

St. Matthew's Gospel – An Introduction.

The four gospels are the foundation documents for our Christian community, & it is through them that we come to know & understand Jesus. Yet I would be very surprised if many, or even any of you, became Christians in the first place simply because you took up the gospels, read them & asked to be baptised. People come to meet Christ first by meeting Him in others, who passed on what they received. It may have been our parents, it may have been through a Christian school, we may have begun our journey to Christian faith through a chance encounter with someone from a Christian community. Whatever our particular experience, the first time we encountered the gospel was not through a book, but through some person.

The word gospel in its origins was not a written text, but an oral proclamation. Nowadays the word gospel is used in a Church context, & we associate the word in particular with the four texts we call gospels, but in the time of Jesus it simply meant, 'good news'. We know for example when a new Roman emperor ascended the throne, heralds went out to every corner of the Roman empire proclaiming the good news to everyone who would listen. Sometimes they would also say things like, 'We have a saviour & Lord, who has brought us peace' – political words that now sound more at home in a church setting.

Preaching the gospel was not something that happened in a pulpit. We know of one occasion when St Paul did that & he was not very successful. He spoke at great length & one young man in the congregation fell asleep, & the next thing he had fallen off the ledge on which he was sitting. St. Paul preached the gospel originally in the streets & markets while he was practising his trade in the different cities of the Roman Empire. Paul would engage one or two people in conversation & then at an appropriate moment he would say something like, 'Listen, I have some good news for you. Jesus, who was crucified outside Jerusalem – He is alive, & I have met Him. He is your real Saviour & Lord, not the Roman emperor. Would you like to learn more?' Come & see! From chance encounters like that Paul built up small communities of Christians.

None of the four Gospel writers knew Jesus personally when He was preaching & working miracles in Galilee or Jerusalem. They came to know Him through encountering members of Christian communities. Indeed the gospel texts as we know them were not written until some forty years after the crucifixion of Jesus, so they are not eye-witness reports, but stories & memories of Jesus that percolated down through the Christian communities. Those stories were told, & the memories transmitted as the Christian communities instructed new converts, debated with unbelieving Jews & Gentiles & celebrated the liturgy, just

as we continue to do today.

Most modern scholars believe that Mk was the first of the gospels to be written down, & that Mt's gospel was written a few years later. As we get to know the gospels of Mk, Mt & Lk well, we will discover that the basic outline of the story they tell is the same in each gospel, & indeed in many places we might be tempted to think that all three gospels were identical, but then we notice subtle differences. They are not saying quite the same thing, & their portrait of Jesus is not quite the same as one goes from one gospel to another. That is not because one or other of the gospels is not true, but because the truth of Jesus is so deep it cannot be contained in one book. So in each gospel we will see the same story, but told in a slightly different way, with different emphases.

So just as an artist might paint the same theme in different ways, we can say that the three gospels, & the gospel of Jn which is quite different from the others, contain four different portraits or images of Jesus, four different ways of seeing the same Jesus. In Mk we see Jesus as the pioneer, who leads His disciples from the front, & invites them to join Him in places they would rather not go. In Mt we see Jesus as the teacher, who like the teachers of His time sits among His group of disciples teaching them, questioning them, challenging them, asking them if they understand. In Lk we see Jesus walking by His disciples, just as the stranger walked by the disciples on the road to Emmaus, preparing them to go out & share the good news. The portrait of Jesus in Jn is more subtle. It is bound up with the character of the beloved disciple who is intimately close to Jesus, who leans on His breast & takes every word of His to heart. To put it another way, the heart of Jesus is seen in every genuine believer & disciple.

One important thing to remember when reading the gospels, & particularly the gospel of Mt, is that the words of Jesus we hear are those of the risen Jesus who has been encountered by the community in their prayer, their reading of Scripture, their calling to mind & reflecting upon Jesus' words in their celebration of the Eucharist.

Before we concentrate exclusively on Mt, let's cast our minds back to Paul & that conversation Paul had with his potential converts in the market places of Corinth, Ephesus & other cities. At the heart of Paul's preaching was the Passion & Death of Jesus, & His Resurrection. The earliest Christians began from their personal experience that Jesus who had been crucified was alive & present among them. That was the original story they told. As time went on, they expanded on that original story as they called to mind events in Jesus' life & the things He said. The gospel texts as we have them are the product of that expansion of the story in the early years of the Church.

