

Justice in Heaven and on Earth

The Ethics of Jesus in the mirror of Matthew

1. Preliminaries

a. “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” – this demand in the special Matthaean version of the Our Father (Mt 6,10) shows both: the cosmic horizon and the ethical dimension of Jesus’ proclamation of the gospel.

b. The cosmic horizon is open because of the identity of God the Father who is both: the creator and the redeemer. Although Jesus was concentrating his mission on the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt 15,24), after Easter his gospel is to be proclaimed to all nations (Mt 28,19f.); and although Jesus was concentrating his mission on the conversion of human beings (Mt 4,17), his promise is the renewal of the whole world. This connection between heaven and earth is the theological basic of a biblical ecology.

c. The ethical dimension of the gospel is founded in the righteousness, or justice, of God. The Our Father is a prayer: God himself is the one who alone is able to realize his will. But it is the Matthaean appeal that all people who are ready to pray with the words of Jesus are willing to do the will of God: It is the power of the almighty Father to enable human beings to do his will; and it is the *ethos* of Jesus’ spirituality that there has to be a strong connection between words and deeds.

d. The structure of Mt 6,10 is an expression of the eschatology of Jesus: God’s will is fully realized in heaven; but it is yet to be realized on earth. Jesus has an eye for all the problems on earth: illness and death, poverty and affliction, sin and injustice. Nonetheless, Jesus has hope for the world because of the will of God. “Kingdom of heaven” is the keyword of Jesus in Matthew; this „kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt 4,17); therefore the future has begun, and Jesus needs co-workers for a world in which this future will become presence.

e. Matthew combines a lot of different Jesus traditions in his book. He is interested in clarifying that Jesus is fulfilling the law and the prophets (Mt 5,17-20). Therefore *Dikaiosyne* is a main theme in Jesus’ teaching. Because of the ethical dimension of the Gospel it is a question whether “righteousness” or “justice” is the best translation into English. “Righteousness” is the capacity to bring into order what is failed, “justice” is the virtue to distinguish between right and wrong and to establish a system of a better life.

2. The promise of righteousness and the call to justice

a. It is an open exegetical discussion if *Dikaiosyne* in Matthew is an ethical or a soteriological motive. The answer has to be differentiated. The key is the Matthaean Christology which profiles the humility of Jesus as essence of his service “to bring justice to the Gentiles” (cf. Mt 12,15-21 - Is 42,1-4).

b. The first place of *Dikaiosyne* is Jesus’ answer to John’s question why he came to be baptized by him: “It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Here *Dikaiosyne* is the essence of God’s salvation and the will to establish his Kingdom as reality not only in heaven, but also on earth. Jesus’ righteousness in baptism is his participation in the life of the sinners; John’s righteousness (cf. Mt 21,23) is his consent that he, the weaker one, baptizes the “more powerful” one (Mt 3,11) who went the way as servant. The revelation of Jesus as beloved Son from a voice out of the open heaven as well as the coming-down of the Spirit (Mt 3,16f.) open up the same eschatological dimensions as the Our Father.

c. In the Sermon on the Mount the Beatitudes concretize the eschatological sense of *Dikaiosyne*: It is God’s righteousness which the poor are hungering and thirsting for (Mt 5,6), because they miss it, and which they are persecuted for (Mt 5,10), since they are victims in a world of injustice. Here the soteriological sense of *Dikaiosyne* is open for its ethical dimension, because the poor are suffering in their justice, and they do hunger and thirst for righteousness looking for a better world for themselves and others.

The same dialectic is present in Mt 6,33: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness”. The righteousness, or justice, of the Kingdom is the full realization of God’s love. To strive for it means to be on the way of searching and seeking this everlasting love. Therefore the aim of that striving is also its moral. Justice is an essential dimension.

d. In the Sermon of the Mount there are two words of *Dikaiosyne* with a clear ethical meaning. The first word is the summary of Jesus’ moral teaching: “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5,20). The so-called antitheses give examples of the righteousness which is justice as well. The Greek phrase *περισσεύειν* marks an eschatological quality of love in the *imitatio Christi*. Therefore the ethic of the disciples Jesus calls for is characterized by the eschatological presence of the Kingdom of heaven on earth.

The second word is the harsh warning which introduces the catechesis about the three good works almsgiving, praying, and fasting (Mt 6,1-18): “Beware of practicing your righteousness (NRS: piety) before others in order to be seen by them” (Mt 6,1). Righteousness in its proper sense is to help the poor, to pray for the sinner and to fasten in solidarity with the suffering people. It is justice in its proper sense.

