



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND
Diocese of St Edmundsbury
and Ipswich

Living Faith in Suffolk



Living Matthew

Images

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Living Matthew is one of the Living Faith in Suffolk resources produced by the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich and available on www.cofesuffolk.org

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Introduction

Living Matthew is a Living Faith in Suffolk course intended to enable exploration of some of the key themes in Matthew's Gospel.

The following themes are covered:

- Blessing (page 4)
- Praying (page 7)
- Story-telling (page 10)
- Modelling (page 13)

Each session is complete in itself and so the course can be followed in any order. The material can be used by individuals or by groups; if you are using it in a group setting then please see the information below.

For facilitators

- The material provided here should be used flexibly to suit the needs of your group. The central element of each session is the Bible reading with the related questions underneath, enabling people to reflect on the passage and make decisions about its application. The additional material in boxes can be used as much or as little as is appropriate to your setting. It may provide useful background information for you as facilitator or further reading for those who wish to go deeper after each session. Some or all of it could be used to inform the discussion of the central questions or as additional discussion points. The important thing to remember is that there is no need to try to cover everything.
- The session opens by reading the Bible passage given. When meeting as a group there are a number of different ways of reading a Bible passage:
 - read it more than once, from different versions of the Bible as used by different members of the group
 - allow everyone in the group to take a turn at reading, each reading just one sentence before the next person takes over
 - read slowly and meditatively
 - read imaginatively; that is, allowing people to enter into the story in their imagination, to picture themselves present at the scene (either as themselves or by identifying with a character)
 - read the passage and then allow a time of silence during which people can reflect, before reading the passage for a second time.

Session 1

Blessing

Read: Matthew 5:1-12

- As you read this passage, what do you notice? What stands out for you? What questions arise?
- What might be meant by each of the characteristics mentioned by Jesus? – how would you understand being 'poor in spirit', 'merciful' etc? You might like to try rewriting the Beatitudes in a way that explains each characteristic. How might someone's life be shaped by each of these?
- What difference does it make to know that, for each of these groups of people, there is a promise of future blessing? Why might Jesus have felt it necessary to give this teaching? How could it change people's understanding of their circumstances?
- What might this teaching have to say to you about the way you respond to each type of person listed here, and also about the kind of person you are called to be?

BACKGROUND

Matthew chapters 5-7 form the 'Sermon on the Mount', the first of five major teaching sections in Matthew's Gospel (the others are chapters 10, 13, 18 and 24-25). Matthew's Gospel is keen to make links between Jesus and the Old Testament; here, like Moses bringing the law and commandments down from the mountain (Exodus 24:12-18), Jesus' chosen place for delivering his teaching is the mountainside.

The theme of the Sermon on the Mount is discipleship: how to live in the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew's terminology for God's Kingdom). The verses in today's reading are known as the 'Beatitudes' which means 'blessings' or 'blessed'. These blessings are eschatological – that is, they are blessings which will occur in the 'end times' when Jesus returns. People who have these characteristics are given hope for a future blessing.

- What is the value of eschatological promises?

"BLESSED ARE..."

To say 'blessed are you' expresses the opposite of 'woe to you' (see Matthew 11:21). Blessings and woes are judgements on, or consequences of, certain behaviours and attitudes. To be 'blessed', 'happy' or 'fortunate' is to have joy in the knowledge of a good future.

- The word 'bless' or 'blessed' is quite commonly used now in some situations (e.g. to say 'Bless you' when someone sneezes): how does the current use differ in meaning from the biblical understanding of blessing?

FOR FURTHER READING: MATTHEW 26:26-29

This passage gives another example of eschatological hope. The words used by Jesus carry great significance. He explains the importance of his forthcoming death – enabling forgiveness and a shared future. The language Jesus uses connects him with the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53:12, and with the covenant in Exodus 24:8. Jesus fulfils what has gone before, in the Old Testament, and looks forward to the future blessing in God's Kingdom.

- Why might it be important to understand Jesus in the light of what has gone before and of the future?

MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

As with the other gospels there is some debate about the origins of Matthew's Gospel, but it seems likely that it was written around 90AD in Syria, where Antioch had a large Jewish population. It is likely to have been written for a Jewish audience, possibly once Jewish Christians had been excluded from the synagogue: this would explain the concern to demonstrate the role of the Old Testament, Jesus as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies, and the critique of the Pharisees and synagogues. The author is likely to have been a Jewish Christian, and the book was attributed to Matthew early in the second century, soon after it was written. Much of the content of the book is also found in the other gospels (a large part of Mark's Gospel is also found in Matthew, along with some parts of Luke's Gospel).

- Why is it useful to have some understanding of the context in which the Gospel was written, and of its intended audience?

RIGHTEOUSNESS

Righteousness is a key theme in Matthew's Gospel, contrasting Jesus' righteousness with the way many of the religious leaders understood the Old Testament teachings (for example, 'You have heard that it was said...but I say to you...' Matthew 5:21-22). It reflects the idea of being in right relationship with God, with the behaviour that entails. It is a characteristic of being holy, being distinct from the rest of the world, imitating God: this is what discipleship involves. The actions and attitudes praised in the Beatitudes and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount are demonstrated in Jesus' own life.

- How do you understand the idea of holiness? What could help you and your church community to grow in holiness?

Session 2

Praying

Read: Matthew 6:9-13

- As you read this passage, what do you notice? What stands out for you? What questions arise?
 - This prayer is often known as the 'Lord's Prayer', the Paternoster or the 'Our Father'. What are your experiences of using the Lord's Prayer (in church, school, personal prayers...)?
 - The prayer is very clear and to the point. What beliefs, hopes and requests are being expressed here? How do these compare to the ideas expressed in your own prayers, both personally and in church?
 - What might you take away from this prayer as a challenge to the nature and/or content of your own prayer life, individually and as a church?

BACKGROUND

This passage is placed in the centre of the Sermon on the Mount. It is surrounded by teaching which contrasts what is seen as accepted practice to Kingdom practice, and which encourages people to go beyond following the law to the letter and instead to live out the Kingdom principles which underpin the law ('You have heard that it was said...but I say to you...' Matthew 5:21-22).

When it comes to prayer Jesus stresses the importance of motive: prayer is not something to be engaged in as a public display, or with lots of empty words. Rather, it is to be done simply, open-heartedly, as Jesus demonstrates.

- To what extent was Jesus teaching his disciples a specific prayer to use, or modelling the simplicity of prayer that he was advocating?

PRAYER IN THE BIBLE

The Bible is full of prayer, yet it remains something that many Christians struggle with. Prayer can be personal (as when Jesus went away by himself to pray e.g. Matthew 14:23) and also communal, as in the Temple prayers. It can be emotional (for example weeping – see Ezra 10:1). It can involve the whole body (for example 'lifting up holy hands' in prayer – see 1 Timothy 2:8; prostrating oneself in prayer – see Matthew 2:39; dancing in prayer – see 2 Samuel 6:14). It can involve dialogue with God (for example Genesis 18:16-33). It can involve hearing from God (for example Jeremiah 1:4, Ezekiel 21:8, 1 Kings 17:2). It doesn't have to be carefully thought out: God's Spirit will pray in us when we don't know what to pray – see Romans 8:26-27.

- How does your understanding of prayer compare to the examples given here? Which of these ways of praying have you experienced? Which might be helpful to try?

DIVINE COMMUNICATION

In Matthew's Gospel (and elsewhere) God communicates on occasion via angels and dreams – see Matthew 1:20-24, 2:13-14, 28:1-8. Angels appear throughout the Bible as messengers, protectors, ministering to believers and carrying out God's commands.

- How open are you to the possibility of God communicating with you via angels and/or dreams?