Returning now to Mt, we will first look at the way he tells his story. The best way to begin is to compare him with Mk, the gospel written about a decade before. Mk's gospel was considerably shorter than Mt. The chief focus in Mk's gospel is the Passion of Jesus, His suffering & death on the Cross. Indeed some scholars have described Mk's gospel as a Passion Narrative with an extended introduction, because the death of Jesus looms over the story from the very beginning. One might say that Mk's story is about how Jesus came to be crucified, & how a similar fate may be the calling of those who follow Him in the future.

Mt took the outline of the tradition which Mk received & used, modified & expanded it with other traditions about Jesus that he had received. Whereas Mk's gospel is mostly about action – what Jesus did, & focuses particularly on His miracles & His conflicts with the Pharisees & religious leaders, Mt's gospel contains much more of Jesus' teaching, especially His teaching about the kingdom of heaven. Much of this teaching is quite subtle, & I would suggest Mt is not an 'entry level' gospel.

Each of the evangelists structures the material he received in his own way, & Mt in a sense stands out from the others. Scholars have detected in the writing of Mt's gospel several 'blocks' of material, alternating between narrative or story & discourse, sayings, parables & the like. So the gospel begins with four chapters of narrative which cover the period of Jesus' life from His conception & birth up to the calling of the disciples. This is like an overture to the gospel; it tells us who Jesus is & where He comes from. It gives us the credentials of Jesus, so to speak. Through the stories in these chapters of Jesus' birth, the coming of the Magi & the flight into Egypt Mt tells us how Jesus is the fulfilment of the plan of God revealed in the Scriptures, the part we call the OT, how He is the Christ, the anointed King sent by God to save the whole world from our sins, how He is Emmanuel, God with us, how He was born in Bethlehem as the prophets foretold, though many people assumed His family had never been away from Nazareth. He tells us how Jesus came to announce to all that the kingdom of heaven is very near to us if we repent, have faith in Him & understand the good news He wants to bring us.

Next come three chapters of discourse which we call, The Sermon on the Mount. This forms the core of Jesus' teaching. One might describe it as the ethics of the Kingdom of heaven. What is it like, in other words, to live under God's rule, which is what Jesus understands by the Kingdom of heaven. Its starting point is the law of God revealed in the OT, but Jesus invites His disciples to go beyond that law in their goodness & love for one another, to forgive even their enemies. At times He appears to be abolishing the law but He claims to be fulfilling it, fulfilling its original purpose. Seek, He says, the greater righteousness.

In other words, His disciples are to live according to the spirit of the Law with the interiority & purity of heart that only God can give. Jesus invites us to go beyond the externals of rules & regulations. When it comes to imitating a loving God our first question is not, 'How far need I go?', but 'How far can I go?', since God never restricts His gifts that flow from His goodness, but *'causes his sun to rise on bad men as well as good, & his rain to fall on honest & dishonest men alike'* (5:45).

At the very heart of the Sermon on the Mount is a section on prayer, because prayer must be at the heart of the lives of those who would enter the kingdom. In this section Jesus makes a distinction between the external aspects of prayer & what is actually going on in our hearts. He distinguishes the prayer of those who simply wish to be known to be pious, from the person who genuinely wants to know God & do God's will. The heart of the sermon is the Lord's Prayer, which is a prayer for the gifts of the kingdom, that the kingdom may come & God's will be done. It is a prayer that we may imitate God in his infinite capacity to forgive, & that we may be protected from the power of evil. It is a prayer, in effect, for those fundamental good things of life that we could never achieve on our own without him.

In the OT the great mediator of God's Law was Moses. Mt had already evoked memories of Moses in the opening section, in the story of Jesus' miraculous escape from the soldiers of Herod & His flight into Egypt. In the Sermon on the Mount He is presented as like Moses but greater even than Moses, because He not only offers a definitive, radical spirit with which to understand & act on God's law, but He does so with the authority of God Himself. So we hear Him say, *'You have heard it said, but I say to you'*. In other words, He claims ultimate authority for interpreting God's revelation.

In the OT Moses was seen not only as a lawgiver & leader but also as a prophet, & at the end of Deut. it was promised that an even greater prophet than Moses would arise in Israel. The signs of the arrival of the anointed one (prophets, like kings, were anointed) would include the healing of the sick & disabled, so we should not be surprised that after the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus shows Himself to be the Messiah by His words, in the next two chapters Jesus shows Himself to be the Messiah by His healing of people who are sick & disabled (chs 8 & 9) & by His powerful deeds such as the calming of the storm on the sea of Galilee which would have evoked in people's memory stories of God controlling the waters at the dawn of creation.

