

**The Gospel according to
Saint Matthew**



**A daily reading and reflection for Lent 2019
Fr Peter M Down**



Five Crosses

Tintinhull, Chilthorne Domer,
Yeovil Marsh, Thorne Coffin,
Lufton

The Gospel according to Saint Matthew

St Matthew's Gospel is the first book in the New Testament and for many years was considered to be the first of the gospels to have been written. Modern scholarship has revealed that not to be the case, for Mark's gospel was written well before it and Matthew used Mark as the basis for much of his gospel. That does not diminish the importance of Matthew's gospel which remains an essential witness to the events around Jesus' life and is a vital tool in helping us to understand how God has acted to bring salvation to the world through Jesus Christ.

The gospel is the most Jewish of all the gospels. Matthew goes to great lengths to demonstrate how Jesus is the fulfilment of prophecies in the Old Testament and is especially keen to explain how Jesus fulfils the Jewish expectation of the Messiah.

Matthew also has a key focus on the teaching of Jesus. This is most evident in the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7) which, presented as a single piece of teaching, is unique to Matthew. Much (although by no means all) of this teaching is found in the other gospels but it is Matthew's genius to bring it together in a wonderful single passage of teaching. Matthew draws together specific teaching for the disciples in chapter 10; he also presents parables in groups as he does often with healing stories and miracles. Clearly Matthew wanted his gospel to be, not simply an account of Jesus's life and significance but also, a tool for teaching within the Church.

Here we can be led to a stronger discipleship and a deeper faith by coming to understand who Jesus is and what he taught. This small booklet is intended to help that happen for us during Lent as we can read the whole of Matthew's gospel and reflect on what Matthew wished us to know of Jesus. There is a passage appointed for each day of Lent and the first few days of Easter, together with some reflection and explanation. Some of the passages appointed are quite long and although reading the whole gospel is recommended you might wish to skip some parts.

Ash Wednesday - 6th March

Matthew 1 – Who is Jesus?

Matthew begins his gospel in a way that we find baffling or even downright perverse. It is very easy for us to simply ignore this list of names of Jesus' ancestors and start the story where we would like it to start – with Matthew's account of the birth. While that's understandable we should probably spend a few moments considering the genealogy of Jesus as presented in the first 16 verses of the gospel.

Luke also has a genealogy but it is not at all the same as Matthew's. (For more about the differences in the genealogies see, <https://tinyurl.com/y8hl7wh9>).

Matthew starts his genealogy from Abraham, to David, to the fall of the kingdoms to Jesus. Each of his divisions has fourteen names (or at least that's what Matthew says, although the last division has only thirteen. It may be that one has been lost early in the history of the copying of the gospel.) Clearly the number fourteen is important to Matthew but its significance is largely lost on us, but the key figures in the list are easily grasped – Abraham → David → Fall of the Kingdoms → Jesus. In his own opening Matthew says, *Roll of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham*, so those names come as no surprise. This list of names is designed to tell us some very important facts about who Jesus is. He is a *son of Abraham*, and therefore a true member of the people of Israel. He is also the *son of David*, and therefore has a claim to the kingship of Israel. Matthew raises the hope in, at least his Jewish readers (and Matthew's is the most Jewish of the gospels), that Jesus might be the the hoped for Messiah who will restore the kingdom and renew Israel.

Now he moves into the birth story. Matthew's account is very different from Luke's. The naming of Jesus is central to the angel's appearance to Joseph, *the child conceived in [Mary] is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save the people from their sins.* The name itself is important – Jesus (Yeshua in Hebrew) means *the Lord saves*. Importantly, for Matthew, the birth will be a fulfilment of prophecy – *Look, the virgin is with child and will give birth to a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God-is-with-us* (Isaiah 7.14), and Matthew makes sure that we do not miss the point that Jesus is God with us. We will often see how Matthew points to the way in which Jesus is the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies.

Chapter 1, and chapters 2-4 which follow, allow Matthew to state clearly at the beginning of his gospel just who Jesus is.

Thinking it through

Does it matter now that Jesus fulfils prophecies? If so, in what way?

7th March

Matthew 2 – Bethlehem to Nazareth

Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus is very different from Luke's. There is no birth story as such; it begins after *Jesus had been born at Bethlehem in Judaea during the time of King Herod*. The magi (wise men) arrive seeking the new born King of the Jews. This, again, is a clue about who Jesus is. He is the true King of the Jews, unlike Herod, who is a Roman client King. Jesus is born in Bethlehem, thus fulfilling another prophecy, *you, Bethlehem ... , by no means least among the leaders of Judah, for from you will come a leader who will shepherd my people Israel* (Micah 5.2).

