



MATTHEW THE MAN

Lent Course, St Michael's Cornhill,
 1:45 pm, Wednesday 9th March 2016
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Many years ago now I was a Residentiary Canon at Portsmouth Cathedral. My roles included Cathedral Treasurer, Education and Theology and Diocese Director of Ordinands. Alongside me, there were two other residentiaries – one was in charge of social responsibility and the other Canon Pastor. The fourth canonry was about to be filled and the Provost (we'd now call him the Dean) was preparing his sermon for the installation. This fourth Canon, completing the pack, was to be the Diocesan Director of Education. The man appointed was able and interesting but tended in the direction of legalism

The Dean's sermon was a tour de force, but almost equally offensive (unintentionally I'm sure) to all four canons, for the Dean had chosen the four gospel creatures, rather as in this series, to describe the four of us. So, the Canon Pastor was the overseeing *eagle* eye (rather threatening), the Social Responsibility man was the muesli-eating *ox* – rather demeaning - I was the *Lion* of Mark, always about to pounce – rather frightening, and the new man was the legalistic scribal *man* – rather unattractive! None of these leant very obviously in the direction of a compliment, but it was the new man who was to be the most offended!

I begin there since that model of a legalistic Jewish figure can sometimes tend to be the image that scholars too easily portray or create of Matthew. Of one thing, however, there can be no doubt: Matthew is unquestionably the most Jewish of all four gospels. He is the most concerned with the law – indeed it's often argued that he sees Jesus as the second Moses, proclaiming a radicalised form of the Jewish law to the *new Israel*, that is, the embryonic Christian community. That brief introductory leaflet which I produced gives one clear example.

Matthew's version of the story of Jesus and his disciples crossing a cornfield and plucking ears of corn on the Sabbath, which appears in chapter 12 of Matthew's gospel, is cleansed of those elements of the Marcan version which would have been most offensive to a Jewish community. We can assume that Matthew was attempting to depict Jesus as the leader of a *new Israel in God* to his largely Jewish audience.

So, first of all, in his version of the story Matthew notes that the disciples are *hungry*. They're not gratuitously disobeying the law and wasting the fruits of God's earth. Second, it rankled with Matthew that Mark had got the name of the priest wrong when he referred to King David eating the shewbread in the Temple. It was Ahimelech and not Abiathar. So, *out* goes Abiathar's name, but he doesn't put Ahimelech in – he doesn't wish to be aggressively anti-Mark as it were! Finally, Mark has that defiant saying on Jesus' lips: 'The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.' *Out* goes the first sentence and Matthew softens it all to: 'For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.'

There are other key messages in the gospel which indicate very clearly the Jewish provenance of Matthew's community. Perhaps most obvious of all is the prologue to the gospel. It's *that particular passage* that no reader ever wants to be given as his or her part in a church service. The reading is, so to speak, this: 'The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.' Then follows that extraordinary list which in the King James Version issues in a hundred 'begats'! Abraham begat Isaac and Isaac begat Jacob and so on ad infinitum.

But still it is a very clever piece of work. First of all, it establishes Jesus as the successor of the Patriarchs, the fathers of ancient Israel. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and so on. Even Ruth, the heroine of that beautiful Old Testament folk tale, is somehow cobbled into this extraordinary ancestral table of inheritance – she turns out to be the great grandmother of King David! So, there is the next achievement: Jesus is also of the *royal line*, reaching back to David, the heroic founder of the southern and northern kingdoms of Israel and Judah, Samaria and Jerusalem. With extraordinary panache, Matthew sets out three successions, each of fourteen generations which link Jesus with Abraham. It is a magnificent hoax in a way, since there are many leaps and many inaccurate assumptions. But as a hoax it works! Jesus' lineage becomes impeccable.

So, then, for Matthew, Jesus' *Jewishness* is crucial – it's part of the essence. This issue of Jewishness is crucial. So, contemporary scholars have retrieved this insight in different ways with different gospels. So, very often, because of its philosophical style, *John's Gospel* was, well into the twentieth century, seen as Greek in its provenance. Now it's clear that it came out of a sophisticated semi-Platonist world. It's the same world as that of the Jewish writer Philo, writing at almost exactly the same time as Jesus was teaching. Greek and Hebrew thought are made to coalesce in a most imaginative and creative manner.