Following that narrative of miracles, in ch. 10 there is another discourse, a section devoted to the teaching Jesus gives to those He is sending out to extend His

ministry to those who physically He cannot reach. As He sends the twelve apostles out to preach the good news of the coming of God's kingdom as He had done, to heal the sick & cast out demons, He tells the missionaries to travel light, to be aware that they may be persecuted, & not to fear because Jesus will be with them. He warns them that conflict will be an inevitable part of their experience.

That is precisely what we find in the next narrative section (11-12). People, whole towns like Chorazin & Bethsaida reject Jesus & His preaching. Others put a negative slant on everything He says & does. For example, when Jesus heals the man with the withered hand, He is castigated for breaking the law about working on the Sabbath. Some even say that His miraculous power does not come from a good healthy source, but from Beelzebul the prince of demons. For those of us who know the end of the story of Jesus' life, we know that this rejection reached its culmination when Jesus was crucified by the Romans at the instigation of His own people.

Up to this time, Jesus had been preaching openly to the people of Galilee with no restriction on who heard His message, but in the light of this rejection He withdraws somewhat from the public sphere & focusses on teaching His disciples in greater depth. So in ch.13 He explains to His disciples with the help of a text of the prophet Isaiah why He was rejected, & then goes on to speak about the kingdom of heaven & how it grows. Here Jesus teaches in parables. Parables are stories or sayings which on the surface appear to be about things that everyone in a rural community would know about, such as the sowing & growth of seeds, the place of yeast in the baking of bread, the catching of fish, but He uses these images in order to speak about spiritual realities, & about the way God works. But not everyone 'gets' the meaning of the parables. Sometimes one has to think about them at some length. One scholar described the purpose of the parable as 'teasing the mind into active thought'. Some do not have the right disposition to understand them, just as the sower could scatter seed everywhere, but not all the soil proved conducive to growth. What we see in this section are parables that no doubt go back to Jesus' ministry, but after His resurrection they were modified & took on greater depth in the light of the experience of the early Church.

& it is to the Church that Mt now turns. In Chs 14-17 Jesus performs more miracles & gets involved in even more conflicts particularly with the Pharisees, but His teaching is more focussed on the disciples than the wider audience. At the same time He has to cope with the fact that often His disciples don't seem to understand Him either. Eventually Jesus withdraws to Caesarea Philippi, a largely non-Jewish area, & there He asks Peter the fundamental question, 'Who

do you say that I am', & on the basis of Peter's response Jesus entrusts Peter with the leadership of a new community of people called together by God. Jesus calls this community an *ekklesia*, which is the Greek word we translate as Church. This is followed by another discourse by Jesus, which is largely concerned with how the Church is to conduct itself, particularly when its members fail to live up to their calling, & Jesus stresses the necessity of forgiveness, while acknowledging that there will be some occasions when people put themselves outside of the community by their actions. This will not surprise those who are already familiar with the petition of the Lord's prayer asking God to forgive us as we forgive others.

When we are reading, or listening to the gospel of Mt, it is important to remember that we do not read it as if all this happened long ago but has no reference to us. True, at one level we read this as the story of what Jesus said & did in His public ministry before His death, but at another level we are hearing the teaching of the risen Jesus, speaking not only to the early church but to the church in every generation.

At ch.17 the story changes location. Up to this point Jesus had been preaching in Galilee, in the north of the country. Now he begins the journey south towards Jerusalem, but He warns the disciples 3x that this journey is not going to have a happy outcome, because Jesus will be arrested, tried by His enemies & crucified. As He moves into this stage some of the things He says & does become even more radical & demanding. The rich young man comes to Him, asking what he needs to do to gain eternal life. Thinking that he has done enough by obeying the commandments, he is surprised & saddened when Jesus tells him to give his possessions to the poor & come, follow me. This leads to a teaching by Jesus on the danger of wealth which can undermine a person's capacity to do the will of God. But, even so, *'for God'*, says Jesus, *'everything is possible'*. He tells the disciples that if they are to follow Him, they must do so without expectation of rewards, even spiritual rewards, so in response to the question by one of the disciples' mothers He says it is not his place to distribute the best seats in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all, for Jesus Himself came not to be served but to serve.

When, finally, Jesus enters into Jerusalem He drives the money changers out of the temple. This effectively seals Jesus' death warrant, because in the eyes of His enemies He has shown hostility to the very dwelling place of God & threatened the whole religious foundations of Judaism. What follows in the rest of this narrative section almost looks like a concerted attack on the lay leaders of Judaism, the Pharisees. The leaders question the authority of Jesus, He in turn tells parables implying that because Israel refused the help God offered His

people, they will lose everything. With a series of 'Woes' He denounces the leadership for hypocrisy.