The date of Jesus' birth is revealed here too – Herod ruled from 37-4 BC. The magi find the child in Bethlehem and offer their gifts – which may have meaning, but this does not seem important to Matthew's account. Warned in a dream not to return to Herod they return home by another route and Joseph (also warned in a dream) takes Mary and Jesus to safety in Egypt, where they remain until after the death of Herod and they return and settle in Nazareth. Matthew claims that Jesus fulfils another prophecy because he comes from Nazareth, *He will be called a Nazarene*. There is no prophecy in the Old Testament which says this and *Nazarene* may not refer to Nazareth at all and may be closer to the idea of Jesus having been set apart as a *Nazirite* for a special service to God (see Numbers 6.1-21), although Jesus does not, in every detail, merit that title.

Here we see another of the themes of Matthew's gospel revealed. Matthew frequently casts Jesus as a new Moses. Herod is the new pharaoh, a symbol of unbelief and hard-heartedness. He, like pharaoh, condemns the young children to death and Jesus, the new Moses, is protected from the wrath of the king in order that he might be able to fulfil his role in God's plans.

Thinking it through

Although Matthew is the most Jewish of the gospels here he shows how important it is that God's Son is revealed to the nations. Why does this matter?

8th March

Matthew 3 – On the banks of the Jordan

Matthew now turns to Mark's gospel for his information. All that has preceded chapter 3 is unique to Matthew, but Mark was an important source for him. This is where Mark begins his gospel but Matthew adds much to what Mark had to say. Again, this chapter helps us to understand who Jesus is. The appearance of John feels rather abrupt in the gospel. Like Jesus, John is a fulfilment of prophecy; the *voice of one crying in the desert*, 'Prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight, is a quote from Isaiah 40.3. Matthew fleshes out the detail of John's preaching which is powerful and direct, *Brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?* (Matthew 3.7) John points to Jesus as one who is greater than he and, departing from Mark's description, adds an element of seeing Jesus as judge, *His winnowing-fan is in hand; he will clear his threshing-floor and gather his wheat into his barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that never goes out* (Matthew 3.12). Only Matthew has John protesting that Jesus should not be baptized by John, but rather John by Jesus. When Jesus comes up out of the water it is only Jesus who sees the heavens open and the Spirit descend like a dove, but Matthew suggests that the voice, *This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased*, is heard by everyone present.

Thinking it through

What is more important to Matthew – that Jesus is baptized, or that the Spirit comes down and the voice is heard? Why do you suppose that is?

9th March

Matthew 4.1-11 – Tested in the desert

Again Matthew follows Mark but expands considerably on what Mark has to say about the testing of Jesus in the desert (Mark 1.12-13). The three temptations by the *tempter* are shared with Luke although the second and third temptations are reversed in order. The first two temptations are introduced with the words, *If you are the Son of God*, recalling the voice from heaven at the baptism. This may be Matthew's way of suggesting that the tempter is hoping that the events of the baptism might have 'gone to Jesus' head. The third temptation is not so introduced and is less an invitation to test God as to abandon him altogether. Each of the temptations is met with a rebuke from

Jesus in which he quotes from the book of Deuteronomy prefaced by the words, *It is written...* (Deuteronomy 8.3, 6.16 & 6.13).

Again we see in this passage the way in which Matthew sees parallels between Jesus and Moses. Jesus is tested in the desert for forty days and nights; Moses' test in the desert lasts forty years. Matthew may well have had in mind a passage from Deuteronomy 8.2 in which we read, *Remember the long road by which Yahweh your God led you for forty years in the desert, to humble you, to test you and know your inmost heart -- whether you would keep his commandments or not.*

Thinking it through

Does the way Jesus rejects the tempter's challenges teach us anything about resisting temptation?

Lent 1 - 10th March

Matthew 4.12-25 – The first disciples

Jesus has come from his home in Galilee to the Judaeen desert where John is baptizing on the banks of the Jordan. From there he is driven into the desert by the Spirit where he was tested. As these verses begin we hear of the arrest of John, so Jesus returns to Galilee in the far north of Palestine away from the city of Jerusalem and remote from the Jewish authorities. He settles in Capernaum on the northern bank of the Lake of Galilee, an area populated largely by Gentiles and governed by Herod. Again Matthew goes to lengths to show how the events of the life of Jesus fulfil prophecy, this time from Isaiah 9.1-2.

