

Preaching from Matthew

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Although the Lectionary draws the preacher to Matthew only every third year, the First Gospel probably exerts more influence on the church than any of the other three. It is likely because Matthew's Gospel was held in such widespread esteem in the early church that it stands at the head of the New Testament.

When Christians speak of Jesus' teaching, what they generally think of are the five blocks of material Matthew gathers and places in discourses, concluding each with the words "when Jesus finished these sayings" (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). It sounds almost as though he intends his book to be read as a new Torah from a new Moses. Numerous echoes of the Moses story, particularly in the infancy narrative, seem to confirm such a suspicion (a tiny baby is threatened by a wicked ruler and escapes not from but to Egypt, only to go up a mountain to deliver, rather than receive, God's Law, and so on).

The problem with discerning such a pentateuchal structure for Matthew, however, is that it does not really do justice to the entire book. It focuses only on the center of the story and ignores the infancy and passion narratives, or turns them into little more than prologue and epilogue, and it ignores the title the author himself assigns his work: "The Genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of Abraham, the son of David" (1:1). Other scholars notice a different narrative signal at two turning points in the story. At 4:16 and 16:21, Matthew says, "from that time on, Jesus began to..." which seems to set off three major phases of the plot: the person of Jesus (1:1-4:16), the proclamation of Jesus (4:17-16:20), and the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus (16:21-28:20). There are two further literary clues to Matthew's purpose that suggest general themes the preacher might do well to bear in mind. The self-designation of the work is a "genealogy," which suggests that Matthew is interested in who Jesus is and where he comes from. A literary *inclusio*, or mention at the beginning and the end of the book of similar ideas, alerts the reader to how the story is to be understood, and suggests that Matthew is the Gospel of Jesus who is God with us. At 1:23, Matthew quotes Isa 7:14 to say Jesus should be called Emmanuel, "which means 'God is with us'." Unlike the other Gospels, in which Jesus goes away at the end of the story, Matthew promises at 28:20 that Jesus stays with his church forever (cf. also 18:20).

Four general themes in the Gospel demonstrate ways Matthew considers Jesus to be "God with us": he is God with us in history, God with us in the Law, God with us in church life, and God with us in mission. This is by no means to suggest that every text in the Gospel fits tidily into one of these four themes, only that such an overview is one way to understand the whole in which individual passages stand. There are multiple helpful conversation partners with whom to read Matthew. John P. Meier's *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church, and Morality in the First Gospel*¹ and his small commentary on Matthew in the New Testament Message series² are uncommonly good. Jack D. Kingsbury's *Matthew as Story*³ and Douglas R. A. Hare's commentary in the Interpretation⁴ series are also worth having within reach.

The most valuable exegetical tool for preachers to keep close at hand, however, when reading Matthew (or Luke, for that matter) is a critical synopsis of the Gospels.

Obviously Mark is not Matthew's only source for his book, but it is the chief one, since it provides him with not only the basic outline of his story but also a substantial part of its content, most notably the passion narrative. To see what Matthew has changed in Mark's story is one very important clue to what he thinks the story means.

Having said that, on the other hand, a caveat about the limitations of redaction criticism is also in order. The greatest temptation for a redaction critic is to begin to assume that we know *why* Matthew makes any given alteration to Mark's story. It seems fairly likely, for example, that Mark's reference to Abiathar (Mark 2:26) is absent from Matt 12:4 because 1 Sam 21:1-6 says instead that Ahimelech, Abiathar's father, was high priest when David and his soldiers ate holy bread in the Temple. It is not nearly so obvious why Matthew adds to Mark the story about Pilate's hand-washing in 27:24, although we can make some more or less educated guesses about transferring responsibility for Jesus' death from the Roman authorities to the Jewish authorities against whom Matthew seems to carry on a running polemic. Matthew writes a whole story about Jesus, not merely an edited version of Mark. He uses two sources about which we can speak with some confidence: Mark, which we have, and Q, which we do not have. The theological advantage of attending to redactional changes is that it continues to remind the preacher that all stories about Jesus are told for ecclesiastical and theological purposes. Not one of them is historically or journalistically inspired. We do not know those purposes—the evangelists are dead and all we have are their books—so we dare not presume to claim much certainty about their so-called authorial intentions. We can ask questions, though, about the impact their story-telling has on us as readers and why one way of telling a story might differ from another.

