

# 3. The Gospel of Matthew

Written, it is thought, around 85-90CE for a community of converts from Judaism located - probably - in Syria, and attributed to Matthew (though there is no evidence that it was written by him), the language of this gospel is polished Greek, reflecting a community well connected to their Jewish roots and to the wider world of the Roman Empire.

The gospel of Matthew seems to draw from the same source as Mark but also draws from a source common to the gospel of Luke<sup>1</sup>, as well as containing passages which are unique.

Unlike Mark, this gospel reaches into Christ's origins to show that Jesus is both God and Man from his conception: this is essential to the gospel message - that Jesus is the fulfilment of God's promise to the Jewish people, that he alone interprets the true meaning of the Jewish Law, and that the failure of the Jewish people to recognise their Saviour leaves them outside the salvation he has brought into the world. This salvation was meant first for God's own people - the Jews - but, since they have rejected it, the door has opened to the gentiles, those outside the Law, who come to believe in the gospel.

The gospel of Matthew is marked by conflict between Jesus and the representatives of the Jewish people - the Scribes and Pharisees - which leads to his rejection and condemnation. His crucifixion is both a fulfilment of God's promise heard through the prophets, and a judgment on God's people so that, following his resurrection, Christ sends his disciples out to the gentiles.

The text is marked by three titles attributed to Jesus:

- Son of God
- Son of David
- Son of Man

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## Son of God

In a general sense, the term 'son of God' occurs in the Jewish scriptures occasionally, but not frequently, and refers - at most - to Israel as God's people as a whole.<sup>2</sup> But for the early Christians it was central to their belief that Jesus was uniquely Son of God, the fulfilment of the messianic prophecies: both Son and Saviour. As we shall see when exploring the resurrection narratives in more detail,<sup>3</sup> it was **the disciples' experience of the risen Christ** which was the source of their proclamation of him as Lord and Saviour:

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<sup>1</sup> A source often known as 'Q'. The existence of this source - which Mark does not appear to know - is deduced from commonalities between the gospels of Matthew and Luke which do not exist in the gospel of Mark

<sup>2</sup> cf. Exodus 4:22 and Hosea 11:1

<sup>3</sup> See Session 6: The Passion and Resurrection Narratives

Christ's resurrection both showed to the world and gave proof that Jesus was **uniquely** Son of God. The letters of Paul offer an insight into this early *kerygma*.<sup>4</sup>

The gospel of Matthew takes this christology as its central message: Jesus was not merely a prophet, but uniquely God's Son conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of Mary, a virgin.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, what he did and taught is uniquely *of God*.

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## Son of David

With the possible exception of Ecclesiastes 1:1, no-one is called a 'son of David' except those sons actually born of King David.

However, the gospel of Matthew<sup>6</sup> takes great care to show that Jesus was himself truly descended from David through Joseph, his adoptive father. This is not to deny that Jesus was born of the Virgin - which is emphatically stated in the gospel - but that, because Joseph took Mary to be his wife,<sup>7</sup> so Jesus took the status of his earthly father.

But why this emphasis that Jesus was *born of David's line*?

The *messiah* promised - by the prophets - to Israel, and born of David's line, was to bring God's healing and show himself through his miracles. The gospel, therefore, sees Jesus' miracles and healings as proof of his identity and of the fulfilment of scripture - indeed, the text is filled with quotations, largely from the prophets, which show how Christ's words and actions are a fulfilment of God's promise.

That the Jewish people rejected Jesus, therefore, is understood as the deep rejection of God's salvific promise made present in Christ.<sup>8</sup>

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## Son of Man

This title, in the New Testament, is only found on the lips of Jesus: it is used *by* him of himself and is never used *of* him. This suggests that this is how Jesus referred to himself in his life and preaching.

