

An Introduction to the Gospel of S. Matthew

This evening we continue thinking about the Four Gospels and their respective Evangelists. The Four Evangelists are variously depicted as the four living creatures found around the throne of God in Rev 4.7. The ox, the lion, the human and the eagle: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Last week we introduced S. Mark's Gospel. S. Mark's Gospel we recall is shot through with a sense of urgency and hurry, rapid and overpowering, that makes the comparison with a lion a suitable one. S. Matthew meanwhile is depicted as the ox. Solid, broad, dependable, this depiction already gives us clues about the overall nature of the Gospel of S. Matthew. One biblical scholar, Fr John Muddiman, was fond of saying that if you went into S. Matthew's living room and looked at his mantelpiece you would see there a clock in the centre, a vase either side, a candle either side of those, and a photograph each end. Picture, candle, vase, clock, vase, candle, picture. S. Matthew's gospel is full of neat and well order material, and the book seems to be divided into sections marked off by the formula 'this was to fulfil what had been written in the prophets...'.

This also shows S. Matthew's interest in Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish prophecy and expectation. Some church fathers have noted that the depiction of S. Matthew as an ox is apt given the place bulls and calves had within the Jewish system of religion practiced in the Temple. This also gives us an indication of one of the great themes of S. Matthew's gospel.

Of all the Synoptic Gospel writers, it is S. Matthew who seems most concerned with the separation of Christianity from earlier Jewish forms piety. In the history of the Church, this concern has often been interpreted as a hostility to the Jewish people, and a regrettable source of Christian anti-Semitism.

When reading S. Matthew's Gospel, it is therefore important to pay attention to the precise targets of his criticism. Moreover, when S. Matthew writes against a group of people for a certain practice or way of life, we do well to focus as much as the positive alternative he sets out, than the people committing the behaviour with which he is concerned.

This is especially true of chapter 23 – in which Matthew presents Jesus as rallying against the Jewish leadership of his day. The phrase 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!' is repeated seven times. S. Matthew sharpens the theme of hostility toward the Pharisees in particular – a theme which runs throughout each of the Gospels.

Scholars know much less about the Pharisees than they like to admit. The term 'Pharisee' is from the Hebrew, '*perushim*' meaning 'separated'. It seems to refer to an individual or group who have kept themselves apart from the mainstream. Perhaps to avoid being tainted by association with figures less respectable than themselves. In Greek, however, the term becomes 'separating ones', those who separate. However, what it is the Pharisees separate is not at all clear. The term may have the sense of 'discernment'. Most of our ancient sources are agreed that the Pharisees had a reputation for being excellent interpreters of religious matters. The Pharisees are those who best discern the law, or discern matters of important. In the Gospels, it is clear that they, with the scribes, represent the theological elite. The charge against them seems to be one of hypocrisy – they whilst they may teach the truth, they do not practice it:

'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach'. (Matthew 23.2)

Teaching is a central feature of S. Matthew's Gospel. Last week we said that S. Matthew (like S. Luke) used and took over most of S. Mark's gospel. The additional material in Matthew is almost all material relating to the teaching and sayings of Jesus. (The teaching material which is shared between Matthew and Luke is sometimes called 'Q' from the German *Quelle*, meaning source, and reflects some scholars belief that a collection of sayings of Jesus is a further source shared by S. Matthew and Luke).

S. Matthew's gospel is full of teaching material. Chapters 5 – 7 stand as something of a centrepiece of the Gospel and are known more commonly as the Sermon on the Mount. These chapters bear reading again and again. They include our Lord's Prayer and contain the series of 'blessings' or 'beatitudes' in which Christ sets out something of a manifesto of Christian living:

Then he began to speak and taught them, saying: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted; the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 'those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. the merciful, for they will receive mercy.' the pure in heart, for they will see God.' the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 'those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.

In chapter 25, we find a similar guide to Christian living, only this time it is mediated via a vision of Christ in judgement at the end of the time. Those who have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, visited the prisoner and quenched the thirsty, even when they didn't do so with reference to Christ, are those who are welcomed into glory. Meanwhile, those who failed to do these things suffer the reverse fate. It is clear to us the mode of life which S. Matthew is encouraging us to adopt.

To return to the Pharisees, Why it is that they and their teaching in particular should be the subject of such criticism throughout the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospels as a whole? That they are so tells us a lot about the Gospels and the early Church from which they arose.

The Pharisees are generally not the religious elite. They are not the temple hierarchy. They do not have power or control over the Jewish system of worship. That's the domain of the Sadducees. Another group within the Judaism of Jesus' day. The Pharisees seem instead to be those generally regarded as experts in matters of religious law. Moreover, they are not so dissimilar to the early Church in one important regard – both the Pharisees and the early Church believe in the resurrection of the Body. This belief is central to the early Church because belief in the resurrection of Jesus is central to the early Church.

All of this adds up to explain why it is the Pharisees become an object of such hostility. The Pharisees keep themselves separate from the less respectable. The early Church takes its model as Jesus who did anything but this, and was constantly associating with those deemed unrespectable. Lepers, tax-collectors, troubled women.

The Pharisees are perceived as the most accurate interpreters of the Jewish way of life, of how to be a good person. The early Church is offering a new vision of that life, centred on the life and revelation of Jesus that must challenge the Pharisees reputation for excellence if it is to succeed.

And, finally, both the Pharisees and the early Church believe in the resurrection of the Body. It must have been a source of eternal frustration for the early Church to be compared to this group. We know from experience the people we disagree most completely are easy to accept. The people with whom we share most in common but differ only a little are those who infuriate us.

This brings us to the final theme we'll think about in our introduction to the Gospel of Matthew – the wider Church. This theme is particularly appropriate as we find ourselves at the start of the octave of prayer for Christian unity¹. So often, as members of the Church, we have found those with whom we share most are those with whom we find it hardest to live alongside. In Chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel, we find a guide for overcoming disagreement within the Church. Christ tells us first to speak to the individual with whom we are concerned alone and then with the wider Church. Peter asks:

‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. (Matthew 18.21-2)

As we continue through the octave of prayer for Christian unity, S. Matthew's Gospel reminds us that since the earliest days of the Church, the Church has been marred by conflict. It has failed to live up to the body of Christ's teaching set out by Matthew in his gospel. It has also failed, and we have failed, to do enough to embrace the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the prisoner and the stranger. Disagreements between Christians and Christian communities have distracted the church from its mission.

Pope Francis has recently, like S. Matthew, sought to refocus our priorities as Christian people. Too often, the Church has been bruised, hurting and dirty because of arguments within itself. Pope Francis has said:

I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.

To this, S. Matthew would surely say, Amen. May he and all of the Evangelists pray for us now and always. Amen².

¹ The Octave of Prayer runs from the 18th January to the 25th January each year.

² An address given by Fr Simon Cuff during Evensong and Benediction on the 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time 2014.