But how about Matthew? Well, a generation ago, Jewish scholars began to research and indicate how significant is the Jewish background to Jesus. The hero of this approach, who benefited from the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was one Geza Vermes. Vermes was brought up as a Hungarian Christian, a Roman Catholic, and eventually joined a religious community, the order of the Fathers of Notre Dame de Sion. In his thirties he met an English scholar and poet, they married and lived thereafter in Oxford. Vermes' ground-breaking book, *Jesus the Jew*, showed how crucial it was to take serious Jesus' Jewishness and to see how he fitted into that culture of his time as the holy man that he was.

So, first then we see one of Matthew's key contributions as being his part in and understanding of the Jewish world from which Jesus sprang. Variations on this theme have assisted enormously in greater rapprochements and interesting crossovers between Christians and Jews throughout our contemporary world. So, then, assuming that only Mark's Gospel was available to Matthew as a complete text, we have seen one way in which he felt he needed to offer a very different slant to that of Mark. Even then, it wasn't slavishly or even over-legalistic in its Jewishness, as we shall see a little later.

But there's another crucial element, that Matthew saw missing Mark. We saw how in Mark's Gospel, both Jesus and John the Baptist appear on the world stage as if from nowhere – created *ex nihilo*, as it were. There's no foreplay, no overture, no gentle prelude taking us in. It's simply: 'The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. . . etc.' For Matthew that's far too abrupt and so he follows up his genealogical tour de force, with a narrative that further embeds Jesus both in the Jewish world from which he came, but also on the wider world stage.

For the question for Matthew's readers was, 'Where *did* Jesus come from then?' Here is the prompt for Matthew's beautiful, lyrical birth narrative that helps fashion the feast of Christmas and the service of nine lessons and carols, for all Christians. Halfway through chapter one, in the King James Version, we read these gentle lines: 'Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise...' We read of Mary's conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit and of Joseph's gracious acceptance of this. All is set in the context of Israel's history. So, Isaiah is brought into play. Matthew quotes Isaiah 7: 'Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us.'

For the English speaking Christian believer, one can hardly hear these words without the background of the unforgettable tones of Handel's music in *Messiah*. Matthew then sets all this in the world of his time with reference to Herod, the tetrarch. After this, wise men, *magi*, come from the east to remind us that this birth is no ordinary quotidian event; it is instead a nativity of cosmic significance! And it brings with it great ambiguity!

T.S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi* captures all this:

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for Birth or Death?

.....
.this Birth was Hard and bitter agony for us,
like Death, our death.'

It is only after this completely new piece of narrative is complete that we are allowed to encounter John the Baptist and then catch up with Jesus' baptism. At the other end of the gospel, Matthew is equally unhappy with Mark's abrupt and inexplicable ending, but we'll bide our time before seeing what Matthew has in store for us then.

One other key aspect of Mark's Gospel is also at odds with Matthew's. You'll remember the intriguing theme of secrecy accompanied by the crassness of the disciples' lack of comprehension, culminating in Peter's threefold denial. You'll remember too, Jesus' description of parables as there to act as *dark riddles*, lest those outside might understand and be saved! None of this will do for Matthew.

In chapter 13 of his gospel we once again meet the parable of the sower. In Mark, it leads into that extraordinary discourse showing that parables are there to obscure not enlighten, as in that brief but beautiful poem by Robert Frost about the drinking goblet hidden under the instep arch of the tree. But for Matthew, the parable is instead a model of lucidity. 'Blessed are your eyes, for they see and your ears for they hear. Truly I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, hear what you hear, and did not hear it.'

All this happens not in a quiet huddle, a tiny coterie of Jesus' followers. Now, we're told instead: 'That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him. . . .' This is the scene within which he engages with his disciples. After this follow parable after parable – the wheat and the tares, the mustard seed, the leaven, the treasures hidden in a field, the net thrown into the sea. So, for Matthew, Jesus is the *great teacher*. Sometimes it's by the lake, but often it's on the top of mountains.