3. Dimensions of justice in the Sermon on the Mount

a. The Matthaean concept of righteousness and justice fills the relation between heaven and earth. Because of God's righteousness this connection exists; because of Jesus' ministry the coming out of the Kingdom of heaven is an event of salvation; in the discipleship of Jesus justice is an essential expression of the faith which answers the gospel. In this context justice has a cosmic dimension in itself. The Sermon on the Mount concretizes that dimension: first in an implicit universality; second in an explicit explanation of an ecological ethic which respects creation under the opened heaven.

b. The implicit universality has three aspects: the address, the intention and the expression of morality.

i. The Sermon on the Mount is addressed by the disciples (Mt 5,1f.; cf. 5,13-16), but in a way of communication that the "crowds" which are present at the foot of the mountain (Mt 5,1) is able to listen, so that they are "astounded at his teaching" with its very special "authority" (Mt 7,23f.). These crowds have come together from the whole of Israel and its neighborhood (Mt 4,25); they are transparent for the nations to whom the disciples are called to bring the Good News (Mt 28,18ff.). The disciples are sent by the risen Christ to make the nations disciples by teaching the teaching of Jesus so that from generation to generation the presence of the "Immanuel" can be the middle of a faith community with an ethic of Jesus.

ii. The ethics of the Sermon on the Mount is a call to overcome frontiers of sin and enmity. The love command in the interpretation of Jesus (Mt 5,38-48) makes it clear that there is no reason to reduce the radius of love because God himself loves his enemies: "for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous (KJV: on the just and the unjust)" (Mt 5,45). The examples Jesus gives are directed to political, financial and personal conflicts in which the love is possible and necessary. The "good works" the disciples are called on to do are promised to be seen in the world as light in the darkness and to be tasted as salt of the earth (Mt 5,13-16).

iii. In Mt 7,12 the Golden Rule – in its positive version ("In everything do to others as you would have them do to you") – is posted as essence of "the law and the prophets". This ethical dictum is well known in a lot of different cultures. Therefore the quotation and interpretation of that rule is proof that for Matthew the ethics of Jesus is not a special moral regarding to a specific confession but a universal ethic, rediscovered in the light of God.

These three aspects belong together. The universality of Jesus' ethics is grounded in the universal salvation will of God, the one and only; the address to the world by the mission of the disciples is the logic of the Gospel of Jesus.

c. The ecological dimensions of the Sermon on the Mount are consequences of the Kingdom proclamation.

i. Jesus' preaching of *Dikaiosyne* has a heavenly prospective. But the result is a theology of the earth as part of creation and place of God's holiness. The fourth antithesis concerning oaths connects, with reference to Is 66,1, the metaphors that the heaven is God's "throne" (Mt 5,34) and the earth God's "footstool" (Mt 5,35). The difference between heaven and earth stands; but they do belong together in the name of God. The promise to the "meek" that they will "inherit the earth" (Mt 5,5) makes clear that the Kingdom of the heaven will not destroy but renew the earth in the eschatological fulfillment.

ii. The ethos of the Sermon of the Mount is an ethos of life protection. The first antithesis concerning anger (Mt 5,21-26) points the way. It is not only murder, it is any missed respect for the life of others what Jesus criticizes. It is the option for peace which is guiding the life of his disciples (Mt 5,25). The antitheses concerning retaliation (Mt 5,38-42) and love for enemies (Mt 5,43-48) show how far the road leads.

iii. The Our Father, the catechism on good works and the wisdom teaching concerning worrying are dealing with food. Eating and drinking are one of the most important ethical cut surfaces between human being and nature.

- The plea: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Mt 6,11) articulates the confidence into God the creator, but also the knowledge that it is necessary to ask him for that what is necessary for life, namely just to ask for this bread, not more than for this bread, but also not less than for this bread.
- The catechesis concerning fastening (Mt 6,16ff.) is an invitation to be careful with eating and drinking. But the reason of fastening is not hate but love to the creation. That is why the disciples should „put oil“ on their heads and "wash" their faces (Mt 6,17). This practice is against religious show but it is in accordance with the boon which is on the nature because of the creature.
- The wisdom teaching concerning worrying (Mt 6,19-34) firstly deals with money (Mt 6,19-24). The point is to find the right ethos of investment: The very best treasure is that of the heaven. The consequence is sustainability on earth
The wisdom teaching secondly deals with the temptation of the poor. "Do not worry" is a warning for them who are captured by their fight for surviving (Mt 6,25-34). To have a look to the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field teaches to see God's care for his creatures and calls to live as a part of this creation.

The final metaphor of the house and the flood (Mt 7,24-27) generalizes the ecological ethos which fills the relation between heaven and earth.