Then follows the last discourse of Jesus (24-25). Jesus retires from the public scene to spend time with His disciples alone on the Mount of Olives, where one gets an excellent view of the temple. With the crowds gone, Jesus looks to the future, & shares His vision of the destruction of Jerusalem & its temple. The old age is over, a new one is about to begin. The old Israel will be destroyed, & God will enable a new Israel to emerge. But this message is not intended for Jesus' enemies; it is directed at the future Church, hence the final scenario of the discourse is the last judgement when Jesus will return to judge who is fit to enter the kingdom of heaven, & the criterion of His judgement will be what we call the corporal works of mercy – feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, visiting those in prison, welcoming the stranger.

Immediately following this final discourse begins the final two days of Jesus' life, culminating in His last Supper with His disciples, His arrest & trial, crucifixion & burial.

The story of what happens after this differs in each of the gospels. One might say that each evangelist goes His own way because these so called 'resurrection narratives' are stories about how those who handed on the tradition spoke about their experience of having met Jesus. Mk's gospel ended with the women finding the tomb of Jesus empty, but not quite knowing what to make of it. A young man announced to them that Jesus was risen & they must go to Galilee & there they would see Him. Mt tells how Pilate's men & the leaders of the Jews did not know what to make of the empty tomb either, so they put out a story that Jesus' body had been stolen. Running through Mt's gospel has been a line between those who accept Jesus & those who reject Him, those who have faith in Him & those who turn their hearts against Him. That line continues to run after the crucifixion of Jesus.

What Mk had spoken about in terms of a promise, Mt describes as a story. The young man in the tomb, in Mk's story, told the women that if they went to Galilee, they would see Him. Whereas in Mk's story we are never told whether the women went to Galilee or not – the story ends with the women in a state of fear, in Mt's story the women are filled with awe & great joy & go off to share the proclamation of the resurrection with the other disciples.

Mt's story ends in Galilee where the other disciples meet the Lord. Interestingly, when Jesus sent out the disciples to preach & heal & exorcise in Mt 10, we are never told that they went. Now at the very end of the story they are commanded by Jesus to go out once more, but this time not just to Israel

but to the gentiles, their task being to make new disciples, & to teach them what they have received – namely all the tradition that has been handed down & appears in the gospel text.

One of the reasons why Mt, Mk & Lk are so similar & yet each has its own perspective, is that each gospel was written with a different community in mind, a community that had its own specific problems & issues. In the case of Mt, the gospel was written for a community of followers of Jesus who had been brought up in the Jewish tradition & were uncertain how their acceptance of Jesus as Messiah related to their ancestral faith. Should they believe those who said that Jesus was just a charlatan who was abolishing everything sacred & blaspheming the God who had revealed His law to them? Mt's gospel was written after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans, an event which shook the foundations of the Jewish religion, & it was the Pharisees who took the lead in restoring Jewish identity. With the temple gone, how was the Jewish faith to be practiced? What would replace all the sacrifices? Eventually Judaism would evolve into the form we know it today, but that was a long way into the future. In the meantime, the young Jewish-Christian community stood out as a kind of aberration of Judaism & was held in great suspicion by the mainstream because its founder was considered to have played fast & loose with the Law. Hence in Mt's gospel there is a certain tension & conflict between Mt's community & other synagogues, & this is typified in the conflicts between Jesus & the Pharisees. This also accounts for much of the bitterness & aggression shown by Jesus against the leaders of Judaism.

Mt sets out to encourage his young community by telling them the story of Jesus again, but in such a way as to suggest that Jesus was not an unorthodox Jew out to destroy Jewish laws & customs but desired above all to bring Judaism to what God had intended it to be, & to show them that if they read their Scriptures carefully, they would understand this. Through this gospel text he told his community that in Jesus a new era in the relationship between God & his people had begun, because in the person of Jesus the kingdom of heaven had broken into our world in a definitive way. Life would never be the same again, & this little community were to be the new 'assembly' or church of the People of God who were to carry this story forward by making new disciples & observing all that Jesus had taught them. No doubt this sounded a daunting task, hence the final words of the gospel contain a great assurance on the part of Jesus, '*Know that I am with you until the end of the age*', in other words, until the work of Jesus is brought to its fulfilment.