
ON SEEING THE GOOD NEWS

PAUL S. MINEAR

Among the greatest of the world's paintings is the gigantic fresco Michelangelo created on the wall behind the altar in the Sistine Chapel. I want first to comment on that mural. Having no competence as an art critic, I will rely on observations made by Roberto Salvini. He stresses the fact that the painter rejected any use of a frame for his fresco. A frame would have implied "a fixed distance with a fixed viewpoint."¹ It would have presupposed a limited space and time, whereas the painting was designed to cover a range of reality from the highest reach of heaven to the deepest zone of hell. The subject was too big for the room, for any room, for it pictured heaven with its dense population of angels and demons as the essential and eternal source and context for everything that happens on earth, from the creation of the first mortal to the end of the age.

In the fresco, the focus of vision falls on the vindicated and powerful Judge. Near him on one side is a vast company of the patriarchs and prophets of the old covenant and, on the other, an equally vast company of apostles, martyrs, and saints. At the bottom, on one side, are the blessed who are being raised from their graves and, on the other, the cursed being assigned to Hades. Among the latter is "the extremely bitter self-portrait that the artist included in Saint Bartholomew's empty skin."² Essential to an understanding of the drama are the two lunettes at the top, one showing the cross and the other the pillar, two symbols borne by angels to suggest qualifications that enabled the crucified Jesus to serve God as the final judge.

Let me make two additional comments. The entire fresco enables

Paul S. Minear is Winkley Professor of Biblical Theology Emeritus at Yale University Divinity School and author of numerous works, including *The Golgotha Earthquake: Three Witnesses* (1995) and *Christians and the New Creation: Genesis Motifs in the New Testament* (1994).

¹Roberto Salvini, *Michelangelo* (New York: Mayflower, 1981), 130–131.

²*Ibid.*, 120.

viewers to see synchronically the long story of earth within the context of God's creative activity. It also enables them to locate a single center for that story in the person of a human Jesus whose humiliation and exaltation embodied the power of God, thus qualifying him to serve as the judge of all. Because of the conjunction of these two, simultaneity and centrality, every episode in the long story points toward that center, which, in turn, yields an ultimate significance to each episode. The very scope and depth of this bond between detail and center justifies the location of the fresco behind an altar, where it invites worshipers to see, once again, both the story in its unimaginable diversity and the center in its inexplicable synthesis of defeat and victory.

These comments introduce an explanation of the initiation and purpose of this essay, dealing as it does with selected incidents in the Gospel of Matthew. Let me state that purpose in various ways. Just as worshipers in the Sistine Chapel are being silently urged to hear again the witness of patriarchs, apostles, and martyrs when they see the men and women in the fresco, so, too, readers of the Gospel stories are being subtly urged to relate each scene to the central scene in the Gospel—the crucifixion. To put the same point more technically: As Michelangelo provides a synchronic vision of a long tradition that happened diachronically, so Matthew edits a diachronic collection of stories in a way that calls for synchronic vision. My purpose is to help readers view Matthew's Gospel as a single mural with a central scene, the scene of a helpless Servant whose very humiliation fulfills the divine design hidden in each of the preceding episodes.³

But to see the Gospel in these terms is far from easy because of the emergence of modern attitudes toward history, the development of the historical sciences, and the subjection of every verse in the Gospel to tests employed in those sciences. Those tests give priority at every point to the demands of diachronic reasoning. Every past event must be located at a specific point on a fixed chronology, after other events with their possible influences and before other events with their possibly warped interpretations. A chain of successive events must therefore be reconstructed before hypothetical influences and meanings can be ventured. Whenever Matthew relayed events out of their original order, any interpretation becomes hazardous. Only a strictly diachronic reconstruction can lend credibility to the causes and effects within the story. And such causes and effects are limited to things observable in time and space. References to interventions by angels or demons arouse either outright disbelief or nervous skepticism. Even more embarrassing are appeals to heavenly kingdoms, whether divine or satanic, or to warfare between those kingdoms. Faith in a God from whom, to whom, and through whom are all things, yet a God whose closest link to human history is by way of human hearts—such faith can only complicate historical narratives and their understanding. Yet that very

³This analysis of Matthew 11–12 first emerged on my desk after a book-length manuscript had just been completed (“The Good News According to Matthew: A Training Manual for Prophets”). It may be published later as an appendix to that manuscript.

faith is essential both to Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* and to Matthew's Gospel.

