

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

for Trinity 1 (14 June)

Matthew 9:35 - 10:8

And so we enter the Church's "Summer-Time" season, the Sundays After Trinity, which will now take us through to the autumn and its promise of Christmas! I doubt if you wanted *that* word in a reflection at the beginning of June. Mind you, one look out of the window as I write this, and it could be nearly Christmas: cold, wet, grey, dreary. Definitely not 'June' or summer.

During this "Summer-Time", our main scriptural emphasis will now focus upon the Gospel of Matthew, interspersed as it will be by Romans (primarily) and other linked readings. Leaning towards the words of the gospel will, inevitably, take us back in time, back to the ministry of Jesus as He worked and lived and taught and shared His life with all who gathered around Him. We may know what was to befall Him – after all, we have just brought the season of Easter to a close with Pentecost – but what this summer programme of readings will do is help to strengthen our realisation of exactly who Jesus of Nazareth truly was, and what profound impact His existence had on those around and we who continue to share such.

And we will get a somewhat distinct image of a character who was, at heart, a Jew; Matthew's version of events is heavily swayed towards the Judaistic roots of Jesus' life; and his bias will continually lead us to imagine quite a palpable lack of interest in anything non-Jewish. We will, though, hopefully see a slow but determined transformation as time and script goes by, so that when we reach the punchline of the writings in chapter twenty-eight (as reflected upon on Trinity Sunday – see archive for text), we will gauge a much more universal appeal. The final revelation of Christ providing the gospel with a global motif. For now, though, a journey through Judaism's influence over the authorship.

So, why did Matthew feel the need to take this stance? No one really knows (but plenty will have an opinion – pick up any commentary to find out), so here is mine to add to the 'pot'! We know that Matthew's writings were based upon Mark's, but were given much embellishment and, as mentioned, a Jewish slant. It seems important to Matthew to do this. He takes Mark's account – an account which many scholars consider factually accurate and informative – and adds dramatic licence and scale; where overlap occurs, you can guarantee Matthew will have it with 'bells on'! He also adjusts the sequence of events and sometimes the people involved, but never changes the theology. One important fact to note of all the gospels is that, lying at their core, is the same one person, with the same one status, and very definitely with the same one message. In Matthew, though, he wants us to see Jesus as part of the established world. He was not an itinerant from foreign parts – He was 'one of us'. He had a right and status within Jewish life. Matthew's authorship wanted to appeal to the intellectual audience of Judaistic order.

Taking today's rather short extract from chapters nine and ten, what impression do we get? The first is that this Jesus of Nazareth was a great teacher. He was a crowd-puller. He garnered attention. He went throughout the region. He was popular in the synagogues. He made full use of opportunity. We expect this, given whom we consider Him to be, but did they? The people must have

been fascinated. What He said must have drawn them. Who He was no doubt intrigued them. Human beings are naturally curious, but it usually has to be something or someone quite moving or dynamic for it to draw vast crowds. The emotion has to be strong, the cause has to be relevant, the reason for gathering has to be worthwhile. Jesus clearly knew how to work an audience, so His message had to be worth hearing.

Matthew does not tell us what the "good news" might be, at least not in this extract, but we assume it invokes the greatness of the God we all believe in, and no doubt the audience did, too. But many preachers existed at this time, the synagogues were constantly full of them (as our churches continue to be!), what makes this one so different? Our faith tells us the answer because of what we believe in all these years later – the people of the day were being drawn in by its stark reality. Previous to this extract, the teachings on the mount had occurred – word had spread, it was contagious, the curiosity and hope in individual lives was no doubt kindled. Could He be the promise enshrined within their Hebrew inheritance? Here was a message worth hearing.

A message that is given an edge by Matthew, for the journeying around the teaching programme also involved healing. Not just the occasional one, here and there, for Matthew says all: every disease and every sickness was cured, wiping away all known ailments if we read it quite literally. How could anyone dislike Jesus' entry into their village if, as a result, all will be well thereafter? How could anyone have turned against Him on that fateful Friday given His track record? One of the recurring challenges for any who believe in the Son of God is realising how complex it is to rationalise the inconsistency of thought from these first-century archives. And where was the almighty power of God in all this? Artistic licence to one side, why did history appear to get so muddled? And where has that healing power gone now? Later scriptural text claims it was bestowed upon the early followers – where is it now? Our ever-advancing secular world has reduced the Christian faith to a 'minority sport' in so many parts of the globe – why has this Matthean version of Jesus seemingly evaporated?

We perhaps get a hint in today's text. Even in these first-century times, the people looked harassed we are told. Helpless, in fact. Rudderless. Worn out. By what? We have no idea from the text, but Matthew believes they are – and he hints that the work of encouraging such people to believe in Jesus and his ministry is going to be hard for the disciples. They may not succeed. They will have to 'push water uphill'. There are not enough of them, even from 'Day One'. There are not enough of us today – our "empty" church building reminds us of that almost every Sunday.

But, go out. Do the best you can. Try your hardest. Jesus sends His friends out with all encouragement. Jesus sends us out with the same. Be the people you are. Be my friends. Be faithful. Stick to your 'guns'. And proclaim! Proclaim the good news – you decide what that is! "I am the Good News" – we are it, too. Bring God alive by simply being – being people who love the idea, who respond to the revelation, who enjoy the teaching, who aim to follow the directions, who work together to be the 'Body of Hope' that Matthew is alluding to, and that we want to be part of. And gently ignore Matthew's nationalistic restrictions. We are all in this together – so enjoy!

FOOTNOTE:

When referring to any gospel's authorship, we know very little of the sources. Named titles, as we know them, almost certainly were generic, and most likely referred to academic schools of thought who recorded the stories as understood by their particular era; bear in mind that the dating of the four gospels ranges from around 60/70AD (Mark) to the turn of the second-century (John). It is extremely unlikely that four individual people sat down to write the four gospel books.

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