Now begins Jesus' ministry as he proclaims, *Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand*, the same message that John proclaimed. Possibly, Matthew is having Jesus pick up where John has left off, his ministry having been ended with his arrest, a direct challenge to Herod who was the ruler of Galilee.

And now Jesus begins to gather disciples around him. He calls the four fishermen, two pairs of brother – Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John, the sons of Zebedee, on the shore of the Lake of Galilee. In both cases we are told that they left their nets, or boat, *at once* and followed Jesus. Did they already know of Jesus and his message? Or was his presence so powerful that they responded in this way?

As Jesus begins his ministry, *teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing all kinds of disease and illness*, Jesus'

fame spreads rapidly and people begin seeking him out from all parts of Palestine.

Thinking it through

What is it about Jesus that makes you want to be his disciple?

11th March

Matthew 5.1-19 – Blessing for the righteous

Of the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke) it is Matthew who particularly draws the teaching of Jesus together in extended passages. Here we see the beginning of the first of those passages – the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), *Seeing the crowds, he went onto the mountain*. Just as Moses went up the mountain to receive the Law, so Jesus delivers his teaching, “the new law” from the mountain.

Much of the Sermon on the Mount (though by no means all) as recorded by Matthew is found also in Luke, although in a different context.

The Sermon begins, famously, with the *Beatitudes*. Here Jesus challenges the norms of the world; The beatitudes describe who may enter the kingdom which is coming. God reverses the positions and judgements which people have made for themselves in this world, summed up, perhaps by, *thus the last will be first, and the first, last* (Matthew 20.16). It is important to note that the beatitudes are a description of the type of person who will be a member of the new kingdom, not a description of their behaviour. Charles Gore, first Bishop of Birmingham (1905-1911) said, *the character which we find here described is beyond all question nothing else than our Lord's own character put into words, the human character of our Lord corresponding always in flawless perfection with the teaching which he gave* (The Sermon on the Mount, Gore, 1896).

This is the character which will be *the salt of the earth and the light of the world*.

Jesus also reminds us early in his sermon that this new Law does not remove the old but rather completes it, defines it more sharply and more deeply. The Law and the Prophets are not abolished by Jesus' teaching, but enriched, *anyone who keeps them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of Heaven* (Matthew 5.19).

Thinking it through

Can Christians become truly Christ-like?

12th March

Matthew 5.20-48 – A higher standard

This section of the Sermon is introduced with these words, *if your righteousness does not surpass that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of Heaven*. Here Jesus takes quotes (mostly) from the Law and reinterprets them to demonstrate the higher standard that is required by the members of the kingdom. Where the Law states, *You shall not murder* (Deuteronomy 5.17), Jesus condemns anger, in the case of adultery, (Deuteronomy 5.18) Jesus condemns lust. *You must not break your oath, but must fulfil your oaths to the Lord*, is not an exact quotation from the Old Testament but see Deuteronomy 5.11, Leviticus 19.12 and Psalm 50.14. While love of neighbour is commanded in Leviticus 19.18, hatred of enemy is not found in the Old Testament, and especially not in the context of a personal, rather than national, enemy. What Jesus requires of his disciples is not a simple keeping of the letter of the Law but a clear requirement that observing the spirit of the Law should be the first duty of those who are to be members of the kingdom.

Thinking it through

Which is harder to resist – a sinful action, or a sinful attitude?

13th March

Matthew 6 – Trust in God

Chapter 6 has pieces of advice and instruction which make clearer how the standards of the kingdom might be attained. Righteousness, almsgiving (charity), prayer and fasting are required but a discipleship which parades its virtues looking earthly reward or recognition is hypocritical. These actions are performed not for human praise but out of obedience and service to God. It is here that Jesus teaches his disciples to pray. In giving them what we know as the Lord's Prayer he is giving a pattern for personal, private prayer. We hear in Luke's gospel that John, in common with other rabbis taught his disciples to pray (Luke 11.1-4) and here Jesus does the same. Luke's prayer is briefer and perhaps more original especially in view of Jesus' instruction here (Matthew 6.7-8), *In your prayers do not babble as the gentiles do, for they think that by using many words they will make themselves heard. Do not be like them; your Father knows what you need before you ask him*.