Classically we see that, in the Sermon in the Mount which consumes all of chapters five to seven of Matthew's Gospel. Indeed scholars have been able to discern five great sections of teaching which many believe are meant to parallel the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament in which the Jewish law is set out. Here is Jesus, the second Moses, the new Moses, expounding the new law which will relate all humankind to God the Father in Jesus. Mark appears to see Jesus leaving the law behind. Matthew has Jesus retaining the law but in a radicalised form. It does not bind harshly; instead it describes our relationship with God, a relationship seen in perfection in Jesus. 'You shall be holy', says Jesus, 'as the Lord your God is holy.'

So there are all these contrasts: 'You have heard that it was said of old time: "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.' Time after time it's, 'You have heard that it was said of old time . . .' but I say to you. . . .' So this is the pattern of life that Matthew describes in Jesus. It means that in Jesus there's not a repetition of all that went before. Instead the new life in God is creative; it is born of a new imagination; it opens up a transformed universe.

If there is one verse which is a clue to all this, it is in Matthew 13, verse 52. Jesus says: 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.' In this simple sentence there's encapsulated so much of what we learn of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. So, first of all, there's that phrase 'the *kingdom of heaven*, which is like a mantra for Matthew. The other evangelists talk of the kingdom of God. So Matthew in this phrase brings a new slant to it.

In the 'kingdom of heaven', Jesus is describing the new life in God manifested in himself, in his way of living and in his teaching. So, here, 'a scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven' is a teacher in this new community, rooted in Jesus. Jesus himself is the exemplar, the teacher par excellence. Matthew is one of his disciples. His gospel uses this technique. Furthermore, he brings out of his treasure *what is new and what is old*. Here's buried (to use a treasure-like metaphor), here's buried another clue to Matthew's picture of Jesus.

Where does Matthew begin? Well, of course, we know, or that is, virtually every scholar assumes, that Matthew begins with Mark. It is Mark's pioneering work that offers the framework, the outline of the entire gospel. But Matthew's is a much fuller account. There's so much more material. We've seen the birth narratives and genealogy and, in a moment, we shall see the conclusion. But there's much else – more parables, more teaching. Sometimes it's both powerful and terrifying. Think of chapter 25, which brings together three telling parables. There's the story of the wise and foolish maidens, some with no oil for their lamps. There's the tale of the master giving out the talents and one burying his in the ground. Finally there's the beautiful tale of the sheep and goats: 'As much as you did it for one of these my little ones you did it for me.'

But remember each of these ends with something like: 'The righteous shall enter into eternal life, but the unrighteousness into eternal punishment.' They are all parables of *judgment*. Matthew's gospel has a clarity which Mark avoids. But where does all this other material emerge from? The answer is we don't know. Many scholars look to a now lost document which they call intriguingly Q – from the German word *Quelle* or source. But Q would have been a very odd document. Then, they say there was also other material too that Matthew found. I'm inclined to think that Matthew may well have had his own sources, but also in the same way that a good creative Jewish scribe produces his own *midrash*, that is Matthew generated creative material rooted in the Jesus tradition.

But then what of the conclusion? Mark has the women fleeing in terror and saying nothing to anyone for they were afraid. Matthew's Jesus remains the great teacher and exemplar to the end. Again they're told to follow Jesus to Galilee, but this time, in Matthew, Jesus meets the women and tells them not to be afraid. The final scene, as so often in Matthew, is once again on a mountain. Jesus is there with his disciples. He says to them: 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. . . and lo I am with you always to the end of time.' Here is Jesus again, the teacher supreme, the new Moses.

So, in Matthew again, we have albeit differently, so much to enrich and encourage us. Matthew addresses us in another mood and on another day. His upbeat Jesus leads the vanguard of teaching. Creativity in our living and presenting of the gospel lies at the heart – bringing out of our treasure house things new and old. Matthew’s didactic mood will not be for all., but the beauty of his birth narratives and the richness of Jesus’ parables are not only unforgettable, but offer so much especially at moments when we feel we need a new sense of energy in our praying and living the Gospel of Jesus.