



St Anne's Church Wandsworth

READING ST MATTHEW

The readings we hear each Sunday in church follow a three year cycle. In 20016/17 the gospel readings are mainly from St Matthew.

Who was Matthew?

The name of the author did not appear on the first copy of the gospel, but was added later. He is often identified with the tax collector called to follow Jesus (9.9), but it is unlikely to have been the case – there is little sense of knowing Jesus personally. In many ways the voice is of someone writing a whole generation or more later, and modern scholars date the book to about 75 to 90 AD.

What is clear is the author's Jewish heritage. He is writing for Jewish Christians who still follow the Law.

What is special about Matthew's gospel?

Perhaps the most famous passage of Matthew is the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7). Much of the material is also found in Luke but we come back to Matthew's magnificent piece, beginning with the Beatitudes. The sermon sets out the ideal way of life and worship, including teaching the Lord's Prayer. Anyone wanting to summarize Christ's teaching would probably start with this sermon. Matthew does not have the famous parables that Luke provides, but we still have notable pieces like the parable of judgement: the Sheep and Goats (25.31-46) which sets the challenge to Christians: what we do for the most insignificant person we do for Christ himself. There is also the parable of the merchant who discovers the pearl of great value and sells everything to get it, as a picture of the value of the Kingdom of Heaven (13.45).

Matthew is one of the two gospels which tell of Jesus' birth. He tends to lose out to Luke in our Christmas stories. Matthew describes the angel coming to Joseph, not Mary, and the infant being visited by the Gentile magi rather than the shepherds. For a Jewish writer and readers, there is special irony in the



*When Joseph awoke
he did as
the angel directed*

Gentiles worshipping the Messiah before he is recognised by the Jewish people!

The resurrection of Jesus is told very simply: an appearance to the women at the tomb; then one appearance to all the apostles on a mountain in Galilee. There the glorified Jesus commands them to make disciples from all nations and to baptize them. His final words 'I am with you always, to the end of the age', is the climax of the whole book.

What does Matthew tell us about Jesus?

Matthew based his work closely on Mark's gospel (as well as using his own material, some of which was available also to Luke) but he paints a portrait of Jesus rather different from Mark.



Matthew's Jesus is obviously Jewish, observant of the Law, discussing points of detail with other Jews. This is historically more authentic than Mark's Jesus who is somewhat dismissive of the Law and Jewish piety. But Matthew does not stop there. Jesus is presented

as the authoritative interpreter of the Law, and in that respect like Moses, and indeed greater than Moses, who received the Law on Mount Sinai. While Moses merely received the Law from God, Jesus knows the very mind of God. This is the point of the passages in the Sermon on the Mount giving interpretations of the commandments on murder, adultery and divorce, oaths, revenge and loving one's enemy. Jesus calls the Christian to the perfection of a higher standard of righteousness than previously revealed. The new revelation of God in Jesus is responded to by a new way of life.

Matthew and the Church

Matthew is the only gospel which explicitly mentions the Church. It is as if the writer bears in mind both the words of the historical Jesus and also Jesus speaking to the Church in the writer's own time. Chapter 18 (coming shortly after Jesus naming Simon Peter as the rock on which he will build his Church, 16.13-20) is almost a set of rules and standards for church life: the importance of caring for the 'little ones'; church discipline; the importance of forgiveness. If only such priorities ruled today!



It is to just such as these that the kingdom of God belongs

Matthew's use of Mark's Gospel

Matthew used Mark's gospel as one of his sources, almost to the point of copying him out. (Today we regard such practices as wrong, but it was perfectly acceptable in those days.) It is the differences between their accounts that tell us more about their particular interests.

The following passages give an example of how Matthew uses Mark. Mark is impatient with the Old Testament Law and presents the issue in a very black and white manner. Matthew looks for the proper interpretation of the Law. Both writers project their views into their accounts of Jesus:

Mark 3.1-6

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him.

And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward'.

Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Matthew 12.9-14

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.

Much of Matthew can also be compared with parallel passages in Luke, but the comparison is less clear. Probably they were borrowing off a common source now lost to us, often labelled Q (for *Quelle*, 'source' in German) by scholars.

Matthew and the Jews

By the time Matthew was writing, Judaism was in crisis. There had been a revolt against the Romans in 66AD which resulted in a crushing Roman victory. In 70AD the city of Jerusalem was destroyed and the Temple burned down. For Jews in Palestine the Temple had been the centre of their religious life. The priesthood was all but annihilated with the Temple, and the only major group surviving was the Pharisees. At a town called Jamnia they worked to reconstruct Judaism around their insights into Jewish beliefs and observance. This involved not only living without the Temple but also narrowing, as it were, the many diverse strands of Jewish life which had flourished previously.

Christians were already somewhat on the edge of Jewish life. Jesus himself of course had been a Jew and his followers had functioned as a sect within Judaism, but it quickly made itself suspect to many Jews not only by claiming that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God but also by criticism of the Temple and by its mission to Gentiles. Through people like Paul (a former Pharisee) Gentiles were allowed to become Christians without being subject to the Jewish Law. The Pharisees of Jamnia now effectively excluded the Christians as renegade Jews. Matthew's gospel reflects this situation. He is writing as a Jewish Christian observant to the Law, but he is aware of and fully accepts Gentile Christians. Also he responds to mainstream Jewish criticisms of the first Christians. In presenting Jesus as the authoritative interpreter of the Law he is also making a claim for Jesus' followers, the Church, to be the true inheritors of the Jewish Bible (the Old Testament) and to be the real authentic Israel – no longer the presence of God in the Temple but the presence of Christ in the Church community.

Ancient disputants cared less for political correctness than does the present day. Some things said about Jews in Matthew can sound harsh to modern ears, and sadly was twisted in later centuries to justify anti-Semitism. In the last 60 years scholars have emphasized that the rivalry was of the writer's time and should not be taken beyond that situation.

In time the community to which Matthew belonged, that of Jewish Christianity, dwindled and disappeared. Judaism and Christianity became separate religions. But very quickly the gospel of Matthew had found a wide readership. In early centuries Matthew's gospel was the one which people read and referred to most readily, hence its position as first of the four gospels. Today it is the best reminder of our Jewish roots and common heritage, and of the four gospels portrays most clearly the Jewish Jesus.