WAYS OF PRAYING

'Pray as you can, not as you can't'. There are many ways of praying: meditation, contemplation, intercession, silent prayer, active prayer, praying through music / art / icons / nature, using the words of others (e.g. the Jesus Prayer), the daily office, prayer apps... You will find more information about some of these in the Living Faith in Suffolk courses 'Living Prayer 2' and 'Living the Gifts of Love' (available at www.cofesuffolk.org/livingfaith). Some online resources, giving space for prayer and reflection, can be found at www.wordlive.org, www.pray-as-you-go.org, www.sacredspace.ie and the 'Daily Prayer App' from the Church of England website.

- 'Pray as you can, not as you can't'. How have you found yourself able to pray? Set yourself a goal this week to investigate some of these resources and ways of praying.

FOR FURTHER READING: MATTHEW 26:36-46

This passage demonstrates the points that Jesus was making earlier: this prayer is private, simple and open-hearted. 'Private' does not have to mean 'solitary': in this case, three of his disciples accompany him and are asked to 'Watch and pray' with him (vv.38 and 41). In this prayer we learn about surrender. We also see a reminder that discipleship is not individualistic but rather involves being alongside each other, in community.

- What does this prayer teach us about the nature of our relationship with God, as modelled by Jesus?

Session 3

Story-telling

Read: Matthew 20:1-16

- As you read this passage, what do you notice? What stands out for you? What questions arise?
- What do you learn from this parable about what the Kingdom of Heaven is like?
- What do you learn about each of the labourers from their reactions when receiving their pay? Which of the labourers in this parable do you most relate to?
- What does this parable have to say to you, both individually and as a church, about your perceptions of each other and of the Kingdom?

BACKGROUND

Jesus has been talking to his disciples (in the preceding chapter) about the way in which Kingdom values turn upside-down the way in which the world usually works, and this parable is an example of this. The labourers who were hired last may have been left till last because they were not really worth hiring, or because they were lazy and hadn't come forward for hiring until late in the day. To be willing to pay them the same as those who had been working all day was generous in the extreme – but not how the world usually works.

- The word used for this kind of generosity is 'grace'. How would you explain what 'grace' means?

THE 'BIG STORY'

Matthew writes his Gospel in the context of the 'Big Story' of God's dealings with humankind. He begins by tracing Jesus' genealogy back to Abraham, the original recipient of God's covenant with God's people (Matthew 1:1-17); and ends with Jesus' promise to be with his people 'to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20).

For many of Jesus' hearers it was important to be able to understand how the Kingdom being taught and demonstrated by Jesus related to the faith in which they had grown up. Matthew therefore makes clear his view that the Old Testament points to Jesus and that Jesus fulfils the prophecies of the Old Testament (see, for example, Matthew 1:22-23, 2:15, 2:17-18; 2:23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4-5; 27:9-10).

The Gospel also shows Jesus as re-enacting parts of the Old Testament – the Old Testament being a 'type' that anticipates Jesus. So in Matthew 2:15 and 4:1-11 Jesus is compared to the people of Israel coming out of Egypt and being tempted in the wilderness (see the story of the Exodus). He is likened to the great King David (Matthew 12:3-4 and 1 Samuel 21:1-6), to the 'dying and rising' Jonah (Matthew 12:40-41 and Jonah chapters 1-2) and to the wise Solomon (Matthew 12:42).

- Why might it be important to understand these links between Jesus and the Old Testament?

READING JESUS' PARABLES

Much of Jesus' teaching was delivered in parables – stories intended to produce a response in the hearers by speaking to them in ways they would understand, and challenging them. Sometimes the meaning of the parables is obvious; on other occasions they are intriguing, even mystifying, and they invite further reflection. Some parables would have shocked their original hearers.

- Why are stories such a useful teaching technique?
- Stories make sense in their particular context but sometimes lose some of their meaning when read in a different context (such as at a different point in history). How could these two parables be 'rewritten' for today?

TEACHING IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

Much of this Gospel consists of Jesus' teachings. It comes in five main blocks:

- chapters 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount, on how to live in the Kingdom
 - chapter 10, on mission
 - chapter 13, parables about the Kingdom
 - chapter 18, about life in the Church
 - chapters 24-25, about the future
- Why might Matthew have been so concerned to pass on such a significant amount of Jesus' teachings?