In spite of such difficulties, I want to challenge us to *see* the Gospel in ways analogous to Michelangelo's vision. And there is no inherent difficulty in meeting that challenge. In writing his Gospel, Matthew was himself seeing all its contents in retrospect. Like all memories, retrospects are by nature synchronic. All such retrospects receive their unity from being viewed by a single set of eyes that interpret earlier events in terms of present significance, whether destructive or constructive. This holds true also for Matthew's first readers or listeners. They were believers who had accepted from Jesus, as their Lord and Savior, an exalted and dangerous vocation. That vocation established as pivot in all their thinking the image of God's crucified Servant, a pivot that provided them with the key to grasping significances concealed within all the stories and teachings that stemmed from Jesus' own mission, viewed synchronically. Interpreters who fail to recognize the integrity of this retrospect, or who, in recognizing it, infer that it automatically invalidates their vision, will never see the stories as Matthew and his first readers saw them.

What was true for that original conversation of writer and readers is also true for some Christians today. They often listen to these stories during times of worship, introspection, and inward imagination. At the same time, they are facing an altar on which a cross continues to provide for that imagination the detailed recollection of the passion—a recollection that is synchronic in the fullest sense. These worshipers are at times prompted by the presence of the cross to see the connections between two moments: the moment of the Gospel lesson as read from the pulpit and the moment of that terrible crucifixion. Such a vision may well remind these worshipers that the church has placed in its canon of authoritative Scripture the Gospel of Matthew rather than some historical distillation of events that might seem more credible.

Now let me illustrate Matthew's synchronic perspective by examining three episodes selected from chapters 11 and 12. These three are typical of many. They all focus upon sayings of Jesus that often fail to attract much attention from modern teachers and preachers, but I believe that inferences drawn from them carry important weight. Viewed diachronically, these sayings have proved very baffling to historical exegetes; but viewed synchronically, with the passion story as the center, they give a clear and coherent witness to the good news.

THE BLESSING AND THE OFFENSE

Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities. When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (Matt. 11:1–6; NRSV)

Historians find many difficulties in interpreting this story. The storyteller shows virtually no interest in the original participants. Apart from the reference to John and Jesus, there is no concern for those actors. None is named. No response to Jesus' answer is given. There is no clear location in space or time. No concern is shown for John, his reason for raising the query, or his response to Jesus' answer. Six groups are mentioned as having profited from Jesus' work, but none of them is present and none speaks. Jesus gives no direct answer to the question but instead leaves to others the responsibility for answering. In fact, he places the emphasis not on his identity but on the judgment of others about him. He calls attention to the six groups who have responded to his message, but they are not even present. Only a few things seem to be common to the six: They have accepted the good news through a repentance stimulated by their helplessness. Nothing is said about their political status. The only economic factor recognized is poverty, though the kind of poverty is unspecified. All six groups appear to be disadvantaged religiously, being subject to certain sanctions as unclean and thus disqualified from a full share in the worship of synagogue and temple. None is in a position of power, or in a position, when healed, to exercise power. In short, the characters in this story and their place in society are as undefined as the crowds in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*.

“Jesus not only lacked the expected credentials, he rejected them. His offense was to reverse all human measures of greatness, of freedom, of wisdom.”

Little wonder that an exegete finds it difficult to establish a context within which the story can be interpreted. Such a context is partially provided by “what you hear and see,” but the very next statement of Jesus proves that this context alone does not fully answer the question. Nevertheless, the text contains clues to that answer. Those clues are found in the saying of Jesus that forms a natural climax. What is the offense? Who are offended? Who are not offended? What is their blessedness? The Gospel as a whole provides clear and convincing answers to these four questions. I will answer them in order. When those answers are in hand we will know how to view this scene in its relation to the rest of the mural.