The focus of the disciple must be on heaven. The treasures stored in heaven cannot be defiled.

It is difficult to be sure exactly how the last paragraphs of this chapter fit in with what has come before. Their teaching is clear enough – live in the light, serve God not possessions and trust God to provide for you – but exactly why Matthew placed these teachings here is not clear. There may be a bit of a play on words in the original Greek which ties them together, but we cannot be certain. Nevertheless these are among the best loved teachings of the Sermon.

Thinking it through

In what ways is the Lord's Prayer the perfect prayer?

14th March

Matthew 7 – Warnings and encouragement

The disciple is warned against judging, because each of us stands in the need of judgement ourselves. The standard we use is the standard by which we will be judged ourselves.

We should not abuse the things that are holy, *Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls in front of pigs* (Matthew 7.6). It is not entirely clear how Matthew thinks that this fits in to the teaching of Jesus, nor exactly what it means here. It has been suggested that this is an instruction to the disciples not to proclaim the gospel to the gentiles but we cannot be sure as the context does not help us here.

God is faithful to those who seek him, *Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you* (Matthew 7.7).

This recalls earlier teaching (Matthew 6.25-34). God will provide what is good for us just as we know how to provide well for our children.

Jesus concludes the sermon now with words of encouragement to choose the right path (Matthew 7.12-14), select the right guides (Matthew 7.15-20) and make the right decisions (Matthew 7.21-27).

By way of conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount this teaching of Jesus is described as authoritative by Matthew, in contrast to the teachings of the scribes.

Thinking it through

What does it mean for you to build your house *on rock*?

15th March

Matthew 8.1-17 – Jesus the healer

The sermon concluded Matthew redirects us to consider the healings and miracles of Jesus. He records ten miracles in chapters 8 and 9, split into three groups. The first healing he records in detail in the gospel is the healing of a man with leprosy. According to the Law the leper was considered to be *unclean*. This is why Jesus sends him to the priest so that he may offer the sacrifice laid down in the Law for the healing and cleansing. The man expresses faith in Jesus, *Lord, if you are willing, you can cleanse me*. Jesus also instructs the man to tell no one about his healing. This is not uncommon in such stories and it may be that Jesus wished to keep publicity regarding his healing prowess to a minimum so as not to distract from his more important work – the proclamation of the kingdom.

The next healing recorded is that of the centurion's servant. The fact that the centurion is a gentile is important in this story. Jesus compares the faith of this gentile with the faith of the Jews, *in no one in Israel have I found faith as great as this*. The miracle is also a clear demonstration of Jesus' authority and the presence of divine power in him.

And then follows the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. There is a simple domesticity about this miracle with nothing but a simple touch describing the events. Matthew tells us that there were many more healed and demons driven out, and, crucially that this is a fulfilment of prophecy, *He himself bore our sicknesses away and carried our diseases* (Isaiah 53.4)

Thinking it through

Jesus praises the centurion for his faith. Where have you seen faith in someone you never thought had faith?

16th March

Matthew 8.18-34 – Works of power

We've seen three healing miracles already and two more miracles are related here, different from the first three – the calming of the storm and the driving out of the demons in Gadara. He divides his accounts of miracles with sayings of Jesus on the demands of discipleship; the first seems slightly enigmatic but its meaning is made clear by the context, *Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head*. The second, *Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their dead*, would have

been particularly shocking to Jews but emphasises the urgency of Jesus' mission.

The two miracles recorded here are both found in Mark's gospel (Mark 4.35-41; Mark 5.1-20) but significantly shortened by Matthew (which is not unusual when Matthew quotes Mark). The point of the calming of the storm is surely found in the response of the disciples, *Whatever kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him*. Their faith is deepened by the actions and authority of Jesus. Matthew changes extensively the story of the exorcism of the demoniacs into the herd of pigs. The story takes place in a different place, there are two demoniacs, we are not told that there are many demons or that their name is *Legion*, we are not told, as Mark does, that the men are healed. The emphasis in Matthew is possibly more on the request of the *whole city* that he leave the area than on the miracle itself.

Thinking it through

Why do you suppose that people were made to feel uncomfortable by Jesus' miracles?

Lent 2 - 17th March

Matthew 9.1-13 – Another healing, another disciple

The cure of the paralytic completes this group of miracles before Matthew presents another passage about discipleship.