1. *God with us in history.* Matthew 1:1-17 stands as the prologue to whole Gospel that describes who Jesus is. And because what you say about Jesus generally says as much about you as it does about Jesus, the prologue also says something about what Matthew thinks the church is about. Matthew is concerned with history, especially God's history with the covenant people. The genealogy is selective—much as Luke's is (Luke 3:23-38)—and it is far more fruitful to consider what the various names suggest about the nature of God's faithfulness to Israel than to speculate about the historical awkwardness of the list. The three groups of ancestors reflect three moments that mark Israel's history—its zenith in the Davidic kingdom, its nadir in the Exile, and the arrival of the Messiah—and they suggest that the last moment is just as intentional and divinely ordained as the first were, although Jesus may not be recognizable to those who lack faith.

So also, the inclusion of women's names in the genealogy is a bit strange: It is altogether unclear what Tamar (Gen 38:24ff), Rahab (Joshua 2), Ruth (Ruth), Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:2ff), and Mary have in common. Are they non-Israelites? We have no indication Mary is a Gentile. Are they all women who have irregular sexual unions? Some have suggested the first four serve to explain Mary's reputation among non-Christians. Perhaps it is only that these women are unexpected: God is always using unexpected people to accomplish the divine purpose. Alternatively, Beverly Gaventa suggests the women are threats to good order and are themselves threatened by that order—just as Mary herself is both threatened and a threat in the first two chapters of Matthew.⁵

The genealogy thus prepares the reader to expect that the Bible will play an

important role in his story. Matthew's use of scripture is very distinctive. He frequently uses what are called formula quotations at 2:5; 2:15; 2:17; 2:23; 3:3; 4:14; 12:15; 13:14 (cf. 11:10). Each of them seems to be less a matter of predictive prophecy than a confirmation of who Jesus is by biblical witness. It is more that Jesus interprets scripture than the reverse, a way of saying that God is consistent. Note particularly the quotation at 2:23, "He will be called a Nazorean." No such sentence appears in the Bible, and it may be a conflation of several texts. That may be the reason that only here does Matthew say, "what had been spoken through the prophets [plural] might be fulfilled." The net effect of using scripture this way is to say that the God of Jesus is the God of Israel.

For all Matthew's Jewishness, though, he is pretty hard on non-Christian Jews. He changes Mark's "the synagogues" to "their synagogues" repeatedly (e.g., 10:17, cf. Mark 13:9), three times calls the Jewish leaders a "brood of vipers" (Matt 3:7; 12:34; 23:33), and castigates the Pharisees for their moral bankruptcy and religious hypocrisy (chap. 23). Remember that historically most Pharisees were no more hypocritical, immoral, or legalistic than most Christians were; Matthew's perspective is colored by his own experience. "Listen to what they say; do not do what they do," he says (23:3). Matthew does not dispute the authority of the Pharisees' office, but their particular discharge of that authority. The harshness of his remark about proselytism (23:15) suggests that there is competition for converts between those who do and those who do not "sit on Moses' seat," that is, who have authority to interpret Torah.

At Jesus' trial, Pilate is seemingly exonerated and the guilt for Jesus' death transferred to the Jewish people. In a chilling shift of vocabulary, Matthew stops speaking of "the crowds" and has "the whole people" invoke Jesus' blood on themselves and their children (27:25). This too appears to be a function of the competition between Matthew's synagogue and the synagogues of the non-Christian Pharisees who are repeatedly singled out for harsh criticism. Primarily, that criticism is aimed at the leadership rather than the people themselves, hordes of whom respond eagerly to Jesus and his ministry. Note particularly the series of stories in 21:23-22:14. Matthew's shaping of the challenge to Jesus' authority and the parables of the two sons, the wicked tenants, the marriage feast, and the wedding garment suggests that the Jewish leadership, rather than the whole people, have relinquished their rightful authority because they have rejected Jesus.

This may be the single greatest challenge in preaching from the First Gospel, its potential to incite virulent anti-Judaism.⁶ The preacher's challenge is greatest when dealing with the passion narrative, where historic Christian anti-Semitism has found much of its putative support.⁷ Matthew holds the Jewish leadership accountable for Jesus' death largely because he needs to interpret his community's distance from the Jewish mainstream. Although it is not until the second century with Barnabas and Justin Martyr that anyone calls the church the "new Israel," for Matthew the church is already somehow the "true Israel," led by Christian Jews like himself, scribes "trained for the kingdom of heaven" whose treasures include both "what is new and what is old" (13:52).

