

November: The Gospel of Matthew



On Advent Sunday we begin the year of Matthew in the Sunday readings: the Church puts before us Matthew as the principal Gospel to be read throughout the following year. In the early Church Matthew seems to have been the most popular of the four Gospels. In writing his Gospel Matthew obviously drew on Mark, editing it slightly to bring out points which he thought important. So he stresses the majesty of Jesus: people not merely 'reverence' Jesus, but 'worship' him; he is 'the Lord' in the strong sense which renders the unpronounceable holy name of God. Matthew also stresses the lasting presence of Jesus in the Church: 'where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them'. In the final commission he promises to be with his disciples till the end of time.

Besides Mark, Matthew probably drew on a collection of Sayings of the Lord which has now disappeared, but is attested in both Matthew and Luke. He was a methodical teacher, and gathered together these sayings in five great discourses, of which the first is the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7) and the last the Eschatological Discourse (chapters 24-25). This means that he divided the body of his Gospel into five 'books' (like the Torah of Moses), each with a narrative section and a teaching discourse.

Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels, careful to show that Jesus is the fulfilment of God's promises to his Chosen People. So he constantly shows that Jesus is the fulfilment of scripture. Jesus is hailed as the 'son of David', and is so greeted at his entry into Jerusalem. He is also the Second Moses, the prophet like Moses who is to come, spending forty days and forty nights in the desert, going up the mountain to deliver his new Law, as Moses delivered the Law on Sinai. This suggests that Matthew was writing primarily for Christians sprung from Judaism; indeed some of the Jewish customs may still have been observed in his community, for Matthew cuts out the Markan comment (Mk 7.19) 'thus he declared all foods clean'. He shows how Jesus corrects and supplements the Law ('you have heard it said...but I say to you'), teaches how the three good works of Judaism are to be fulfilled (6.2-18), and three times stresses how the Law is to be fulfilled in accordance with the saying of the prophet Hosea, 'what I want is love, not sacrifice'.

Above all, Matthew is a brilliant teacher, full of vivid imagery, especially animal imagery – the cunning snake, the innocent dove, the cheap sparrow, the destructive moth. He no longer lives in the primitive world of Mark, with little shops, barter and small sums of money; but he includes such sophisticated matters as loans and debt, bankers and interest-rates, astronomical sums of money (ten thousand talents). Especially striking are his parables, often in pairs (buried treasure and priceless pearl) with contrasting characters, either black or white (five wise and five foolish wedding-attendants, the sheep and the goats), illustrating his favourite theme of the final rewards and punishments.

It has been suggested that Matthew wrote his Gospel in the last quarter of the first century at Antioch – now on the border of Turkey and Syria – an important port town, where there was a strong Jewish colony, and where the followers of Jesus were first called 'Christians'. At the beginning of the second century St Ignatius of Antioch quotes no other Gospel. Whether the author was Matthew the tax-collector is another matter, for if the Gospel was written some years after Mark, the tax-collector would have been a great age by then. It would be odd that he should tell the story of his call by Jesus in the terms of Jesus' call of Levi, rather than as a personal experience.