

St. Matthew's Gospel

An Introduction

2014

Encountering Christ

- People come to encounter Christ not, primarily, by reading texts, but through the witness of other people.
- The first 'gospel' was not a text but oral proclamation, and 'preaching' was not confined to buildings of a religious nature.
- The Evangelists, and Paul, only came to know Jesus through the mediacy of others.

The Gospel texts

- Written some 40 years after the Crucifixion.
- Not eye-witness reports as such but stories and memories handed down through the Christian communities.
- Memories were transmitted as the communities instructed new converts, debated with unbelieving Jews and Gentiles, and celebrated the liturgy.
- Mark, Matthew and Luke – similar in the outline of the story but not identical. John has a different outline to the other three.

The Gospels – 4 portraits of Jesus

- Mark – Jesus the pioneer; the story is told from the perspective of his earthly life and the effect he had on the disciples.
- Matthew: the risen Christ comes to teach his community,
- Luke: the risen Christ walks by his disciples and prepares them for mission.
- Christ seen in the beloved disciple and those who believe in him and follow him.

The Gospel Story developed in stages.

- Stage 1. The telling of the story of the Passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.
- Stage 2. Filling in the details, the story of the public ministry of Jesus.
- Stage 3. The story of Jesus' conception and infancy – Who is Jesus and what is his origins?

The Composition of the Gospel texts.

- Behind the texts as we now have them, we can detect 4 layers of tradition.
- 1. The preaching of Jesus himself, the story of his public ministry, arrest, trial and death.
- 2. The initial oral proclamation by the Christian communities.
- 3. Some sayings or events in the life of Jesus come to be written down and take on a certain shape.
- 4. The evangelists gather and select the stories in order to create a synthesis of the gospel for their particular community.

Structure of Matthew's Gospel

- The material is structured in alternating 'blocks' of narrative and discourse. Thus:
- Chs. 1-4 – narrative – Jesus' conception, birth and infancy. The calling of the disciples
- Chs. 5-7 - discourse - The Sermon on the Mount. God's Messiah, powerful in word.
- Chs 8 and 9 –narrative – miracles – God's Messiah, powerful in deed.

Structure of Matthew's Gospel, contd.

- Ch 10 – discourse – Jesus equips those he is sending out to continue to preach, heal and exorcise
- Chs 11-12 – narrative – different towns reject Jesus.
- Ch 13 – discourse – Jesus teaches his disciples, the parables of the kingdom
- Ch. 14-17 narrative. Miracles, conflicts, the foundation of the Church. From Galilee to Jerusalem.

Structure of Matthew's Gospel, cont.

- Ch. 18 – discourse - on church order, forgiveness.
- Ch 19-23 narrative - The beginning of the end. Conflict grows. The money changers are driven from the temple. The authorities are provoked but not yet in a position to arrest Jesus.
- Ch 24-25 The last discourse – destruction, renewal, the final judgement.
- Chs 26-28 narrative - Passion and Resurrection.

Reading Matthew's Gospel

- Chs 1-4 From Christ's conception and birth to the initial proclamation of the good news – the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.
- These stories are intended to reassure this largely Jewish congregation of Matthew that Jesus is one of them, a son of Abraham and David, but he also has a unique role in the plan of God to save the whole world from its sins. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, promised by the prophets. The Magi who come to him in Bethlehem are the forerunners of all the gentiles who will come to adore Jesus.

The Sermon on the Mount (5-7)

Jesus, the Messiah in Word

- The core of Jesus' teaching; it is a kind of handbook of the ethics and piety of those who belong to the kingdom – the kind of people cited in the Beatitudes.
- Its starting point is the Law revealed to the people of Israel in the Old Testament, but Jesus goes beyond the external commands of the law as he exhorts people to seek 'the greater righteousness' in their relationships with one another. He presents himself as the One who knows the true intention of God that lay behind the details of the law, so that sometimes he demands more than the law requires, and sometimes even appears to contradict it. (eg, adultery – do not even look at a person lustfully. Oaths – don't take them at all. Let your yes be yes and your no be no.
- At the heart of the Sermon – the Lord's prayer through which Jesus brings us into relationship with his Father in heaven.

Chs 8-9 Some miracle stories

Jesus the Messiah in *deed*.