The cure of the paralytic is significant for two things – the words of Jesus to the man, *Take comfort, my child, your sins are forgiven*, and the debate with the scribes who criticise him. It is well known that the people of Jesus' time believed that illness and disability were the result of sin, but Jesus, until now, has not explicitly forgiven the sins of those he has healed. Doing so would inevitably raise a debate with the religious leaders and so it does. The scribes suggest that forgiving sins in this way is *blasphemy*. Jesus' response is to force the scribes to consider, first, that to leave the man in his present state would be *evil*, and, second, to consider whether there is a fundamental difference between forgiving sins and commanding the man to, *Get up and walk*. If sin caused his condition (and we might take a different view) then in either case his sins are forgiven. This is the first stated cause of friction between Jesus and the religious leaders in Matthew's gospel.

In the story of the call of Matthew (Levi in Mark and Luke) we hear another moment of conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders, this time the Pharisees. They question his wisdom in the company he keeps, *Why does your*

teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? Jesus responds by quoting Hosea (6.6), *My pleasure is in mercy, not sacrifice* (again fulfilling a prophecy?) and stating that he *came to call not the righteous, but sinners.*

Thinking it through

Are there people that you are not prepared to allow a second chance?

18th March

Matthew 9.14-26 – A question answered

Again the group of miracles are split by a piece of teaching. Although John has been arrested (Matthew 4.12) his disciples still form a group who perhaps now are asking whether they should now follow Jesus and so they come asking a question, *Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not?* Jesus replies that the time is not right for fasting but there will come a time when they will fast. Not only is this an answer to the question but also a prophecy of his coming passion, *the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast.* This is followed by two parables – the new cloth and old wine in new wineskins. Matthew adds, *and both are preserved* to Mark's, *New wine into fresh skins* (Mark 2.22), perhaps implying that the old wine of Judaism must be preserved as well as the new wine of the kingdom.

The account of the healing of the official's daughter (named Jairus in Mark, but unnamed here) and the woman with the haemorrhage is considerably shortened in Matthew in comparison to Mark (Mark 5.21-43). These two miracles show the power of Jesus over death (Matthew 9.23-24) and over serious chronic illness (Matthew 9.20).

Thinking it through

Does Jesus' healing require faith from the person healed?

19th March

Matthew 9.27-37 – The Lord of the harvest

There appear here two accounts of healings. The first, the cure of two blind men reveals a device not unknown in Matthew's gospel of double healings. We saw it in Matthew 8.28-34, and we shall see it again in Matthew 20.29-34, a strikingly similar story to this one. Although this healing narrative is not

taken from Mark's gospel, the other two are and Matthew has doubled the numbers of those being healed. We might ask why this occurs, and it might be about revealing Jesus' authority, or it might be linked the need for two witnesses in Jewish Law. There can be no doubt, therefore, that Jesus can heal and drive out demons.

The second healing is off a dumb (perhaps mute) man. He is healed, but the point of this story is surely the accusation of the Pharisees, in contrast to that of the people, that, *It is through the prince of demons that he drives out demons*. Again this story story is remarkably similar to another in Matthew 12.22-24.

The chapter concludes with Jesus feeling sorry for the crowds expressing to his disciples the need for the *Lord of the harvest to send out labourers to his harvest*. The need is for leaders who will guide the people into the kingdom to come. Implied here is a rejection of the religious leaders of the day who are failing, according to Jesus, in their duty to the people.

Thinking it through

Why does Jesus apparently deliberately provoke the religious leaders?

20th March

Matthew 10.1-25 – The disciples' mission

Jesus calls the Twelve (the first mention of twelve disciples in the gospel) and gives them authority *over unclean spirits, with power to drive them out and to cure every disease and every illness*, a share in Jesus' work, which will be continued, it is implied, beyond the resurrection. He then lists the Twelve (the lists vary slightly in the three synoptic gospels, Mark 3.16-19, Luke 6.13-16; John refers to the Twelve but does not give a complete list of their names). Matthew then continues with the second body of Jesus' teaching in his gospel which fills the whole of chapter 10. This teaching is concerned with the mission of Jesus' disciples. The first section is concerned with where they should go – *to the lost sheep of the house of Israel* – what they should do – *Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, drive out demons* – and what they should provide themselves with for the mission – *Keep not gold or silver, not even copper in your belts, no bag for the journey or spare tunic or footwear or staff*. And they are instructed not to waste time on those who will not welcome them, *as you walk out of the house or town shake the dust from your feet*.

