

Welcome to the world of Matthew

In our Bibles, the Gospel of Matthew comes before Mark, Luke and John, an ordering that was settled in the second century. Have you ever wondered why this is? [Note that I refer to 'Matthew' as the author of the Gospel that bears his name, often thought to be Matthew the tax-collector and disciples of Jesus, but we have no way of knowing whether this Matthew is responsible for the book]

Some scholars suggest it's because the early church thought Matthew was the first Gospel written, whereas there is now a near consensus that Mark was actually the earliest Gospel. Other scholars suggest Matthew was placed first because it contains more teaching from Jesus which was helpful for new converts, especially the moral teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

What is appealing – and troubling – in this Gospel?

Each Gospel, of course, has material that is attractive and appealing, and other parts that are more puzzling and troubling. So it is with Matthew ... as we happily recall Jesus' amazing teaching with words such as ...

- You have heard it said 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy', but I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. (Matt 5:43-44)
- In everything, do to others as you would have them do for you; for this is the law and the prophets. (Matt 7:12)
- Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. (Matt 18:20)

On the other hand, Matthew records Jesus frequently describing God's judgment as causing people to be thrown into darkness where there will be 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt 8:12, 13:42, 13:50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30). And in Matthew's Adults Only origin stories about the birth of Jesus we hear of King Herod's violent rage, ordering the murder of all the children near Bethlehem under the age of two (Matt 2:13-18). I wonder why we don't hear more about this story ... which provides a deeply troubling context for the hope that the story expresses ...

So Matthew often appears very black and white, condemning Jesus' Jewish opponents ... and thus providing fodder for later anti-Jewish movements like the Crusades and Third Reich in Germany ... while also offering God's blessing and comfort to the weary and the outsider.

As always, it's tempting to only read and take seriously the parts of the story that appeal to us and ignore the harder teachings. This is not a good way to read any of the Gospels ... it's much better to grapple and struggle with all of it ... however hard it feels at times.

Some insights into Matthew's approach

Let me offer two quick insights into Matthew's approach that may be helpful as we grapple with his version of the Jesus story over the next few weeks of Advent and Christmas and into next year ...

First is context. Who is Matthew writing for and what issues are his community facing in the latter decades of the first century CE? Given the strongly Jewish focus of this Gospel – especially the focus and disputes concerning the Jewish law – it seems reasonable to conclude that Matthew's community contained Jewish Christians. These Jewish Christians, however, were apparently in dispute with other Jews who rejected the claims about Jesus being the Messiah.

So Matthew is keen to stress that Jesus is in fact the promised Messiah from the line of King David, a story thread that is highlighted in the birth stories. Further, Jesus is also presented as the new Moses, the new authoritative interpreter of the Jewish Law ('... you have heard it said, but I say to you ...' repeatedly in the Sermon on the Mount). As the one who correctly interprets the Jewish Law and the Prophets, Jesus rightly stresses the loving kindness and mercy of God (Matt 9:13, 12:7). This God welcomes those on the margins – including women and Gentiles – just as Jesus does. Hence the heavily patriarchal genealogy that begins this Gospel (Matt 1:1-17) also includes four Gentile women who – according to Scripture – engage in dubious sexual activity – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba – although this is mostly thrust upon them by privileged males. All this as a way of introducing Mary, whose own sexual behavior that leads to the birth of Jesus is also undoubtedly being questioned by some ... hence Matthew writes the Adults Only Christmas story. But the larger point is that all are welcome in God's house.

Second, because of his Jewish focus, Matthew's Jesus can appear harsh and difficult to our ears. But that is because we live in a fairly permissive society and worship in a fairly progressive denomination. Our attitudes on what is acceptable to God are therefore quite relaxed compared to most Jews living in the first century where the Jewish Law dominated every aspect of life. In his context, Jesus offers a message that is liberating ... that lifts the burden of the Jewish law in several important aspects. So when we read the ethical demands of the Sermon on the Mount, we may wonder how on earth Jesus could describe these as 'light' or 'easy' (Matt 11:30) ... yet Matthew's audience would be so grateful not to have to follow the many Sabbath and food laws that kept Jews separate from other people.

A unique title for Jesus that helps summarise Matthew's message

Jesus is given many titles in the Gospels – including Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, etc. One title that is unique to Matthew's Gospel – and yet in some ways helps summarise the whole story – is that of Emmanuel, a Hebrew phrase that means 'God is with us'. Matthew introduces this title in the birth story of Jesus in Matt 1:23, quoting a passage from the prophet Isaiah 7:10-16. While in Isaiah this title has overtones of the threat of judgment, in Matthew it is very positive. Jesus promises to be with his followers wherever their journey takes them. Hence Matthew's story begins by naming him Emmanuel at his birth – and the Gospel ends on the same note with Jesus promising to be with his followers always, to the end of the age (Matt 28:18-20). So while Matthew's community may face struggles and hardship – as may we on our journey of faith through life – the encouragement is that Jesus will always be with us.

References

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