Because they challenge a mindset in our generation that so often is tempted to give up, tempted to believe the statistics, tempted almost to embrace the inevitable that decline is the reality.

And yet, coming back to the words of Jesus, He says, many will come. how can we get that picture into our minds?

I think there are two ways perhaps of thinking about it this evening. The first is not original. The first was suggested by Charles Haddon Spurgeon a long time ago.

When He reminded us that we have to think in the context of God's redeemed people as many. And when we think, first of all, of all who Christ has died for.

And when we think of that, we are inevitably forced to bear in mind that that number is not insignificant. You remember just before Jesus is taken and crucified, He says Himself that the day is coming when, lo, I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto Me.

[9 : 36] And there was many moments in His three years of ministry where there was indication that that picture was a reality. there's even the moment of crucifixion itself in which there is the reminder that that's happening when the thief turns to Him and says, Lord, remember Me today when You come into Your Kingdom.

But we pick it up on the day of Pentecost when Luke tells us of 3,000. In the early chapters of Acts we are constantly reminded that many were added to the church daily as would be saved.

Again, we get something of this dimension or scale when we think of all the infants that have died. How many children have passed into eternity?

Again, all the saints from every generation. Again, all the believers who have died that we know not of.

All perhaps who have on a battlefield somewhere in previous conflicts submitted their lives in their dying moments to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[11 : 03] All those who are unknown to us. And then again, you think of it in the context of all those who will yet come.

Because our conviction is that many will still come. I trust it's your conviction here in Aberdeen.

I trust it's the conviction of all of your church leaders, of all of you as God's people. The conviction that what we're engaged in is not a waste of time.

It's not the maintenance of an institution. It is the maintenance and the working through a congregation of people seeking to impact the city in respect to the glorious truth of God that he saves sinners.

But again, you can begin to pick up something of the size. When you're not just home in or look at the stress put on the many.

[12 : 13] But when you look at the shall, I say to you that many will come. And how we should listen as God's people to his shalls or his wills.

There's nothing comparable to them. His promises never fail us. And we must believe that in the context of Christian ministry, in the context of Christian witness and evangelism.

Because around us tonight, perhaps sitting in church this evening, there are those who are of a mindset that I will never come to Jesus.

I will never bow the knee to him. I will never walk the Christian life. You're here for a variety of reasons. You've done it perhaps for a long time.

It's what's expected of me by my parents, by my family. But have me become one of those committed followers of Jesus Christ?

[13:22] No chance. Listen to what Jesus is saying, my friend, this evening. You will come. for no one can resist his ultimate invitation and work the work of his spirit.

Some of you and some of those known to you will say to you in your witness to them, me a Christian, an impossibility because this life of mine and the life that I live is such that no God would have me at all.

You will come, he says. And what a word this is to all of us this evening who are tempted to grow weary in the main things.

What a word this is to those of us in leadership in the church and in the work and witness of the gospel to embrace in the context of ministry that Jesus is saying many will come.

Can I ask you before we go any further, have you come? responded you personally to the one who indeed is the savior of the world, to the one who is ever inviting you to believe and to be saved, to the one who is saying come unto me, cast all your cares, cast all your burdens upon me and I'll give you rest.

[15:11] Can I urge you to do so? But then you notice Jesus didn't just say many shall come. And interestingly enough, in that context, Bishop Ryle said on one occasion, surely the many we shall see in heaven will make ample amends for the few we now see upon the earth.

But as well as stressing the scale, Jesus went on to give us a second picture. The picture of the source, we might say, of his redeemed people.

Where were they to come from? He says, I say to you, many will come from the east and from the west. From the east and from the west.

How fitting that in John's wonderful vision in the Revelation, it's almost as if you hear an echo of what Jesus said here before the crowd and in the presence of the centurion.

Jesus said, many shall come from the east and from the west. And John, in that great privileged position that was his to see into the future and into the kingdom of God, is privy to that great vision that he describes as a multitude which no man can number from all nations, from all kindreds, from all kinds, before the Lamb and before the throne.