What is the offense? Jesus himself is the offense. It is not the signs that offend, but the person. Not his power to release captives, but his failure to present the evidence that would fit the expectations of “the one who is to come.” He appeared rather as “a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners” (11:19).⁴ He was too meek and humble in heart

⁴Unless otherwise indicated, all references are to the Gospel of Matthew.

to qualify (11:29). He did not “wrangle or cry aloud,” did not step on a bruised reed or extinguish a flickering lamp (12:19–20). He was an ordinary man, a member of an ordinary workman’s family, who received no special respect in his home town (13:55–57). Last of all and slave of all, he was of all penitents the most humble in heart (11:30).⁵ All these offenses were telescoped into one: “I must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes.” That offense was too much even for his closest follower (16:21–23). Jesus not only lacked the expected credentials, he rejected them. His offense was to reverse all human measures of greatness, of freedom, of wisdom. When God struck down this shepherd, all the sheep in his flock scattered. He thus fulfilled his repeated warning: “All of you will be offended in me” (26:31, 33). All definitions of the offense meet in and are reflected from the forsakenness at Golgotha: Jesus *is* the offense. (That present tense remains a present tense through all generations.) He does not claim messianic greatness. Far from it. He epitomizes messianic lowliness.

Who are those offended? The Gospel mentions diverse groups. One is “this generation,” which, like children playing in the marketplace, rejects the calls from John as well as from Jesus (11:16–19; 21:28–32). Another is the residents of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum who refuse to repent, thus sharing in God’s judgment on Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom (11:20–24). Blindness to the presence of God’s grace unites those proud people from different places and times in a single obtuse generation. The offended include “the wise and intelligent” whose self-esteem prevents them from seeing things revealed to infants (11:25). One must also include Pharisees, who, blinded by their own place on Moses’ seat, could not accept the priority God placed on mercy (12:1–14). The key to all these offenses was something internal in the offenders themselves, a self-assurance that inhibited complete honesty before God. They could not repent because of blind eyes, deaf ears, and hearts that could not understand the possibilities that opened up on the far side of complete humility before God (13:1–5). Nowhere is this definition of offense more inclusive and more devastating

⁵Jesus’ indifference to messianic titles has gone unrecognized by later followers who have exaggerated the importance of such titles. This has encouraged a popular misunderstanding of the conclusion of his assignments in Matthew 10, in which he distinguishes three groups of people who offer food and shelter to his apostles. Some welcome the apostles, thinking that they wield the authority or have come in the name of Jesus as “a prophet.” Other hosts suppose the apostles wield the authority of Jesus as “a righteous man” (in Matthew’s terms, an important religious leader). Still others suppose that the apostles come only with the authority of “a disciple.” For all three hosts, however, the commendation is the same: In welcoming his apostles, all welcome Jesus, and in welcoming Jesus, all welcome God! It is their welcome and not their idea of his status that determines the outcome (10:40–42). This is true even if a host welcomed an apostle as one who carried *only* the authority of Jesus as a disciple of John the Baptist! Within Matthew’s thought world, the notion that Jesus might indeed be a disciple of John was by no means foreign. In 11:11–13, Jesus gives a very high estimate of John’s role in God’s plan. In 14:2, Herod links the two prophets, and, when John was beheaded, John’s disciples reported his fate to Jesus (14:12) who then sought solitude for himself. When Jesus asked for popular perceptions of his own role, the first answer was “John the Baptist” (16:14). Finally, in his last trip to Jerusalem, Jesus strongly implies that the two prophets exercised authority from the same source (21:23–32).

than when the Passover blood was being “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (26:28).

Who are not offended? Obviously, the fresco calls us to look in the opposite direction. One detail in the painting identifies the six groups who are specified in the response to John’s question (11:5); another detail, the weary and overburdened who respond to Jesus’ promise of rest (11:29). Also included are those who, bedeviled by demons, are freed from their blindness and inability to speak (12:22). Others, because of their abundant and understanding hearts, receive healthy eyes and ears (13:15–16). The parable of the seeds adds to our list those who hear the sown word, who understand it, and who yield God’s intended harvest (13:24). Finally, we must include those members of Jesus’ school of prophets who, after being offended and scattered at his arrest, are humbled enough to accept his final assignment on the mountain in Galilee.

