

## Jesus in Matthew

It's far too easy to assume that anti-Semitism is a thing of the past, yet whenever we do, it seems to rear its ugly head once again. Christians have over the centuries contributed to this by ignoring the fact that the faith we have is founded in the faith of the people of Israel.

The gospel of Matthew was written specially for Jewish people to hear. It is a reminder to us not only that the first Christians were Jews, but of course Jesus was a Jew too. The first Christian groups met each Sabbath (Saturday) with everyone else at the synagogue, and would then on the following day (Sunday – the day of resurrection) meet in homes to share stories about Jesus, breaking bread and sharing wine. This was the beginning of what we now know as the Mass, where we pray and intercede (as in the synagogue) and also read stories about our faith (in the Scriptures) and celebrate the Eucharist.

Those who have studied the gospel of Matthew carefully say that he was probably a Christian who was also a scribe or a Rabbi. He quotes the Old Testament frequently, and he presents Jesus as arguing in the way of a Rabbi, which of course Jesus was.

Matthew's gospel has a dramatic nature which we see too in the other Gospel accounts, for we should not forget the gospels were collections of stories that had been passed on by word of mouth. He starts off by giving us a list of the ancestors of Jesus, making it clear that he comes from the right family to be the Messiah, and making sure that his listeners realise Jesus has all the necessary qualifications to be the Son of God.

Matthew is the only gospel to tell the story of the Magi. He wants to make it clear that from the very start it was people other than the Jews who recognised Jesus. The family of Jesus even have to flee to Egypt from the persecution of Herod, and in this way we see that the Jewish authorities, whose people had often fled to Egypt from outside persecution, were now turning on their own and forcing the answer to their hopes into exile.

Jesus as we find him in Matthew behaves very much like a Jewish rabbi. So when Matthew tells us the story of Jesus, he spends some time saying what happened – the narrative; and a great deal of time presenting Jesus's teaching to us in the form of discourses, where teachings of Jesus are collected together. A Rabbi would have gathered his followers

(disciples) around him and taught them as they sat at his feet. In each of the discourses, Jesus speaks to the crowds as his followers.

The most famous of these discourses is, of course, the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5.1-7.29). It contains probably the most far-reaching and certainly the most challenging of the teachings of Jesus. It tells those who will listen that God's kingdom is not the way we might choose to see it.

The teaching of the Beatitudes, for example, has much to say to all Christians in the modern world. The poor in spirit are pronounced blessed, as are the meek, and those who are longing for righteousness. Blessed are also the peacemakers, who shall be called the children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for the cause of right. It is so easy for those of us who come from a world of privilege to talk romantically about this teaching of Jesus. Those who have been made poor, or in whose lives there is no righteousness, might not be so romantic. It is desperately important for us all to realise what Jesus is saying. It is the way of the world that the downtrodden will tread down those who have oppressed them, that conflict is the way to obtain righteousness. This is not the way of Jesus. Jesus is not telling us that being poor or downtrodden is OK, but he is saying that God's kingdom has no place for privileges won by violence or at the expense of other people. Those who belong to the kingdom will win justice through the ways of the kingdom, and not by means of the ways of the world.

What we learn from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is a type of honesty – with God, with others, and with ourselves – that does not come easily to us. The teaching on adultery of the heart (Mt 5.27-28) is a timely warning to those who think they are holier than everyone else because they have better self-control. If it's wrong to exploit a woman through an adulterous relationship, then it's also wrong to take attitudes to women (or conversely to men) that would be equally exploitative. Thinking and attitudes are as important in the teaching of Jesus as actions. The same point about honesty comes up when Jesus tells us not to swear oaths, but to make our 'yes' yes, and our 'no' no.

Jesus in fact makes it very clear that honesty is one of the main marks of his followers. A dishonest disciple of Jesus is a contradiction. If you are dishonest, you are not his disciple.

This is the reason why Jesus says so much about truth. A life that is not true is not real, for it doesn't reflect the glory of God in whose image we are made. And when we are dishonest, we are untrue to God. It is not just cowardly to run away from truth, then, or to tell lies – it takes away from our humanity; and it also gives the lie to our own claims that we follow Jesus.

The second discourse of Matthew's gospel is the Missionary Sermon of 9.35-11.1. This tells us how important for Matthew was the way the Church would work. I have indicated that Matthew was written for a Jewish audience, and they would have been both well organised and also well used to seeing religion as an organised thing – one of the reasons for the severe cautions on the dangers of organised religion in the Sermon on the Mount!

Here Jesus sends out the Twelve (10.5) and warns them that they will face opposition. *Every one who acknowledges me before the world, I will also acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before the world, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven (10.32-33).*

The missionary sermon is also a source of strength and encouragement. We know that Jesus speaks to us, but he also says: *What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops (10.27).* We are to be fearless in passing on what we have learned from him.

In chapter 13.1-52, we find a third discourse, where the parables of Jesus about the Kingdom of God are gathered together. This is a reminder that Matthew's gospel is as much a teaching manual as a narrative of the life of Jesus. We learn to know Jesus by taking on board his teaching. Jesus tells his hearers about God's Kingdom in ways that relate to their everyday life: the sower; the wheat and the weeds; the mustard seed; the yeast; the hidden treasure; the hidden pearl; the fishing net.

We also find teachings on the nature of the Church in Matthew's gospel: 18.1-35 collects together the teaching of Jesus on the Church – teachings on humility, forgiveness, single-mindedness, taking care of the young and innocent, seeking out the lost and strayed, resolving disputes, and more teaching on forgiveness. It is perhaps ironic, in an age when the Church is always being asked to teach clearly and to organise itself efficiently, that *these*

are the things Jesus sees as essential to his Church. In many parts of the Church there is a distinct lack of forgiveness for those who don't fit in or those who don't always agree with official Church teaching. Jesus tells us that forgiveness *not seven times, but seventy-seven times (18.22)* is the key to our relationships. The only unforgivable thing, so it seems from the teaching of Jesus, is the placing of obstacles in the way of the innocent.

The final set of teachings is collected in the so-called Eschatological Discourse (24.1-25.46). Here we learn of the destiny in store for those of faith. We also learn a great deal about how faith has to be lived today if it is to have an effect tomorrow. Jesus has given us so much teaching about the way the world is, the way the Church is – now the teaching turns to what will be when the Kingdom fully comes to be. There are words of warning about being ready for the Kingdom, and reminders that we will not be expecting it. The parable of the talents reflects the urgency of using what God has given us now to serve the needs of the Kingdom – but surprisingly, those needs are very human, for serving the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked the sick and imprisoned – these are the ways in which we make the Kingdom happen now. The parable of the sheep and the goats is very disturbing and very clear. When we serve those in need, we serve Jesus, and when we serve Jesus, we are serving the Kingdom of God.

It is so important for us to be able to see Jesus in those in need. This is why I call Jesus in Matthew the Human God, for it is a human sort of gospel that gives us plenty of ways to arrange our lives in accordance with the life and teaching of Jesus. The Church exists to make this possible both for those who already believe and for those who will come to belief through the Church's witness and ministry.

Matthew then should be seen not only as a teaching gospel, but also as a pattern to show what our churches ought to look like – a model for a modern Church. A Church where the most important things are humility and service would be a more difficult Church than the one we now have – but, reading Matthew's Gospel, it would undoubtedly be more Christlike!

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