[17:08] And the question is, who are they? Where are they from? The reminder and the answer is given to us surely by the Lord here.

Matthew's Gospel, one of the outstanding characteristics of it is to emphasize the mission, a mindedness of the Lord. To remind us that the church is not simply for the Jews, but for the world. And that stress is something that's picked up on regularly by Matthew in his record of our Lord's ministry. Reminding us that his purpose was to seek and to save sinners.

That the commission he gave to the disciples before his ascension was that they would go into all the world and preach the gospel making disciples.

That his objectives were to gather a people into his kingdom. And the wonderful thing about these words here in chapter 8 is that the stress is not so much, however, upon the geographic, but upon the spiritual.

[18:30] The outworking of God's people's work and ministry to the world would mean of all nations, of all kindred, of all colors, and so on.

But the spiritual dimension is even more wonderful. They will come, almost Jesus' sign, from everywhere. everywhere. And they'll come from everywhere because they will hear the message of God's love.

They will come and they'll not only hear it, they'll become convinced of it. They'll become convinced of what sin is and of what righteousness is.

They'll become convinced that a holy God cannot tolerate sin in our unrighteousness. And they'll hear the glorious words of the Scriptures that tells them that God so loved the world that He gave His only beloved Son that whosoever believed in Him would not perish because of unrighteousness.

And through that conviction will come the reality of repentance and faith towards God. And it is in that context that again we should be thrilled here because I say to you many will come from the East and from the West as a consequence of Christian witness and ministry.

[20:10] As a consequence of the Spirit's power and work through His Word. And that people from all the nations from everywhere literally is a fascinating community of people.

People are fascinating the world over. In this congregation here in Aberdeen this evening if we had the time and we really had the honesty and we had the opportunity we would appreciate just how

fascinating we are.

We may look very similar, dress very similar, but the reality is we're all different. And those of us this evening professing to be Christian people will acknowledge how different we are.

What pasts we've had. What sin we might say we've known. What places we have almost wrecked our lives in and so on. And yet there is this common thread that grace has brought us to the foot of the cross.

To a Savior that makes the foulest clean. That takes our sin in all its ugliness and makes us as white as the driven snow in his eyes.

[21 : 43] And the reality goes out and that reality goes throughout the whole church. That people from everywhere coming to faith, so many of them will be different.

So many of them will have been hopeless cases. grace. Whitfield described so many sinful people that he knew that the grace of God had touched, who were so different.

He describes them on one occasion as the devil's castaways. Even the devil's castaways, those that the devil himself had given up on, grace had not given up on.

They will come from the east and they will come from the west. Even though sometimes, you know, in the context even of our own lives and congregations experience, those tough, hard-hearted people that at times were tempted to give up on, even in our own family circles, coming to the place so often where we stop praying for them because we cannot perceive a moment when grace will touch their lives and take away these stony hearts that are theirs.

They shall come, he saying, from the east and from the west. All these unlikely ones, all these different types, all these, you would say, prodigals that have littered the stage of history from the beginning, they will come from the east and from the west.

[23 : 30] And I think too, that's what makes Paul's phrase to the Corinthians a very telling one. Because the Corinthian church, it seems, very early on began to lose sight of its objective in the world.

It began to lose sight of why God had touched the lives of so many within it. As they began to fragment and begin to splinter off into groups.

As they began to forget the roots from which, or the pits we might say, from which they were lifted. And perhaps in disdain, many of them looked out upon a Corinth and upon the community in Corinth with almost smug evangelical spirits.

And yet, the apostle Paul comes back to them. And what does he say to them? Such were some of you. How humbling that must have been for them to be reminded of it as if they should ever have forgotten it.

But Jesus is saying, he's saying to you in Aberdeen this evening, for your encouragement in the work of the gospel, many shall come.

[24 : 52] Do you believe that there are many in this great city of Aberdeen still to come to the Savior, do you? And they shall come from everywhere.