Jesus then warns the disciples that they will find persecution but that God will support them and inspire them, *when they hand you over, do not worry about how to speak or what to say; ... it is not you who will be speaking; the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you.*

Division will be rife but those who oppose will not be changed. Jesus, in Matthew 10.24-25, speaks of *Beelzebul* recalling perhaps the words of the Pharisees in Matthew 9.34, *it is through the prince of demons that he drives out demons.* We will hear more of this later (Matthew 12.22-37).

Thinking it through

Jesus was certain that his disciples would be persecuted. Do you feel that society today is sympathetic to faith?

21st March

Matthew 10.26-42 – Costly discipleship

Jesus tells his disciples that the path of discipleship is not an easy one, but they have no reason to be afraid. He uses an image which recalls a part of the Sermon on the Mount, *there is no need to be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows* (compare with Matthew 6.27). It is clear too that Jesus is well aware that his teaching will cause controversy, division and even violence, *Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have come to bring not peace but a sword.*

Now follow words from Jesus which we find difficult, *No one who prefers father or mother to me is not worthy of me. No one who prefers son or daughter to me is worthy of me.* These words arise, surely, from the context in which Jesus and his first disciples were living. They emphasise the urgency of the gospel he proclaims, and his (and his early followers') strongly held belief that the *end-time* is imminent. We may not share that view, but we should not completely disregard sayings like this. More congenial to us is what follows, although it carries the same message for us, *Anyone who does take the cross and follow in my footsteps is not worthy of me.*

Discipleship might be costly but it does bring its own rewards, *anyone who loses life for my sake will find it ... Amen, I say to you, will most certainly not go without the reward.*

Thinking it through

Is faith necessarily divisive?

22nd March

Matthew 11.1-15 – The Baptist's question

Matthew moves from Jesus' teaching to a narrative passage, which begins with the imprisoned John the Baptist sending disciples to ask, *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect someone else?* Matthew tells us that this is because he heard what the *Messiah* (or *Christ*) was doing. This is the first time in the gospel that Jesus is described as the *Messiah* since the introductory material in chapters 1 and 2. Jesus' response is that John should decide for himself from the evidence, *the blind see again, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life and the good news is proclaimed to the poor, and blessed is anyone who does not find me a cause of stumbling.* (Perhaps that last statement is a heavy hint to John that he needs to believe that Jesus is *the one who is to come.*)

This is followed by another passage that emphasises Jesus' belief in the end-time. John is a prophet and his coming has brought with it violence in the kingdom of Heaven. Here Jesus is probably referring to the opposition he is facing from, perhaps, evil spirits or such as Herod or the Pharisees. It is hard to be sure. But what we can be sure of is that Jesus believed he was bringing in the end-time.

Thinking it through

Jesus' answer to John shows what he believes the gospel to be. Have we lost sight of it?

23rd March

Matthew 11.16-30 – Who can hear the good news?

In the remainder of this chapter we hear a series of laments from Jesus about the unreadiness of the people to hear the good news which he is proclaiming. The first comes in the form of the parable of the playing children. Just as some children join in the games while others do not, so some hear Jesus words while others disregard them, *We played the pipes for you and you wouldn't dance; we sang dirges and you wouldn't beat your breasts.*

This is followed by a lament over the towns on the shores of the lake, Chorazin, Bethsaida, *if the works of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago,* and Capernaum, *if the works of power done in you had been done in Sodom it would have remained till this day* (see Genesis 19.1-29).

The chapter concludes with Jesus observing that it is the childlike who are ready to hear his message, *I bless you, Father, ... for hiding these things from the wise and the clever and revealing them to infants*. Jesus calls specifically to those who are most ready to hear him, *Come to me, all you who are overburdened, and I will give you rest... For my yoke is easy and my burden light*. Probably Jesus is referring to a common Rabbinic image of the burden and yoke of the Law (see Ecclesiasticus 51.26). Jesus' new law offers a different yoke.

Thinking it through

Do we make the teaching of Jesus too complicated?

Lent 3 - 24th March

Matthew 12.1-14 – Disputes about the Sabbath

We've not heard a great deal yet of disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees but here we have two stories of disagreements, and there will be many more to follow. Both of these disputes arise from the breaking of the instructions about correct observance of the Sabbath. The disciples pluck ears of corn, thus *working* on the Sabbath. Jesus' justification comes a) because of the disciples' hunger, b) from the events of 1 Samuel 21.1-9, and c) from appeal to Hosea 6.6.

