

Advent 1 – Welcome to the world of Matthew

Today is the first Sunday in **Advent**, which is a season of paradox:

- We prepare for the **coming** of Jesus by looking **back** to his historical birth
- We remember Jesus' birth by looking **ahead** to his return as the Son of Man
- We celebrate the birth of a **human baby** by naming him Emmanuel, 'God is with us'

Advent combines remembering the past while at the same time anticipating the future. But Advent is not the same as Christmas. It's a season of **preparation**, which has traditionally been seen as a time for repentance and getting one's life in order – hence the liturgical colour of purple, which Advent shares with Lent. And again, there is paradox – we are called to repent and be aware of all that is not right in our world yet at the same time be filled with joy and hope.

I want to begin by offering a disciple's view of Jesus' words about his return before spending some time introducing Matthew's Gospel as we begin the year of Matthew in the church calendar ...

So first, thinking about Jesus' words ... a reflection from Ann Siddall

We'd wanted to have the facts, to know what to look out for. And as usual Jesus spoke in riddles, confusing us even further. Why is it so hard to understand the ways of God?

By this stage of the journey we were pretty tired, a bit like you feel at the end of the year; ready to take a break from all that's going on but with a sense it's not over yet and you have to keep going. As we'd neared Jerusalem, Jesus had become more enigmatic, speaking of things that sounded urgent but which felt like they were hard to grasp hold of.

He seemed different from the Jesus who'd taken us round the Galilean countryside, teaching and healing. There'd been a turning point and he'd brought us to Jerusalem to face goodness knows what. He'd already stirred up the authorities and for all the lips that praised him there were others that whispered threats and warnings.

So we weren't too pleased when he muttered something about the stones of the Temple being thrown down. It was a relief when we got up to the Mount of Olives and found a quiet moment to put our own questions to him.

*We wanted some clarity. **When** would the Temple tumble down, and **what signs** would indicate the end of the age to us? Perhaps we hoped it would soon all be over, all the*

tiredness and our anxieties about the tensions that were building. We wanted him to sort out Jerusalem, ensure peaceful times for Israel, bring an end to the current mess. And what do we get ... "You will hear of wars ... they will hand you over to be tortured ... false messiahs and false prophets will arise ... And, oh yes, do not be alarmed."

*Just as we hoped he was getting to the point he said that **no-one** knew the day or the hour when the Son of Man would come with power and glory. No details, no timelines, no plan for us to follow. Just "stay awake."*

When you feel tired after a long journey, or a long year, and someone tells you to stay awake – and he said it several times – it leaves you feeling a bit flat. So, I ask you, you who have also tried to follow him, how do you understand his call to stay awake, to watch, to be alert, to read the signs of the times?

And now some brief thoughts about the Gospel of Matthew ...

In our Bibles, Matthew comes before Mark, Luke and John, an ordering settled in the second century. Have you ever wondered why this is?

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.

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.
- In everything, do to others as you would have them do for you; for this is the law and the prophets.
- Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

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'. 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.

So Matthew often appears very black and white, condemning Jesus' Jewish opponents ... and thus providing fodder for later anti-Jewish movements ... 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 that appeal to us and ignore the harder teachings. This is not a good way to read the Gospels ... it's better to grapple and struggle with all of it ... however hard it feels at times.

Let me offer two quick insights into Matthew that may be helpful as we grapple with Matthew's story over the next few weeks and into next year ...

First is **context**. Who is Matthew writing for and what issues are his community facing? Given the **Jewish** focus of this Gospel ... especially 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 the one who correctly interprets the Jewish law and the prophets and rightly stresses the loving kindness and mercy of God. This God welcomes those on the margins – including women and Gentiles – just as Jesus does. Hence the genealogy that begins this Gospel includes four Gentile women who engage in dubious sexual activity – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba – as a way of introducing Mary, whose sexual behavior that leads to the birth of Jesus is also being questioned by some ...

Matthew writes the Adults Only Christmas story. But all are welcome in God's house.

Second, because of his Jewish focus, Matthew's Jesus can appear **harsh** and **demanding** to our ears. But that is because we live in a very 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. In his context, Jesus offers a message that is **liberating** ... that lifts the burden of the Jewish law. So when we read the ethical demands of the Sermon on the Mount (**slide**), we may wonder how on earth Jesus could describe these as 'light' or 'easy' ... 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.

Jesus has come to shake things up – for the better! He promises to be with his followers on their journey. Hence Matthew's story begins by naming him **Emmanuel**

at his birth – **God is with us** – and the story ends on the same note with Jesus promising to be with his followers always, to the end of the age.

On this first Sunday in Advent, where we focus on **hope** – the hope of a radically better world and an alternative way to live taught to us by Jesus –

I want to finish with a prayer written by Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated in 1980 by El Salvador government soldiers because he dared to dream of a better world for the poor in his country. I find this prayer encouraging but also challenging.

Let us pray ...

It helps, now and then, to step back and take the **long** view.

The kingdom of God is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny **fraction** of the magnificent enterprise that is **God's** work.

Nothing we do is ever complete,

which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

[But] **this is what we are about:**

We plant **seeds** that one day will grow.

We **water** seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide **yeast** that produces effects beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything

and there is a sense of liberation in realising that.

This enables us to do **something**, and to do it well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a **beginning**, a step along the way,

an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,

but **that** is the difference between the **master builder** and the **worker**.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, **not** messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Amen.

God, give us the grace and courage and hope to live in this way ... as we await the return of Jesus.