

Lifting the Burden

Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today

Brendan Byrne, S.J.



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Introduction

With respect to Matthew's gospel, for me it is a case of "I ate have I loved thee." Though I value all four gospels, Matthew was far from my favorite. One missed Mark's sharp eye for detail and Luke's gift for narrative. In contrast, the First Gospel appeared moralizing and didactic, with rather too much talk of punishment and hellfire. Moreover, the Church seemed over-exposed to the gospels of Matthew and John; people needed to hear the independent voices of Mark and Luke (especially the former), as well as Paul.

Then a colleague's absence on study leave a few years ago led to my teaching a scheduled course on Matthew. Reading in preparation for that course—especially J. Andrew Overman's *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism*¹—worked something of a conversion. The rekindled debate regarding Matthew's relationship to Judaism caught my interest. Jesus emerged as interpreter of the Torah in a fresh and liberating way. In particular, Overman drew my attention to the significance for Matthew of a text from the prophet Hosea, "What I want is mercy, not sacrifice" (Hos 6:6), a text Jesus twice cites in defense of his approach to religious law and tradition (Matt 9:13; 12:7).²

In Matthew I discovered a gospel that teaches us to look at humanity through the eyes of Jesus and see it as afflicted and weighed down with all manner of burdens. Far from adding to humanity's burdens, Jesus comes to bear and lift them. Hence Matthew's frequent portrayal of him in the guise of the "Servant" figure in Isaiah.

¹ J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: the Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

² Matthew both times quotes Hos 6:6 according to the LXX, which uses *eleos* ("mercy") to translate the Hebrew *hesed*. The NRSV translation "steadfast love" would seem to reflect more accurately than "mercy" the sense of the Hebrew original of Hos 6:6. However, in connection with Matthew it is appropriate to translate the prophetic text according to the lead given by the Evangelist; cf. the NRSV translation in Matt 9:13; 12:7 ("mercy" in both cases).

This approach to Matthew's gospel seemed to find ready acceptance when put forward in courses, workshops, occasional lectures and the like. Of all the four gospels it is Matthew that has contributed most to Christian identity and self-understanding. At a time when much soul-searching is going on regarding what it means to be Church, it is fitting to look again at the image of Church emerging from Matthew. The Second Vatican Council left the Catholic communion with a marvelous vision of the Church, but fifty years on we find ourselves still grappling with the unfinished business of the Council. For many, the hopes raised by that remarkable gathering in the mid-1960s have been dashed. Oppressive structures and habits of mind linger or have been reimposed. The Church's relationship to a wider world, steadily becoming more and more pluralistic, remains problematic and unsure. One significant area of human life neglected by the Council—human sexuality—has come back to haunt the Church in a devastating way. In the early years of this new millennium we find ourselves a very burdened community—burdened from within by the weight of our own sinfulness and institutional failure, burdened from without through sharing the common lot of humankind in a fearful and unsettled time.

How can a reading of Matthew's gospel address this situation? I am not for one moment suggesting that it be done in a simplistic way—by taking the various prescriptions and commendations in the gospel and applying them literally to life in the Church today. The community responsible for the gospel lived in a situation totally different from our own. A knowledge of its historical setting, its likely issues and challenges, greatly aids interpretation. But there is no sense in attempting to recreate that pattern now. That is to take the path of religious fundamentalism—a road to death rather than life, as we know all too well at the present time. We read and venerate the gospels because of their witness to the power and presence of the risen Lord in our community. We attempt to be captured by their vision, not that we may be drawn back to the world from which they spring but rather that we may be drawn into the narrative world that each of them projects and into the values of that world, which are those of the crucified and risen Lord.

I have subtitled this book “A Reading of Matthew's Gospel.” “A Reading” is meant to suggest one interpretation among several that could be offered. In presenting my personal interpretation from a particular point of view I in no sense wish to imply that it is the only valid reading or even the most obvious or the best grounded. I do believe it to be a valid interpretation, well founded in the text of the gospel. However, I shall for the most part simply allow its own developing logic to commend it, without detailed

argumentation or constant discussion with other scholarly points of view. Technical details and disputed points requiring further treatment I relegate to the notes. The work is similar to a commentary in that I do move through the gospel continuously from beginning to end. It is unlike a commentary in that I do not feel obliged to comment on everything in detail. I shall linger on areas of the text where the approach I am taking seems notably prominent, paying less attention to those where it is not.