In the second story the Pharisees appear to expect Jesus to "break" the Sabbath by healing the man with the withered hand. Jesus employs a response he often uses in the gospels of reflecting their question back to them, *Which of you who had only one sheep and it fell down a hole on the Sabbath, would not get hold of it and lift it out?* Although here it is Jesus who answers his own question the Pharisees are forced to answer it themselves. The dispute is averted but, for the first time, Matthew records that the Pharisees, *began to plot against him, discussing how to destroy him*.

Thinking it through

Is it possible to proclaim the gospel without causing upset to someone?

25th March

Matthew 12.15-37 – Jesus and Beelzebul

As Jesus is aware of the Pharisees' plot to do away with him he withdraws. Many people follow him and, although he heals them, he warns them not to make him known; the time is not right. Here Matthew may be seeing the multitudes following him as the inevitable beginning of the new Israel, the Church. Here Matthew sees Jesus as the Servant in Isaiah and sees him fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah. From very early days the Church has seen Jesus as the servant from Isaiah, Isaiah 42.19; 49.1-6; 50.4-11; 52.13-53.12, particularly here because *his voice will not be heard in the streets*, elsewhere because of his undeserved suffering.

And now we return to the accusation of the Pharisees that Jesus *drives out demons only through Beelzebul, the chief of the demons*, which we saw previously in Matthew 9.34. Jesus' reply argues that whether through Beelzebul or by the Spirit of God makes little difference as Satan is sure to be defeated in either case, but he also forces the Pharisees to consider carefully how the claim they make might reflect on themselves, *if it is through Beelzebul that I drive demons out, through whom do your own experts drive them out?*

The Pharisees, and Jesus' other opponents, oppose him at their peril, *be sure that the kingdom of God has caught unawares*. They risk *blasphemy against the Spirit* which *will not be forgiven*. He illustrates his point with two parables of the strong man and of the sound tree. The evidence of the goodness or evil of Jesus, and of his opponents, will be seen in the outcome of their actions and words.

Thinking it through

Does the fruit that your life produces reveal your Christian faith?

26th March

Matthew 12.38-50 – A sign to be rejected?

Some Pharisees were not so much opponents of Jesus as seekers of truth from him. A group ask for a sign and Jesus replies, *the sign [you] will be given is the sign of the prophet Jonah*. He refers here to his three days in the tomb, but the clearly implied point is that even if they see the sign they will not believe it and so will be condemned by those who were penitent as a result of Jonah's

prophecy. They should therefore seek out wisdom from Jesus, *[the Queen of the South] came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and look, there is something greater than Solomon here.*

The account of the final state of the man possessed by a returning unclean spirit is similarly a warning to those who hear Jesus and disregard his teaching; they too will find themselves worse off than before. By contrast Jesus cites the examples of his true kinsfolk, *whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.*

Thinking it through

How can we be sure that we are doing the will of our Father in heaven?

27th March

Matthew 13.1-23 – A sower went out to sow

Here begins the third of Matthew's five blocks of Jesus' teaching. It comprises six parables and some explanations and rationale of Jesus teaching in parables. The teaching takes place on the shores of the lake and Jesus is seated in a boat a little way from the shore.

He begins with one of the best known of all of Jesus' parables – the parable of the sower. This shows many of the typical features of parables. They are short stories that tell a universal truth; the meaning is not revealed in the parable (although in this case Matthew has Jesus explaining its meaning to the disciples); the setting of the story is in people's every day experience; they often admit of more than one interpretation.

The disciples ask Jesus why he speaks in parables. Typically in Matthew's gospel Jesus is fulfilling a prophecy, from Isaiah 6.9-10, *Listen and listen, but never understand! Look and look, but never perceive!* Those who hear and understand are Jesus' disciples (although that term should not here be limited to the Twelve, or even solely to Jesus' close followers).

Then, as if to emphasise the point Jesus explains the parable of the sower, although the explanation is not entirely consistent. Is it the seed or the ground that is the person hearing the word. The point though is clear enough.

Thinking it through

How can we ensure that we are able to hear God's word?

28th March

Matthew 13.24-43 – The kingdom of Heaven is like...