As Matthew paints the picture, this scene permits only two options: to be offended or not. There is no third possibility. Such a perspective permits only two results: to be blessed or cursed. The only ultimate source of blessing and curse is both invisible and inaudible: the eternally creating God. It is to his approval that Jesus refers in his declaration: “*Blessed* is anyone who takes no offense at me.” In what, then, does this gift of blessedness consist? One inclusive answer is this: inheritance in the kingdom of God and its opposite, rescue from the power of the evil one (6:13). But there are many cognate metaphors for expressing such inheritance and rescue: the vision of God, the gift of an ultimate mercy, comfort for sorrow, life as children of God in the family of God’s Servant-Son, the healing of infirmities, freedom from fear, the strength and wisdom of the Holy Spirit, treasures in heaven for those who store them there, courage to save life by losing it, and, finally, the promise “I am with you always.” This detail in the vast mural is painted in such a way as to point to its luminous center and to be illuminated from that center. The painter invited all his readers to share his synchronic vision of that reciprocal reality.

BEFORE AND AFTER THE VIOLENCE

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.’

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the

law prophesied until John came; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen!" (11:7–15 NRSV)

This entire paragraph consists of an address given by Jesus to the crowds (possibly the groups mentioned in verse 5). The climactic disclosure is signaled by the assurance of an authority from heaven: "Truly I tell you." That this manifesto contains a mysterious message is suggested by the warning against deafness: "Let anyone with ears listen!" Between the *truly* and the *listen* comes a puzzling reference to *violence*, separating the time before from the time after. Yet, although this mystery is uttered with dramatic intensity, there is no indication of any immediate response, whether from the crowds, the disciples of John, or the disciples of Jesus. Apparently, this narrator was more interested in the responses of his own readers/listeners. Did they have the ears to penetrate the conundrum? There is no mistaking the presence, the intentional presence, of a riddle. After praising John the Baptist as the greatest of those born of women and, in fact, as the expected Elijah, Jesus identifies the least in the kingdom of heaven as greater than John. How can these who are the *least* be *greater* than the *greatest*?

The riddle serves to focus attention on three successive periods: the time "until John came"; the time during which the kingdom of the heavens is under violent attack; and the time of the least in that kingdom. Let us examine them in that order.

(1) "*Until John came. . .*" Obviously, this period embraces all those born of women, that is, since Eve. It is a period when the law and the prophets constituted a time of prophecy (23:35–36). In the prophecy of John, that period had reached its term, for he was none other than Elijah, sent ahead of Jesus as God's messenger (11:10). That errand established John as "more than a prophet." All this, of course, was intelligible only to those willing to accept it.

(2) "*From the days of John the Baptist until now. . .*" This is the second period, with its beginning clearly identified. The text places Jesus as standing within this period, along with his audience (with Matthew and his audience as well). This second period, this *now*, describes the kingdom of the heavens as under attack from violent forces. That attack seems to have been initiated by John's announcement of the kingdom, by his baptism of those with penitent hearts, and by his identification of the "brood of vipers" (the progeny of Eve's serpent?). An early clue to the violence had been the struggle of Jesus in the wilderness with Satan, a struggle that had been provoked, in turn, by his true penitence at John's warning. An early instance of violence had been John's imprisonment, mentioned in this very passage (soon to be followed by John's murder). The same brood of vipers charged John with being under the control of demons (11:18), rejecting any claim that his work had been authorized from heaven (21:25).

The rest of the Gospel so fully documents the human violence against Jesus as the spokesman for God's kingdom that its mounting intensity need not be reviewed here. In simple truth and with abundant proof, this prophet

came to earth in order to bring a sword (10:34). In fact, this early period in his ministry leads to a single conclusion: His adversaries conspired how to destroy him (12:14). That goal clearly demonstrated the measure of the violence being unleashed, not only against him but also against his school of prophets (10:24–33). Such is one definition of the *now*.

So much for the violence that was aroused on earth when the good news was announced. Behind and within that war, Matthew discerned the outbreak of violence in the heavens between the two invisible kingdoms, one of God, the other of Satan. This conflict had been going on “since the foundation of the world” (10:34). The *now* marked the time when both John and Jesus could disclose the advent on earth of God’s victorious kingdom. In that disclosure was the assurance that God had cast Satan out of heaven so that his kingdom could no longer stand (12:25–29). Through this invisible victory of God, Satan’s house had been entered. Its owner had been tied up and his possessions plundered. Of that plundering in heaven, Jesus’ exorcism of demons provided the visible earthly evidence. True, the demons that were evicted from their house could return to wreak even greater damage. Such a prospect only called for greater alertness on the part of those who had been healed (12:22–23). Even so, the power of the Spirit of God had been so clearly demonstrated that to deny such power eliminated any further possibility of forgiveness. This terrible prospect seems to have been promised those who accepted the word but who, on being persecuted for their faith in that word, recanted their faith (13:21). These parables disclose the invisible bond between the heavenly and the earthly violence, each being “the flip side” of the other. The violence in the heavens is inseparable from the violence in the heart caused by its divided loyalties. The victory over the primeval enemy in the heavens brings victory near to the hearts that come under attack on earth.