To keep the book within reasonable size and expense I have not, save in very few places, set out the text of the gospel in English translation. The translation to which I adhere most closely is that of the *New Revised Standard Version*. I would urge readers to have this by them as they consult or work their way through the book. Of great assistance to more serious students will be a synopsis of the three synoptic gospels, such as Burton H. Throckmorton's *Gospel Parallels*, the most recent edition of which uses the *NRSV*.³ But, of course, the first and most essential resource is the Old or First Testament, the “fulfillment” of which Matthew is time and time again at pains to point out.

I hope the book will be accessible for the general reader as well as useful for the student. While the tone is not overly devotional, this interpretation of Matthew stems from a faith commitment and a conviction that the Evangelist writes out of a distinctive vision of the God revealed by Jesus and with the aim of commending a pattern of personal and community life coherent with that vision.

“Difficult” Matthew

Despite my “conversion” to Matthew, I remain acutely aware that the gospel presents interpreters and preachers with particular challenges today. One has to do with the whole area of relationship to Judaism; this I take up in the following chapter. The other is that the teachings of the Matthean Jesus reflect not only the moral seriousness of Judaism in general but also encapsulate that teaching within the eschatological worldview of Jewish apocalypticism, in which the prospect of final judgment and accountability is never far from view. Matthew, for whom the Church of his time was very much a mixed body containing weeds among the wheat, is not slow to hold a threat of judgment, which originally had wider reference, before the

³ *Gospel Parallels: A Comparison of the Synoptic Gospels* (5th ed. Nashville: Nelson, 1992).

community itself. The view of Jesus as Emmanuel (“God with us” [1:23]) who comes to lift humanity’s burden sits in considerable tension with that of the Son of Man due to come on the clouds of heaven to judge the world (24:39-41; 25:31-46; 26:64). Invitations of welcome into the final kingdom (25:21, 23, 35, 46) are matched by threats of hellfire (5:22; 18:9; 25:41) and castings out into exterior darkness where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30).

I shall attempt to deal with such material in places where it is more particularly prominent. For the present I simply observe more generally that contemporary Christian theology, while retaining the moral seriousness and challenge of this gospel, is not committed to a literalistic understanding of such matters. Indeed, to ignore the symbolic cast of such expressions would falsify their original intent, which is not to provide information about the future state but to summon people to a responsible pattern of life here and now—an aim hardly achieved by paralyzing people with fear. As with all biblical documents, the crucial thing, I believe, is to place all such statements within their proper context in the unfolding cumulative message of the gospel, which is unmistakably that of a God who desires to heal, gather, and save rather than to condemn.⁴ Even in the more difficult areas I hope to show how that essential positive message never really falls from view.

Some Presuppositions

In developing this approach to Matthew’s gospel I would like to make clear certain things I am presupposing with little or no further justification.

First of all, I take the gospel in its final canonical form, paying little attention to issues concerning its likely sources or what might have been the process of its composition. Along with most scholars, I take it to be written by a third-generation Christian in the closing decades of the first century C.E. The place of composition was probably somewhere in Syria, perhaps in the great city of Antioch, but certainly somewhere where there was opportunity for both continuing interaction with Jewish synagogues and contact of a missionary nature with the surrounding non-Jewish (Gentile) world. In line with tradition I shall refer to its author as “Matthew,” while recognizing that the traditional identification of the gospel with the tax collector of that name called by Jesus (9:9; the character named “Levi” in

Mark 2:14 and Luke 5:27) lacks historical verification. It is in fact improbable, granted that the narrative reflects the use of sources rather than direct, eyewitness memory. Readers wishing to follow up such matters can do so by consulting the standard commentaries. Here I acknowledge those which have been particularly influential in my own understanding of Matthew and whose scholarship stands behind much of the interpretation proposed here both in detail and overall understanding: Ulrich Luz,⁵ W. D. Davies and Dale Allison,⁶ M. Eugene Boring,⁷ Daniel J. Harrington,⁸ John P. Meier,⁹ and Rudolf Schnackenburg.¹⁰

Again, along with the majority of scholars I accept the “Two-Source” theory of the relationship among the three synoptic gospels. According to this theory both Matthew and Luke, in addition to using sources of their own, drew independently on Mark’s gospel and also upon a source, consisting largely of teachings and sayings, that scholars reconstruct and call “Q.” Without wishing to be as definite about the nature of this source as some scholars are, I think it is necessary to postulate some such fount of tradition, whether in written or rather fixed oral form, in order to account for the large amount of non-Markan material Luke and Matthew have in common. In the light of this theory and to bring out the First Evangelist’s distinctive preoccupations I shall at times point out places where Matthew appears to have embellished his Markan source or departed from its order.