- Jesus is the fulfilment of Dt 18:15-20, the prophet like Moses whom God promised to raise up. Healings and powerful deeds were seen as a sign of the presence of a prophet. Jesus is like Moses but even greater than him.
- The people receive him with enthusiasm, but the disciples show only 'a little faith' and the religious are already becoming hostile to him.

Ch 10 Jesus sends out the Twelve Apostles

- Having now preached the approach of the Kingdom and hinted at its presence in his deeds, Jesus now confers his authority on the Twelve and sends them out to do the same. This section was probably remembered in the context of the early church sending out its missionaries, and the treatment they received. This is the first mention of 'the cross'.
- Significantly Matthew never tells us that the disciples actually went out among their co-religionists. Jesus will re-iterate the command to go out at the end of the gospel. Did Matthew write for a community of reluctant missionaries?

11-12 The stirrings of rejection.

- The mission is not going well. John the Baptist is unsure that Jesus is the one who is to come, and his mission in Chorazin and Bethsaida is fruitless. The Pharisees plot to destroy him and attribute his miraculous power to the prince of devils.
- At the heart of this chapter Matthew reminds us of the prophecy of Isaiah about the servant of God who will persevere through to victory.

Ch. 13 Having been rejected by much of Israel and its leaders, Jesus turns to deepening the understanding of his disciples.

- Using another quote from Isaiah, Jesus explains why his teaching has been rejected, and then teaches them by means of parables, which show how the word of God is eventually fruitful, despite the obstacles it encounters.

Chs 14-17 In the light of rejection, Jesus prepares a new assembly of the people of God, the Church

- The section begins with the ominous news of the beheading of John the Baptist. Jesus continues to work miracles but has to cope with the failure of the disciples to understand, and the continuing hostility of the Pharisees. Only a foreign Canaanite woman demonstrates the kind of faith Jesus would expect from his disciples.
- Eventually Peter answers correctly the fundamental question about Jesus' true identity (You are the Christ, the Son of the living God), but when Jesus tells Peter that the mission of the Son is to suffer and die, Peter cannot grasp it.
- However it is to Peter and his companions, men of little faith, that Jesus will entrust his Church.

Ch 18 The discourse on the Church

- Prompted by the question of the disciples, 'Who is the greatest?' Jesus uses as his model of humility the little child, symbol of all those in the church who are weak, insignificant or despised. He then goes on to illustrate through parables and sayings the kind of community he expects his church to be.
- Despite problems that will arise, its default position is to witness to the infinite forgiveness of God.

Chs 19-23 The beginning of the end

- In the course of this section we learn that Jesus is now going up to Jerusalem, the place of his death. As he faces death his teaching becomes more radical and demanding, and the hostility to him grows as well.
- By expelling the traders from the temple Jesus effectively signs his death warrant.

Chs 24-25 The Last discourse

- This final discourse of Jesus is spoken to the disciples in view of the temple but away from the crowds. Now he looks to the future, beyond his death. Jerusalem will be destroyed, and the temple with it, but this will be the start of a new era, when the good news of the kingdom will be preached to the whole world and the Son of Man will return at the End.

Chs 26-28 Passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

- The Passion story focusses on Jesus' rejection by his own people, despite the efforts of Pilate to declare him innocent and have him released.
- Even when Jesus is dead his opponents in the religious leadership take extra steps to ensure his body is not removed
- Yet the tomb is discovered empty, and they claim that Jesus' body has been stolen.
- Throughout the gospel story there has been a dividing line between those with faith who accept Jesus and those who reject him. That line persists, even today.

Matthew's community

- Whereas the community Mark writes for are Gentiles who have to have Jewish customs, etc, explained to them, Matthew wrote for a community who had been steeped in Judaism but were undergoing deep hostility from their fellow Jews following the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Romans.
- Matthew assures his community that Jesus really is the Messiah, that he demonstrated this by his teaching and his actions, not only his miracles but by a way of life utterly consistent with his teaching, and that all this could be understood by those with a profound grasp of the scriptures.
- Through Jesus the kingdom of God, the definitive rule of God, had finally broken into history in Jesus and his ministry would be carried forward by the Church. Indeed, there is no Jesus without the Church; it is through the Church that the risen Jesus continues to speak and do wonderful deeds. The gospel begins by telling us that Jesus is 'Emmanuel' which in Hebrew means, 'God with us', and ends with the great assurance, 'I will be with you until the End of the Age', until all is fulfilled.