

Home Retreat 2020 Nov Matthew

How did Matthew's Gospel come to be written? The first gospel to be written down was surely Mark. I picture a group of Christians coming up to Matthew and saying, 'You are a splendid teacher. Mark's gospel is too concise and leaves out plenty of the tradition of Jesus, particularly of the book of the Sayings of Jesus, his moral instructions and the parable-stories he told.' Matthew shares much of this extra material with Luke, in a way that is possible only if the two of them had a written or memorized source which they shared. In the Church the gospel of Matthew has always been a favourite – before the Vatican II reforms it was ubiquitous, partly because of its neatly balanced lessons (children play-acting in the squares) and delightful animal symbolism (fish and snake, sheep and wolves).

Matthew must have been a Jew, for he leaves out many of the explanations of Jewish customs which Mark had put in for his readers, such as the custom of washing up to the elbow on their return from the market. He is also careful to show that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Jewish hopes. The whole of chapter one is devoted to the adoption of Jesus into the House of David by Joseph naming the child. We do not know anything about Mary's ancestry, whereas Joseph was of the House of David, and is instructed by the angel to adopt Jesus, when he himself thinks that he should not mix in when she becomes pregnant by the Holy Spirit. So Jesus is addressed as 'Son of David' only once in Mark (by Bartimaeus of Jericho), but several times in Matthew. He is also shown to be a second Moses. Like Moses he looks out over the Holy Land from Mount Nebo as did Moses before his death – only Moses saw only the territories of the Holy Land, whereas Satan offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their glory – if only Jesus will worship him. Jesus twice takes his seat on the unnamed holy mountain to give his new Law, just like Moses in Sinai, once for the Sermon on the Mount (beginning with the eight Beatitudes like the ten commandments, and immediately going on to quote and adjust some laws of Moses: 'you have heard it said...but I say to you...'). In the final scene of the gospel also he goes up the high mountain in Galilee to send out his apostles to make disciples of all nations.

Throughout the gospel fourteen times Matthew uses a formula to stress that Jesus is fulfilling the scripture. He even changes the scripture to achieve this, for on the cross Jesus is offered wine mixed with (poisonous) gall too fulfil the Psalm, as the Jewish leaders make fools of themselves by ironically parroting the Book of Wisdom on the wicked mocking the wise. At the beginning the rabbinical dispute between Jesus and Satan is a model of textual argument, and at the end the story of the death of Judas is wholly narrated in terms of biblical precedents. Then Pilate (only in Matthew) washes his hands in a futile Jewish gesture of shifting the blame. Matthew's use of parables is typically Jewish too – rabbis do a lot of teaching by means of story-telling – especially in the frequent opposition of 'goodies' and 'baddies' (the seeds sown by the Sower, houses built on rock or sand, broad or narrow paths, sheep and goats to left and right). The process of reconciling quarrels in three stages (18.15-20) appears identically in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

From the viewpoint of teaching perhaps two points deserve special attention, the figure of Christ and the importance of the community. While in Mark the gradual discovery of the identity of Jesus is an unrolling mystery throughout the gospel, and it is not until Jesus has died that any human being acknowledges him as 'son of God', in Matthew this identity cannot be hidden. Already at the birth of Jesus he is acknowledged by the cosmos (the star) and by the wisdom of the East (the magi), the land of all mysterious knowledge. The Wise Men do not merely reverence the baby, they 'worship' him, a word which is used properly only of the worship due to God. From then onwards, time and again the appellation in Mark of 'Teacher!' is changed into 'Lord!', the word used to translate into Greek the sacred, unpronounceable name of God. It is the mark of the disciple to address Jesus so, enabling

Judas to display his own betrayal by addressing Jesus as 'rabbi' – to Judas he is no longer 'Lord'. In Mark's account of Jesus walking on the water the disciples are completely dumbfounded, whereas in Matthew they hail him as son of God. The Markan motif of the gradual discovery by the slow-witted disciples that Jesus is Messiah has disappeared, so that at Caesarea Philippi he is hailed not merely as Messiah but again as 'son of God'. Instead of Jesus being crowded by well-wishers we see him in an awesome confrontation with a single person, first Simon's sick mother-in-law and next the woman with a haemorrhage; it is as though they are already brought face-to-face with the Risen Lord.

After the crucifixion this homage is intensified. In Mark the emptiness of the tomb is merely explained by a young man in celestial white; in Matthew apocalyptic signs proliferate, two earthquakes, the raising of the sacred dead and a pair of angels. Finally on the holy mountain the risen Christ announces that he transcends even the Danielic Son of Man: the Son of Man received all authority on earth, but the Risen Christ has been granted all authority *in heaven* and on earth.

This scene provides an opportunity to move to the final point of comment, Matthew's awareness that Christ is always with his Church. This is declared three times, at beginning middle and end of the gospel. In the final scene, building on the fullest possible authority, the Risen Christ declares that he will be with his Church till the end of time. The same is portended by the name 'Emmanuel' given at the beginning, for it means 'God is with us', and again in the discourse (chapter 18) on interrelationships within the community, 'Where two or three are gathered together there am I in the midst of them'. In addition to this, or perhaps in fulfilment of it, there are subtle touches throughout the gospel which show the same preoccupation. When Jesus forgives the paralytic's sins, the crowd is not merely astonished but glorifies God for giving such power not to the Son of man but to humans: the power of forgiveness may be exercised by humans, not merely by Christ. Similarly at the feeding of the multitude Jesus does not distribute the bread but gives it to the disciples and they distribute it. It is as though the sacraments of reconciliation and eucharist had already been instituted.

A couple of little touches in the story of Jesus walking on the water are also significant. In Mark Jesus 'has it in mind to pass them by'. No, in Matthew 14 he has no such intention, and he comes not to the disciples but to the boat; it is the boat, not the disciples, that is hard pressed by the waves, and the boat stands for the ship of the Church. The point may be further reinforced in that Peter's faith is tested and confirmed, and it is at this moment that the disciples first acknowledge Jesus as Son of God.

A final note that Matthew is very aware of the Church and the link both ways between Jesus and the Church is that of the five teaching discourses in Matthew two are concerned mainly with the Church and the disciples, chapter 10 about how disciples should carry out their mission, and chapter 18 about how the disciples should behave to one another in community. Matthew is very clearly the gospel of the church, bent on showing how disciples of Jesus are to carry out his mission to the world.