Jesus refers to himself as **the** Son of Man, not 'a' son of man; this distinguishes his usage from any of the Jewish scriptural sources and makes the title unique to him. And yet it

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<sup>4</sup> Philippians 2:6-11. *Kerygma* means the proclamation of the Gospel

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 1:18-25

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 1:1-17

<sup>7</sup> cf. Matthew 1:24

<sup>8</sup> See Matthew 1:22-23; cf. Isaiah 7:14

echoes the title given to the prophet Ezekiel,<sup>9</sup> a prophet noted for his apocalyptic prophecies: Jesus echoes this in his language about himself and in his prophetic and apocalyptic statements.<sup>10</sup>

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## The Birth of the Messiah

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned in Session 2, Mark does not offer an infancy narrative, so this is something new.

Notice how the pace of this text is more measured than in Mark. After the genealogy of Matthew 1:1-17, we are now being drawn into a story - not simply *saying* who Jesus is but *explaining* who he is, how he came to be, and the **meaning** of his coming: Jesus is born to fulfil God's prophecy, conceived 'from the Holy Spirit' and born of a virgin, Mary. He is 'God with us' - *Emmanuel*.

**Exercise: What kind of text would you say this is?** Do you think of it as history, or myth, or something else? What do you see as its purpose? In what ways are we to understand these events?

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<sup>9</sup> Ezekiel 2:1

<sup>10</sup> See Matthew 8:20; 16:13; 17:9,22; 19:28; 26:64. See also references in the other gospels

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 1:18-25

## Law and Fulfilment

Our second extract is familiar to us yet, again, we are faced with the question: Did these events happen just like this, and what is the purpose of this account? These are questions we can ask again and again of a variety of gospel texts from all the evangelists and - perhaps - especially from John, whose accounts vary from those of the synoptic authors and which enter into far more detail.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written,

“One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you”, and

“On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”

Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written,

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

“Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.”

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,  
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the  
Gentiles—

the people who sat in darkness  
have seen a great light,  
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death  
light has dawned.’

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'<sup>12</sup>

There is a repetitiveness - a kind of monotony - about the account of the temptation in the desert. We notice how the word 'again' appears repeatedly, and the casting of scripture both for and against Jesus' self-denial. We should notice that scripture can be interpreted in different ways, but we are drawn again and again to how *Jesus* interprets the word of God definitively.

We notice, also, the nature of temptation: that it is *deceptive* and mis-states what is good and the purpose of what is good. We are drawn, for the first time, to reflect for ourselves on the nature of evil in our world - that it has a 'personal' face, yet is utterly empty: we recognise that - like us - Jesus was tempted, yet he rejected temptation with clarity. We, on the other hand, 'flirt' with temptation. Jesus, here, is an **example** for us to follow.

Two other things to notice:

- how, suddenly, the action moves away from the desert to the beginning of Jesus' ministry - this echoes the source common to the gospel of Mark;
- how *specific* the author is about the location of Capernaum - none of the other gospels echo this: again, this is an opportunity for the author to show how Jesus is fulfilling the words of the Jewish scriptures.

Notice, also, how - as in the gospel of Mark - Jesus' preaching is summed up in one sentence: the same message formulated slightly differently - the call to repentance and the announcement of the kingdom of heaven which has *come near*.

Clearly, this reflects a memory from those who followed Jesus at that time, of his message, the *kerygma*.

Jesus has come to fulfil the Jewish Law: in Matthew 5:17-20 we read:

'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'.

**Exercise: In what ways does the story of the temptation in the wilderness speak to your own experience of temptation?** How to you combat temptation and how does this contrast with how Jesus does so?

**What do you think is meant by Jesus' words that he has come 'to fulfil' the law and the prophets?** What is their meaning and purpose?

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew 4:1-17

## The Teaching of Jesus

In the chapters which follow, this *kerygma* is expanded so that we understand its meaning. We learn of the calling of the first disciples, of healings, and we hear - with immense clarity - Jesus' teaching, beginning with the Beatitudes and moving on to what is a key passage for this gospel: the meaning of the Law and the Prophets, summed up in the line '*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.*'<sup>13</sup>

We are faced with a question: How much of this teaching is the *actual* words of Jesus and how much is an interpretation of Christ's teaching based on the growing understanding of the first Christians following their experience of Jesus' resurrection from the dead?

It can be argued that **most** of the words put here on the lips of Jesus are, in fact, a later interpretation of his message and meaning. It would be hard to believe that so much could have been remembered word-for-word with such detail, when nothing was written at the time these words were said and when the recollection differs between the gospel texts.

