

TREASURES NEW AND OLD

St Michael's, Cornhill, Sunday Sept 21st 2014, Feast of St Matthew

It was back in the mid nineteen eighties and all were gathered to install a new residentiary canon at the cathedral in Portsmouth. He would also be Director of Education and was known to be someone of clear views, a sharp mind and a key understanding of canon law. The then Provost (we'd now call him Dean) hit on a marvellous idea for his sermon. As there were four canons now he'd describe them using the four beasts from the Apocalypse, which in the early church were identified with the four evangelists, the writers of the gospels.

So he began, the Social Responsibility Officer was depicted as *Luke*, the muesli-eating *ox*, the canon pastor became *John*, the *eagle*, gently (here the image became rather muddled!) swooping down upon those within his care; I, then the Director of Ordinands and Canon Treasurer, was *Mark*, the *lion*, waiting to pounce and Michael, the new man in charge of education became the *man*, *Matthew*, the legalistic scribe. As you can imagine this did not endear the Dean, at this moment, to his colleagues: swooping and pouncing are not attractive qualities, and to be described as a muesli-eating ox is hardly complimentary. But finally, the new canon, Michael, was certainly not best pleased to be described as a legalistic scribe!

Taken out of this context, however, there is merit in seeing quite different characters behind the gospel writers. For each gospel has a very distinct flavour and sometimes they clearly disagree with each other. Each writer speaks out of his own world, and their worlds were different. John's gospel is very different from the first three – far more discursive with a subtle blend of Hebrew and Greek thought. Its splendid prologue sets the scene, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.'

But what of the first three, and then more specifically, Matthew whose writer we celebrate today? Just a little background may help. The vast majority of scholars today are clear that Mark, the shortest and swiftest moving gospel came first. Matthew and Luke used Mark for their basic framework and then added more material, some of which is the same in their two gospels, and some different. They may have had a common source alongside Mark or Matthew may have come first after Mark and then Luke last of all, each using material from his predecessors. Luke has a rather pompous start which implies he knew of other gospels. He writes in his first three verses to Theophilus (which simply means lover of God – so perhaps that's all of us) that others have written gospels before but that is now setting out an orderly account – the last word in gospel writing!

Mark, Matthew and Luke all have their own stamp, but what is the stamp of Matthew? Well, the answer to that takes us back to my colleague's sermon all those years ago in Portsmouth. For in talking of Matthew as the legalistic scribe, he is right in hinting at Matthew's Jewish scribal nature. Just a few hints will show what I mean. First of all, chapters five to seven set out the famous *Sermon on the Mount* which includes lots of teaching: Matthew sets out to show how Jesus is a new Moses. Here is a new set of laws, proclaimed from the mountain, rather like the commandments. Jesus takes the law and makes it more radical still.

So, Matthew is keen to provide some *fences* which encircle the Christian community. At one point in Matthew, Jesus says: 'He who is not for us is against us.' It feels *exclusive*, it's about keeping others out. In Mark's account (and Luke takes this saying over), we hear almost the reverse: 'He

who is not against us is *on our side.*' That is ultimately *inclusive.* Maybe Jesus said both, but Matthew's community needed to be sharp in its boundaries.

Or there's the story of Jesus crossing a cornfield on the Sabbath with his disciples. In Mark's account they eat the ears of corn for no apparent reason. This scandalises the Jewish scribes, for picking ears of corn is 'working on the Sabbath.' Matthew includes the story but in a different form. Now Matthew makes it clear that the disciples are hungry. That means they do not need to follow the law on this occasion.

What then do we take away with us from this tiny look at Matthew's gospel? Perhaps there are three discoveries which can enrich our own lives. *First* we see that each gospel tells its own story. Have you ever read through a gospel in its entirety? It is a fascinating exercise and one learns so much. Back in the 1980s the actor Alec McCowen learnt St Mark's gospel and performed it at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and elsewhere.

But *second*, in looking at each gospel individually, we learn something of the world from which each came. Matthew clearly lived in a Jewish community where the tiny group of Christians to whom he had belonged were a tiny minority. How should this tiny burgeoning community respond to the wider community who *still followed* the Jewish law? Then also, as a *third* issue how do *we* understand the gospel? Where do we stand? Do we say 'He who is not for us is against us?' Or are we less defensive, 'He who is not against us is on our side?'

Each of the gospels is a rich quarry for our lives, for our praying, for our response to others, for living in a complex and sometimes frightening world. Our first reading tells us 'Happy is the one who finds wisdom.' St Paul in an epistle reminds us that 'what we preach is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord.' But finally, in that snippet from Matthew's gospel, Jesus broadens our vision infinitely: 'I came not to call the righteous but sinners.' The evangelists offer us pictures of Jesus to help us shape our own response to God.

Amen.

Readings:

Proverbs. 3. 13-18.

II. Corinthians. 4. 1-6. 13.

Matthew. 9. 9-13.