2. *God with us in the Law.* What is old, of course, is the Law of God. Protestant ministers sometimes assume a Lutheran stance—whether intentionally or unintentionally—when speaking of the Law in purely negative terms as that which convicts sinners and brings us to our knees before the Savior's grace. Matthew stands in a very

different corner of Christendom from Luther, and honest preaching from Matthew requires sympathy—or at least empathy—for his faith. For Jewish Christians like Matthew, God's Law is not the opposite of grace, but is itself a gift of grace, the covenant of life that redeems human experience in a fallen world of death. Matthew intensifies the place of the Law in Christian life rather than removing it. The antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount ("you have heard . . . but I say to you," 5:21-48) interpret what Jesus says in 5:17-20. There is no division here between so-called ethical and ceremonial laws, no distinction between experience before and after Christ. God's law is never abrogated. The phrase "until all is accomplished" in 5:18 speaks not of a time when God's Law will no longer stand, but of the day when God will finally restore the whole creation and all the earth will joyfully live as God intends.

The radical, antithetical form of these statements comes from Matthew himself, since the third saying on divorce, which he shares with Mark, and the fifth and sixth on retaliation and love of enemies, which are also in Luke, are not antithetical elsewhere and they stand in different literary contexts. How curious that the *form* of these sayings in Matthew is discontinuous while their *content* is fundamentally continuous with the Law of God as traditionally understood by Jews of the day. In what context do you assert continuity by means of discontinuity? In situations of conflict and competition. Matthew's church has separated from other Jews whom it considers insufficiently faithful to the Law of Moses. The Jews who believe in Jesus must be more observant than the scribes and Pharisees precisely because they follow one who has come to fulfill the Law (5:20). Note elsewhere that Matthew's Jesus does not "declare all foods clean" as Mark's does (Mark 7:19; cf. Matt 15:11), and that Matthew assumes Christians keep the Sabbath rigorously (24:20).

What these Christian Jews believe about God's Law is not formally different from what their neighbors believe. The wisdom and glory and holiness of God is granted to God's people—and through them to the whole world—in Torah. And like all other Jews of the day (or today) they interpret Torah in various ways. What Jesus teaches in Matthew, his distinctive interpretation of the Law, is twice summarized in a way that is itself quite traditional: love of God and love of neighbor (5:43; 19:19). This is a classic way of reading the Decalogue whose first table concerns one's obligations to God and whose second table attends to human life in community. Matthew's Jesus interprets Moses in a rigorous, radically loving, and intensely sacrificial way. Throughout the Gospel, to "do the Father's will," to "follow Jesus," and to "bear fruit" are all synonyms for life dedicated to the Law of God as it is interpreted by Jesus of Nazareth.

3. *God with us in church life.* It is something of a commonplace to observe that Matthew is the only evangelist to use the word "church" (15:18; 18:17), but we do well to remember that all the Gospels are addressed to Christian congregations and ecclesiastical life. Matthew does have a special concern for community life, though. Chapter 18, for example, is addressed specifically to congregational life and order. It is a composite of Mark, Q, and Matthew's own source, and is heavily edited. There is recurrent concern for the "little ones" and the "least" throughout Gospel as well as here. These are not children in the Victorian sense of those who are morally pure or trusting or untouched by the cares of the world. Children in antiquity are emblems of powerlessness and marginality. They are humble not because they graciously prescind from self-promotion but because they have no status. Matthew's Jesus says

that the humility of a child is not simply a virtue to be pursued but the *sine qua non* of the kingdom. Church discipline is here handled quite similarly to 1 Corinthians 5: sin in the community is not only a matter of individual misbehavior but of the community's purity, its capacity to stand holy before a holy God (cf. also 5:48). The parable of the unforgiving servant sets all of it in context, since God's holiness is itself merciful.

Matthew's is a mixed church. Jews and Gentiles together make for challenging community life, as the parable of the workers in the vineyard illustrates (20:1-16). But there are also apparently questions about good and bad (cf. the parables of the wheat and weeds, 13:24-30, and the dragnet, 13:47-50, both unique to Matthew). Similarly, the parable of the wedding garment (22:11-14) makes clear that, although one's ethnic identity does not guarantee one a place in the kingdom, one is required to respond faithfully (that is, to be "worthy," 22:8). In this regard, Matthew's Gospel provides the clearest alternative in the canon to the position we find in the Pauline letters.