FOR FURTHER READING: MATTHEW 25:1-13

This is another parable about the Kingdom. It seems quite harsh. However, in comparison to the parable of the labourers in the vineyard: instead of focusing on God's generosity, it reflects on the need for wisdom in his followers. In this case wisdom is demonstrated by being prepared: torchlight processions were a part of some weddings, with the procession stopping in several places en route to the destination and therefore much opportunity for delay. In keeping watch for the bridegroom it was necessary to be ready for him to come at any time. To not be ready would mean missing out.

- When might we find ourselves missing out on encountering Jesus? How can we make sure that we are always ready for such encounters?

Session 4

Modelling

Read: Matthew 15:21-28

- As you read this passage, what do you notice? What stands out for you? What questions arise?
- As non-Jews we are not part of the 'house of Israel'; how does this knowledge shape your understanding of this story?
 - How would you describe the faith demonstrated by the Canaanite woman? What can be learnt from this exchange about relationship with God?
- What might this parable have to say to you about the way you (individually and as a church) approach mission? What changes might you need to make to your approach?

BACKGROUND

Not all of Jesus' teaching was in sayings and stories; he also modelled what it means to live in the Kingdom. As the people with whom God's covenant was made (the people with whom God promised a special relationship), Jesus came to bring new life to the people of Israel – and then on to the rest of the world. As a Canaanite, this woman was not one of those to whom Jesus had been ministering. However, Jesus responds to her faith and her understanding that the new life is for all. He responds, as he has done to so many others who have come to him, by meeting the request for healing.

- To what extent do we still understand Israel to be God's chosen people?

THE KINGDOM

The Kingdom is a central theme in Matthew's Gospel: what it is, how to live in it, how to prepare for its future... John the Baptist announces its coming (Matthew 3:2); Jesus preaches, teaches and models it; and Matthew is keen to show that although full realisation of the Kingdom is eschatological (in the future, at the end time – see Matthew 24:30), yet Jesus has brought it into the present so that it can be glimpsed now (Matthew 11:2-5). As part of this Matthew demonstrates Jesus' authority: in teaching, in forgiving sins (Matthew 9:2-8), in healing, in controlling nature (Matthew 8:23-27), as being Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8) and as future judge (Matthew 19:28).

- In what ways do we see glimpses of the Kingdom?
- How might Matthew's understanding of Jesus' authority make a difference to the way we live as part of the Kingdom?

BEING DISCIPLES

Various words are used to help explain what it means to be a disciple, including 'follower', 'learner' and 'apprentice'.

- Which of these words most closely fits our understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus?

The important thing to note about all of these words is that they are active rather than passive: they involve being and doing. The disciples learnt by staying close to Jesus, being changed as their relationship with him grew and developed and they took on his characteristics and priorities. Reading through the book of Acts shows how this transformation continued in the disciples after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension.

- In what ways are we being changed as our relationship with Jesus grows and develops?

FOR FURTHER READING: MATTHEW 8:5-13

Most of Jesus' healing miracles happened directly, in person, but here it happens at a distance. The centurion shows great understanding of Jesus' power. Life in the Kingdom isn't just about following teachings; it's about being made whole. Once again Jesus is demonstrating that the Kingdom is for all, not only God's chosen: the centurion was one of the Roman army officials who were ruling over this occupied territory.

- Why might Jesus have found that sometimes people who were not part of Israel were more willing to believe in him than those to whom he had come?

FOR FURTHER READING: MATTHEW 28:16-20

The 'great commission', at the end of Matthew's Gospel, is a command to action – to do what Jesus has been modelling throughout his ministry: make disciples; baptise them; teach them. The disciples have spent three years walking with Jesus, learning how to live in the Kingdom, hearing his teachings and following his example; now they are to pass that on so that others learn from them how to live in the Kingdom, hear his teachings and follow his example. That 'passing on' has now reached us, and we too have the same commission, to model to others how to live in the Kingdom, hear his teachings and follow his example.

- What might help us to do this more effectively?