Does this mean that these texts are wrong, or misleading, or should be ignored? No, because they reflect the true message of Jesus and because, as Catholics, we trust in their authenticity as being written under the action of the Holy Spirit.

This is a question, not of history but of **faith**: in reading the gospel accounts - even where they differ - we recognise their truth in terms of the Gospel message as a whole.

In the gospel of Matthew, many of Christ's teachings contrast with the teachings of the Jewish Law, the *Torah* - we notice this in the repeated use of the structure: '*You have heard that it was said... but I say to you...*'<sup>14</sup> As with so much of this gospel, the intention is to demonstrate that Jesus *brings to fulfilment* the Law of the Jewish people. This culminates<sup>15</sup> in teaching which is uniquely Jesus' own and in a series of healings - these are drawn from the oral tradition of the early Church as well as some written sources common to the synoptic gospels. Ultimately, however, these all serve one purpose: to demonstrate and expound the *good news* of Jesus contained in the *kerygma*.

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## Discipleship

We move now to the question facing every disciple: how do we follow Jesus?

For the author - as for all the evangelists - the question of discipleship was fundamental: the good news does not begin and end with Jesus but continues in the mission of his disciples who - later, under the action of the Holy Spirit - become Church.

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew 5:17

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Matthew 5:21-48

<sup>15</sup> See Matthew 6-9

every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for labourers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town.

‘See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

‘A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!<sup>16</sup>

There is something striking in the first line of this extract: Jesus *gave them* [the disciples] *authority*. This is important because it reflects the reality of the early Church: authority - being commissioned by Jesus - was important for holding on to the truth. Notice how, almost imperceptibly, the language moves from *disciples* (literally ‘students’) to **apostles** (meaning ‘ones who are sent’). The early Church understood itself to be built on the faith of the apostles - we find this echoed in Paul’s letters where he speaks of himself as one

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew 10:1-25



‘called lately’ as an apostle.<sup>17</sup> This is the basis on which Tradition is built, handed on - through **apostolic succession** - from generation to generation in an unbroken line: as Jesus’ authority comes from the Father, so the apostles’ authority comes from Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

Notice how the apostles are told<sup>19</sup> to proclaim God’s kingdom *in the same words* that Jesus himself used.

Notice, also, what they are told to *do*:

- cure the sick
  - raise the dead
  - cleanse the lepers
  - cast out demons
- in other words, to do *exactly* what Jesus himself does and, further - like Jesus - to take no payment but to give freely, and to do all this, first of all, ‘nowhere among the Gentiles... but rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’. This conforms with the experience of the author of the gospel: that the message was to be preached first to God’s chosen people, and then - when they rejected it - to the whole world.

Notice, now, the detail of Jesus’ teaching. As with other similar passages, this detail is itself a clue to the fact that this is not so much an accurate recollection of what Jesus said, but rather the early Christian reflection on the role and work of an apostle, based - yes - on the true teaching of Jesus but, further, on the recollection of how Jesus himself taught and behaved and on the later actions of the apostles as they spread the word of the Gospel following Pentecost. This is why the text emphasizes that the apostles should do **only** what Jesus himself has done and instructed.

Notice how rapidly the text of this excerpt moves from point to point: it is a gathering together of many teachings and recollections from Jesus’ ministry.. The better we understand this, the less we are troubled by apparent inconsistencies in the gospel accounts. The essential point is that they all hold to the truth of the Gospel message, the *kerygma* proclaimed in the life, words and actions of Jesus.

**Exercise: What does this passage tell us about how we are to follow Christ?** Do these words speak personally to us and to our own vocation as Christians? What principles can we identify for our own sharing of the gospel message with others? See if you can write down for yourself a list of principles based on Christ’s teaching in this text.

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<sup>17</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:8

<sup>18</sup> Notice Matthew 11:25 where Jesus thanks the Father for ‘revealing these things... to infants’. This would seem to be a true recollection of Jesus’ words because it is short, reflecting Jesus’ own habit of referring intimately to the Father

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 10:7