The leadership of Matthew's church is to be neither like the Pharisees (23:8-12), nor like the Gentiles (20:25-28), even though it carries out many of the same functions as Pharisees (i.e., to sit on Moses' seat and interpret the Law). Jesus is the real rabbi and those who teach must teach in his name and by his authority (cf. 28:18). Peter's confession (16:13-20) is transformed from a picture of partial insight and confusion (Mark 8:27-30) into a designation of him as *primus inter pares*. Peter is given same power to bind and loose here that the community is later given in Matt 18:18-20.

4. *God with us in mission*. Jesus sends The Twelve out to do what he has been doing all along: to cast out demons, heal, and preach (10:1). The church's mission is therefore Jesus' mission. Chapter 10 again is a composite, rearranging tradition from Mark and Q. Jesus' prediction of persecution (10:16-33) stands in Mark's discourse about the end times (Mark 13:9-13), but is a description of the church's on-going life in Matthew. Jesus' ministry causes division; so also will the disciples' ministry (Matt 10:34-39). Worthiness (10:11) is a matter of faithfulness to Jesus and preparedness for mission, not necessarily ethical or moral worth (cf. the wedding garment). Jesus restricts the disciples to a Jewish mission (10:5) during his own ministry, but 10:18 and 28:19 obviously already envision the church's move beyond Israel, as do Jesus' own encounters with the centurion of Capernaum and the Canaanite woman (8:5-13; 15:24), both of whom are praised for faith that is greater than that even in Israel.

In general, the picture of the disciples is cleaned up enormously in Matthew. They are not nearly so lacking in understanding as they are in Mark, they do not compete for position (their mother asks for prominence on behalf of James and John at 20:20), and the burning question of Jesus' identity in Mark fades behind the greater question of discipleship. For Mark, the question is "Who is Jesus and what do you say about him?" For Matthew, Jesus' identity is known from the start. Even foreign astrologers recognize him as God's messiah (2:1-12). The real question is "Will you follow Jesus?"

Matt 14:22-33 is a story Matthew gets from Mark but changes in important ways. The disciples are just as terrified when Jesus walks to them on the water, and they mistake him for a ghost or apparition, but in Matthew Peter recognizes that it is Jesus. "Lord, if it is you [and he knows it is, or he would not have called him "Lord"]", call me to come to you on the water" (14:28). Jesus says, "Come," but Peter gets only partially across the stormy water when he begins to sink. Again, he addresses Jesus as Lord and pleads "save me" (14:30). Jesus addresses Peter as a "little-faith one" and

asks, “why did you doubt?” Jesus then calms the storm, as he does in Mark, but instead of being astounded and mystified, Matthew’s disciples worship Jesus, saying “Truly you are the Son of God” (14:33), a confession of faith no human being makes in Mark until the centurion at the cross sees Jesus die (Mark 15:39).

The question “why did you doubt?” in Matt 14:31 is an unfortunate translation, since it conjures up for moderns an intellectual or a psychological failing, an inadequate assent to a truth claim. The root of the verb “to doubt,” however, is in the verb “to stand,” not “to believe” or “to think” or “to have an opinion.” It is behavioral rather than intellectual. It might better be translated “hesitate” or “waver” or “sit on the fence.” The same verb is used again nowhere in the New Testament except at Matt 28:17, where the Eleven follow the risen Jesus to a mountaintop in Galilee and worship him, although some doubt. In neither of these two stories does anyone fail to understand who Jesus is or what he requires of them. He is the Lord, the risen Christ to whom all authority has been given by God (28:18). They worship but some hesitate when he asks them to do absurd things like walk on water or evangelize the whole world. Jesus calls Peter to walk on the water not because Peter can, but because Jesus can. He calls the disciples to make disciples of the whole world not because they are good preachers or teachers or healers, but because all authority has been given to Jesus. The mission remains his even as he gives it to his church, because he promises to be with them forever (28:20).

Notes

¹ (New York: Paulist, 1979).

² *Matthew* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1980).

³ (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

⁴ *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993).

⁵ *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1995). Further on the infancy narrative, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1993).

⁶ D. R. A. Hare points out that “anti-Semitism” is an inappropriate characterization of Matthew’s attitude, since he is himself a Jew. Hare places Matthew in the context of prophetic (both biblical and non-biblical) Jewish criticisms of Judaism by Jews rather than non-Jewish polemic against Jews (*The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel according to St. Matthew* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967]).

⁷ See my “Jews and Christians in the New Testament: Matthew, John, and Paul,” *Reformed Review* 42.2 (1988) 113-128 for reflection on the problem.