Not just from those with three church backgrounds. They shall come from everywhere. Because everyone needs the Savior that you witness to.

And such people, when they hear, the ministry that you maintain, the witness that you share, when the Spirit gives that opportunity to talk about the faith and to point to the Lord Jesus Christ, they will come from the everywhere and from the everyone.

And finally, it is as if Jesus is wanting to give you another picture. He is saying this scale of the redeemed people of God, from everywhere that they come from, has this great future hope, this surety.

And what is that? They will take their places, He says, at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.

[26 : 22] They will sit down in the kingdom of heaven. And again, I think that's beautiful. Because what is our work and witness aimed at?

We might say, surely it is aimed at reaching a lost people with the gospel, yes. But what's its ultimate aim? Its ultimate aim in Christ is to win some, not just for time, but for eternity.

And here it is as if Jesus is saying, keep this picture in front of you when you engage in the work of ministry and witness. This picture of the size of my church, the source of my church, and also the picture of where my church is leading.

Someone has said, those acquainted with God and Christ are already in the suburbs of life eternal. We're not given a great deal here in what the Lord shared about the nature of the kingdom of heaven.

But here and elsewhere in Scripture we're given enough to give us incentive. God because the first thing that we are reminded about in connection with heaven is that it is a place of rest.

[27 : 50] They shall sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and feast there. Spurgeon speaking on this particular text, he said, for the working man this must have been one of the most privileged or blessed views of heaven that Scripture could unfold.

Because it is indeed to be a place of rest. There remains a rest for the people of God. But also it is a place of choice company.

they will sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. One of the great wonders of the revelation of John is that heaven will be a place of choice company.

the reality of being with such people like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is mind boggling.

And yet, why are we so nervous or tentative about the thought of it? It is a glorious prospect.

[29 : 12] But it is also not just a place of choice company because of these significant persons that heaven will embrace.

And it will be something to have opportunity, won't it, to talk with people like Abraham what it was like trying to bring together so many splendid groups and form them into a nation.

What it was like to see the unfolding of God's covenant that I will make your people as numerous as the sand on the seashore to talk to people like Noah, to talk to people like David, Paul, Peter, Matthew, Luke.

God's hope. But perhaps for us what's perhaps drawing in terms of this glorious hope is the prospect of reunion with those that we have lost in Christ.

And we'll recognize them. Because if we're able to recognize Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob surely part of the wonder of God's kingdom as it shall be, is that reunion with parted loved ones.

[30 : 44] A few short years of evil past. And then the happy shore, where death-divided friends shall meet, to part no more.

that is one of the wonderful almost magnetic pools of keeping on going, looking towards that moment when heaven will become a reality.

But surely the ultimate, the ultimate in terms of choice accompanying will be seeing Jesus as He really is Himself.

I looked, John said, and I saw a multitude which no man can number of all nations and of all kindred and of all tongues standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

The Lamb of God that was slain, who had taken away the sins of the world. What a moment that will be.

[31 : 59] To see Him. To be able to praise Him in a way perhaps that we have never done to date. To be able to express our gratitude for His incredible love and sacrifice even unto death.

To be able then to marvel and to wonder at the privilege of the Lamb leading His people into an environment and into a world and into an experience that we cannot wholly comprehend.

But one thing is certain we can comprehend. That it will be different as it will be better from the present.

Later on in John's unfolding description of this revelation, he describes it best when he says this, the Lord wiped away all tears from their eyes.

There is no more death in this place. No more sorrow. Why is there no more of what characterizes the present in John's description of heaven?

[33 : 30] Because he says the former things have passed away. Behold, all things have become new.

Isn't that a magnificent description of what heaven will be? A place of rest. A place of choice company.

A place of reunion. A place where absolutely nothing that characterizes the present and our experience of it will be true.

Can I ask you, is that your hope? Can I ask you, is that your destiny? Are you in this multitude which John saw yet?

Are you part of the many yet? I hope so. I hope so.