

READING MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

The Baptism of Christ and Matthew's Gospel

The Baptism of Jesus is one of the most certain events in the New Testament.

It is almost the only event to appear in all four Gospels in substantially the same form – this tells us something about how important it was considered to be.

Its authenticity may be discerned from the account we have heard in Matthew's Gospel

Which attempts to explain the rather awkward fact that John baptised Jesus – hardly something that would have been invented!

We will be hearing a lot more from Matthew's Gospel over the coming year. You might not know that the readings at Mass are in a three-year cycle. In one we hear mostly from Matthew, in another from Mark, and in the third from Luke – with John sprinkled equally between them.

Today, I want to provide some tools to help you appreciate Matthew's Gospel as the year progresses.

Like Mark and Luke, Matthew's Gospel may be described as biographical, but it is not a straightforward biography – it is really mash-up of various genres - apocalyptic, biographical, prophetic and more.

And it does not contain a systematic theology, even if it does have clear theological themes.

Fulfilment

One of these themes is the fulfilment of scripture.

'Let it be so now' - says Jesus to John - *'for it is proper for us to fulfil all righteousness'*.

Matthew's point is that everything the scriptures have foretold finds its completion in him.

The Gospel makes constant reference to Jesus as the fulfilment of the Torah, often directly quoting passages.

Sometimes the reference is clearly signposted with the words 'as it is written ...', whereas sometimes it is simply expected to be understood – such as when the voice from heaven says *'This is my Son the beloved'* - an almost direct quotation of Psalm 2: *'You are my Son, this day I have begotten you'*.

We see this very clearly not only in the words but also in the images of this passage.

To Matthew's readers the phrase *'he came up from the water'* would have reminded immediately them of two things:

First, in Genesis, creation emerges out of watery chaos. Here, like there, the Spirit of God hovers over the waters. The message was obvious – Jesus inaugurates a new creation, a new beginning. And his Baptism marks the start of Jesus' public ministry.

Second, in Exodus, Israel is called God's Son in connection with passing through the Red Sea – A connection made all the more explicit by the tearing open of the heavens, which parallels the parting of the Red Sea. Again, the message is clear – Jesus is a Saviour like Moses, but here is something even greater.

Discipleship

Another theme of Matthew's Gospel is discipleship.

When Jesus demands to be baptised it says of John *'he consented'*.

This simple phrase presents John as a model of the Christian disciple, obeying Jesus in everything, no matter how strange or uncomfortable it might be.

And we find at the end of the Gospel the Great Commission, when the disciples are dramatically sent out to *'make disciples of all nations'*.

So it's there from the beginning to the end, which tells us that first and foremost, Matthew wrote to make us disciples of Christ

JEWISHNESS

But the audience Matthew had in mind was very different from us. Unlike Luke, written to Gentiles, Matthew was writing as a Jew to other Jews, And his Gospel has been described as the most Jewish of all the Gospels.

I have already mentioned his frequent reference to the Jewish Scriptures, but the whole Gospel assumes direct knowledge of Jewish customs, practices and the Law. Matthew mentions the Temple, Synagogues, Jerusalem and the Pharisees more than any other evangelist.

And even though the Gospel is written in Greek, it is full of untranslated Hebrew and Aramaic words.

It is clear that Matthew was a Christian Jew, writing to an educated Jewish audience who also spoke Greek.

The traditional authorship ascribed to Matthew the tax collector mentioned in the Gospel is *possible* but perhaps unlikely because certain elements suggest a date after the destruction of the Temple in 70AD (which would have made him very old!) and nowhere is it suggested that the author was a direct eyewitness of the life of Jesus. It is thought that the Gospel was largely written around the year 100 in Syria, possibly Antioch, which had the largest Greek-speaking Jewish community.

Anti-Semitism?

But alongside this evident Jewishness is another controversial side to Matthew's Gospel which makes a proper understanding as important as ever.

Just after Christmas, residents of Hampstead in North London, awoke to find that many Jewish businesses and shops in the area had been daubed with the Star of David, and references to anti-semitic conspiracy theories.

Such acts are part of a long history of prejudice against and hatred of the Jewish people, and it has to be accepted that most of that has a Christian origin or aspect – even when it has now taken on a very secular form.

Matthew's Gospel often receives the blame – is this justified?

It is true that Matthew's Gospel is the very harshest when it comes to the Jewish authorities – Jesus is nowhere more polemical and fierce in his condemnation of the religious leaders and some Jewish customs and practices.

And no comment of this subject would be complete without reference to the Jewish crowd crying out for Jesus' crucifixion and saying, '*Let his blood be upon us and upon our children*' – words that are only found in Matthew.

But calling Matthew's Gospel anti-semitic makes no sense - it imposes upon it the categories of a later time when Jews and Christians had become separate people with separate religions. In Matthew, we are only at the beginning of this transition from Christianity understood as a movement within Judaism, to something distinct from it. Matthew and the Christians of his day, mostly worshipped in the synagogue, kept the Law, and lived within the framework of Judaism, still considering themselves as Jews.

So when Matthew has the crowd take the blame for Jesus' death, he is placing that blame upon himself and those of his fellow Christians.

It is *their failure* to stand up for Christ.

For the same reason, we too, on Good Friday, take the part of the Crowd in the reading of the Passion.

This is not about someone else, it is about us.

What we see in Matthew's Gospel is an attempt to start working out the relationship between the early Christian community with its Jewish roots and the gentile mission that is beginning to take place.

We see this in the Gospel's dualism with many opposites of

Faithful and unfaithful,

wheat and chaff

sheep and goats –

All of which indicates an attempt to understand and define the boundaries of inclusion.

But we must balance this dualism in Matthew with his great emphasis on reconciliation and forgiveness and love.

Whereas Luke says we should forgive seven times.

Matthew says seventy seven times.

Despite its frequent harshness, Matthew's Gospel emphasises the need for love and peace to displace hate and vengeance.

Nevertheless, the anti-semitic *potential* is clear, and it is up to all Christians make sure they have a proper historical understanding.

Without such attention, Matthew can be – and sometimes has been – misused in dangerous ways

'This is my Son the beloved'

So with these things in mind – fulfilment, discipleship, the Jewish context - I want all of us to enjoy hearing and reading Matthew's Gospel over this year. It is a compelling story.

We know how it ends, but that makes it no less exciting.

Matthew has written his Gospel to help us believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God,
and to be transformed by that reality
so that we follow him without delay.

Matthew knows that most of us will be tempted to remain as members of the ever-present crowd, impressed by Jesus' miracles and parables, but when push comes to shove, we are also calling for his crucifixion.

he also shows us that the disciples were hardly any better,
All of them abandoning Jesus at the last.

But Matthew hopes that by reading his words, we might know it is better to be a faulty disciple than a member of that crowd.

So when the voice from heaven declares:

'This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased'.

It is a voice addressed to all of us.

Christ has changed the world and is changing us at the same time.

He is the new creation, and we are re-created as his people.

They are words addressed to us – his beloved children.