(3) “*The least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*” This is the third stage in the sequence. We should not read this declaration as if it cancelled Jesus’ tribute to John. During the government by the law and the prophets, no one could be greater than Elijah. John’s greatness was in his being a witness to the unprecedented opportunity now open to all those born of women. Their banishment from Eden had been ended in the mercies of God’s kingdom, inasmuch as the powers of the serpent had been overcome. The good tree in the good earth again produces good fruit (12:33). Something greater than Jonah or Solomon is here (12:41–42). Eyes can now see what the prophets had long hoped to see (13:16–17). In fact, the descent of God’s kingdom from heaven to earth has made it within reach of a simple petition by the community of disciples, and, with that descent, their rescue from “the evil one” (6:9–12). The gift of that kingdom constituted God’s blessing on those who were not offended at Jesus. It was that gift that defined the greatness of the least.

It is the severity of the violence that is the measure of the greatness of these “least.” They are greater than the greatest in the pre-Elijah age, than

all those born of women.⁶ They have been freed from the kingdom of the evil one by the power of the Holy Spirit (12:28). It is that power that enables the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk. It has cleansed the lepers and raised the dead; it has expelled the demons and freed the captives. Sown on the good earth, the seed of the good news has produced its abundant harvest. As children of God, they shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father (13:38–43). All this is true, even though they continue to face attacks from the enemy, ample justification for the recurrent warning “Let anyone with ears listen!”

SOMETHING IS HERE THAT IS GREATER THAN. . . .

The narrator next paints two scenes that reflect the same radical shift from one realm to another. In the first realm, the law and the prophets have reached their term. In the other, things concealed from the wise and intelligent are made visible to infants (11:26–30). Conflict emerges at the point of transition. Here is the first scene in its entirety:

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath.” He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.” (12:1–8; NRSV)

It is difficult for a historian to make much out of this scene. Although it reads like a story, more than eighty percent of the words are words of Jesus. Many questions a historian needs to raise are not answered: What happened? To whom? When? Where? What caused it? What are the results? The text provides only the details that are needed to clarify Jesus’ words, but no clue is given as to their impact on anyone. The narrator assumes that his listeners will understand Jesus’ reply better than the original actors did. It is not so much a story as a scene from a larger tapestry. What the actors see depends on their residence. The Pharisees, as residents of one realm, see only the infractions of the law that they are responsible for correcting. The scene documents the guilt of the disciples and requires condemnation by the judges. But in Jesus’ response, the government of the other realm appears. He declares the disciples innocent and their accusers guilty, a guilt

⁶This contrast between those born of women and the least in the kingdom is quite similar to John’s contrast between those born of the will of man and those born of God (John 1:12–13). Also, Matthew’s identification of the coming of the kingdom with the reception of the Holy Spirit (12:28) is similar to John’s identification of the vision of the kingdom with being born from above (John 3:3).

that stems from not knowing what had taken place. They did not recognize in Jesus and his disciples the authentic successors of David and his companions. *Something greater than David* is here. Nor do they recognize these authentic successors of the priests in the temple, who are exempt from Sabbath regulations. *Something greater than the priesthood* is here. More decisive still (“I tell you . . .”), *something greater than the temple* is here (compare Rev. 21:22).⁷ To mark that shift from one realm to another, Jesus repeats what God had said through Hosea: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (Hos. 6:6). *Something greater than the need for sacrificial offerings* is here. The desire for mercy has been realized in this sabbath of which the Son of Man is ruler. *Something greater than the Pharisees’ sabbath* is here. (Note the present tenses. This emphatic phrase recurs in 12:41–42 with regard to Jonah and Solomon.)

The second snapshot of the two realms shows the depth of the conflict that marks the boundary between them:

He left that place and entered their synagogue; a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, “Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?” so that they might accuse him. He said to them, “Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.” Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him (12:9–14; NRSV).

The conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus over the observance of the sabbath resumes. The attack on Jesus is the same; his counterattack is different. Having done what they condemn as a violation of God’s command, he responds by appealing to their own behavior: “If one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath, won’t you grab it and lift it out?” At first, this counterattack seems to employ ordinary logic. Concealed in it, however, is something less ordinary. Involved is a more important law: An act of mercy is always lawful, as the previous incident shows. An additional consideration comes into play in the seemingly obvious remark: A human being is more valuable than a sheep. This contrast reminds the listeners that one of the most familiar images in the Gospel is that of the great shepherd who cherishes and cares for God’s people as a flock of sheep (9:36; 10:6). Matthew’s listeners would also recall the parable of the shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep at risk on the mountain in order to search for the one that is lost (18:14). If the Pharisees rescue a sheep on the sabbath, how much more would God rescue a person! “How much more valuable. . . .” “I desire mercy. . . .” By these hints, Jesus judges his judges. Perhaps Matthew also had in mind a less immediate nuance. The sabbath was not only the occasion for Moses’ commandment; it was also the culmination of creation, a day that God had

⁷This is an almost explicit reference to the shaking of the earth at the death of Jesus with its destruction of the temple curtain (27:51). It also recalls the assurance of the collapse of the temple buildings (24:2).

blessed and hallowed. And the coming celebration of a great sabbath would represent the redemption of that creation. All this, of course, lay beyond the horizon of the Pharisees. Not only had Jesus broken the law; he had defended such violations as a mark of the fulfilment of God's design for Israel. His opponents began to plot his destruction, thus making very clear the kind of violence that is the gateway between the two "ages." The behavior of the Pharisees illustrates the time before; that of Jesus and his disciples, the time after; the conspiracy shows the incompatibility of the two.

Each of the three incidents we have examined finds its climax in words of Jesus. There follows a climax of all three that is given entirely in the words of the narrator himself (12:15–21). First of all, he stresses the fact that the plot to destroy Jesus did not dissuade him from continuing his work of mercy. "Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them"! Such a defiance of the scribes' challenge virtually guaranteed the success of the conspiracy. Moreover, Jesus continued the practice of encouraging—in fact, commanding—those who were healed not to advertise their cures. He did not want to be hailed as "the one who is to come"—at least, not yet. Such self-assertiveness did not comport well with his role as servant. His first answer remained in effect: "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

The narrator then affirms that all this happened in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, in his eyes a final proof that Jesus had not come to destroy the law and the prophets (5:17). This fulfillment proved that Jesus was a better interpreter of Scripture than were his enemies. Moreover, Matthew underscores the fact that something more than Isaiah is present, in that it is God now speaking through Isaiah—all the more reason for the long citation and for stressing the relevance of every line in it. "Here is my servant." That is to say, "These acts of mercy are acts not of my servant alone but of me, since he is only following my orders."⁸ As indications of God's will, those acts indicate God's design for all creation. Behind Jesus' freedom from self-assertion and self-advancement is this role of servant; undue publicity would belie such a role. Through the servant's very humility (11:29–30), God speaks his own final judgment and final victory (12:20). The hope of the nations is vested in the authority ("the name") of this servant, acting as the judge and victor. Such is Matthew's confession, the witness of Isaiah, and the manifesto of God—a fitting conclusion to the three incidents.

Again, I urge my readers to visualize the Gospel of Matthew as a vast fresco with the crucifixion at its center, and with every scene pointing toward it and defined by it. To use a phrase from a well-known hymn, the Gospel "is the heaven-drawn picture of Christ, the living Word."⁹ The

⁸Matthew had no difficulty with the idea of a God who speaks. In that respect, many modern readers do have great difficulty. The most recent and thorough effort to deal with the subject of God's speaking is Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁹William W. How, "O Word of God Incarnate," in *The Pilgrim Hymnal* (Boston: Pilgrim, 1958), 252.

assertion that this picture is heaven-drawn is not simply the idea of the hymn-writer; it is what God says through Isaiah and through Matthew. But first of all it is the word-picture of the works of mercy done by the servant. Earlier on, I commented on one major contrast between Michelangelo and Matthew: the former paints a picture that focused on Jesus as Judge; the Gospel picture centers on Jesus as the crucified. I am now corrected by this very text. Matthew here portrays the crucified servant as being himself both Judge and Victor (12:20).



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