Encounter with the Living Lord

Last but by no means least, readers have to be aware that the interpretation offered here proceeds entirely from a distinct view of what the

⁵ Four volumes in the original German: Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (EKK 1) Vol. 1: *Mt 1–7*; Vol. 2: *Mt 8–17*; Vol. 3: *Mt 18–25*; Vol. 4: *Mt 26–28* (Zürich: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985–2002). Two volumes of a projected three-volume English translation have appeared: *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*. Translated by Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989); *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary*. Translated by James E. Crouch. Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

⁶ W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*. ICC. 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988–97).

⁷ M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” in Leander E. Keck, ed., *The New Interpreter’s Bible* 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 87–505.

⁸ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*. SP 1 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991).

⁹ John P. Meier, *Matthew* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1980).

¹⁰ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). Translation of *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*. 2 vols. (Würzburg: Echter, 1985, 1987).

⁴ Cf. Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (see following note) 4:555.

gospels are and what they are not. First, what they are not: Though cast in a form that follows the pattern of Jesus' life they are in no way biographies in the modern sense. They certainly record memories about Jesus and give a fair indication of the basic shape of his life. But their primary purpose is not to pass on accurate historical information concerning things Jesus of Nazareth said and did in his historical life.

Matthew's account of Jesus, no less than those of Mark, Luke, and John, is shot through with a vision of faith. The essential core of what Christians believe about Jesus—that his death on the cross under Pontius Pilate was followed by his resurrection and exaltation to the right hand of God—colors the entire account from beginning to end. It forms a thick “lens” through which any details of his historical life have to be discerned. It determined what details were remembered and how such memories were embellished and extended when passed on down the decades in a context of faith and worship. Very influential in this process, especially for Matthew, was the understanding of Jesus as the fulfillment of hopes and promises embedded in the scriptures of Israel (for Christians the Old Testament). A scriptural aura in this sense hovers around the stories about Jesus, contributing color, detail, and language, and also, to some extent, content.

Thus the Jesus portrayed in the gospels is the risen Lord active in the community today. The aim of the narrative is to engage the reader in the drama in such a way as to communicate the sense of being a participant, not a spectator, in what is going on. *I* share in the terrible dilemma facing Joseph as he becomes aware that Mary is pregnant (1:18-19); *I* bring my gifts to the newborn King along with the wise men from the East (2:1-12); *I* sit among the crowd listening to Jesus' authoritative teaching on the mountain (chs. 5-7); *I* am the Canaanite woman whose wit and faith overcome Jesus' reluctance to heal her child (15:21-28). This is not make-believe. Behind it lies the reality for the believer that Jesus really is alive and that those whom his Spirit touches undergo an experience of salvation that is just as immediate and real as it was for those who saw him, heard him, and felt his touch in Galilee and Judea.¹¹

So the gospel may appear to be a story about “back there.” But it is not really about “back there” at all. It is about *now*—and about a future for the Church and the world. I shall on occasion comment upon the extent to

which a particular tradition in the Gospel of Matthew may or may not reflect what Jesus said or did in his historical life. But my concern is not to take the reader “back” to this Jesus—something not usually possible save in a speculative and limited degree. Some readers may find this lack of concern for history disappointing or even disturbing. I can only ask them to enter upon the journey for a while. What they have lost of “history” will, I hope, be more than compensated for by the sense of being grasped by the power of the risen Lord that the Matthean narrative, with great dramatic power, conveys.

We would not read the Gospel of Matthew at all if we did not recognize that it is in some sense “our story” too. Standing as we do at a moment of great change and turmoil in Christian understanding and community, we very much need to be people who, like the master of a household described in Matt 13:52, know how to bring out of their treasure chest what is new and what is old. This book aims to play a part in that process.

¹¹ For a development of this understanding of the gospel, especially in relation to prayer in the Ignatian tradition, see further Brendan Byrne, “‘To See with the Eyes of the Imagination . . .’: Scripture in the Exercises and Recent Interpretation,” *Way Supplement* 72 (Autumn 1991) 3-19.