Many of Jesus' parables begin *The kingdom of Heaven is like ...* and here it is compared to a man sowing good seed in his field, a mustard seed and yeast. Each of these parables is simple to understand. The parable of the dandelion explains how membership of the kingdom follows judgement – the good seed is gathered into barns and the dandelion is thrown into the fire, and this is another parable explained to the disciples. The parable of the mustard seed is about the remarkable growth of the kingdom. Although small when sown it grows to a great size. The parable of the yeast suggests the presence of the kingdom is to be seen throughout the world which becomes *leavened all through*. Simple teaching, easily grasped and based in our own experience and reality.

Thinking it through

Where do you see God's kingdom present in the world today?

29th March

Matthew 13.44-58 – A Prophet without honour

Three more parables and a conclusion to this section of teaching leads into a visit to Nazareth, Jesus' home town. The first parables emphasise the priceless nature of the kingdom; once found it must be held on to at all costs. The parable of the dragnet shows the need to be worthy of the kingdom; the good are kept, the rotten discarded.

The conclusion reveals Matthew's sympathy for the scribes. A good scribe protects tradition as well opening up new possibilities.

When Jesus returns to Nazareth (the beginning of another narrative section of Matthew's gospel) Jesus' teaching is seen to be remarkable but his neighbours are unable to take him seriously, *Where did this man get this wisdom and these works of power? Is not this the carpenter's son?* They take offence, not because his teaching and miracles are considered bad but simply because they cannot believe that his apparent authority is anything other than smoke and mirrors, a trick, an act.

Thinking it through

How can we be sure that Jesus is the one we should listen to?

30th March

Matthew 14.1-12 – Herod's guilty conscience

Matthew now turns his attention to Herod (the son of the Herod we heard of earlier, Matthew 2) who has heard of Jesus' teaching and his works of power and clearly feels threatened by his popularity. But he is clearly concerned that Jesus might be *John the Baptist himself; he has risen from the dead*. And then Matthew relates the story that leads to this reaction from Herod. The story is found in Mark's gospel too but Matthew again has drastically abbreviated it. Herod has taken his brother Philip's wife as his wife, although John had warned him that to do so would be against the Law. To silence him Herod had John arrested, but would not have him executed so as not to arouse the anger of the people *who regarded John as a prophet*. He is tricked though by his wife Herodias and her daughter to have John beheaded. Herod obviously feels insecure and craves popularity. John has made life difficult for him and he fears, perhaps, will do the same. Jesus, though, does not directly challenge Herod.

The story serves several purposes for Matthew; to explain the end of John the Baptist, to give a context in which Jesus' ministry is being carried out and to demonstrate the risks to Jesus himself.

Thinking it through

Is it possible that the popularity of Jesus protected him throughout his Galilee ministry?

Lent 4 - 31st March

Matthew 14.13-36 – Two remarkable miracles

Matthew here records two of Jesus' famous and remarkable miracles – the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on water.

When Jesus receives the news of John's death he withdraws *to a lonely place on his own*. This is not the first time that Matthew has noted that Jesus withdraws. He has done this at Matthew 12.15 and will do so again at 15.21. Matthew gives no explanation about why he has done this and in each case Jesus fails to find solitude (if that is what he was trying to do). It may be that this is just a literary device to move Jesus from one place to another in the narrative.

Because the crowds have followed Jesus to this remote place it becomes necessary to find them food. Jesus feeds the five thousand with five loaves and two fish, provided by the disciples. When they gather up the crumbs they fill twelve baskets. This story is found also in Mark's and Luke's gospel, and unusually, in a slightly changed form in John's.

Here, and in Mark's and John's gospel the feeding is followed by the account of Jesus walking on the water. However, Matthew alone adds the account of Peter also walking on the water to come to Jesus. It seems likely that the church for which Matthew was writing his gospel had a great reverence for Peter. This story, although noting his failure of faith, also sees him restored as Jesus helps Peter back into the boat.

Thinking it through

Do you think that the *feeding* miracles have anything to teach us about the eucharist?

1st April

Matthew 15.1-20 – The blind leading the blind

The tension between the Pharisees and Jesus deepens. Here they come to him with a demand that he justify himself. For them, the fact that Jesus' disciples do not wash before eating is evidence that Jesus is no respecter of the *traditions of the elders*. If they can make their criticism stick then Jesus is shown to be an opponent of God and to lack authority. Again, though, he turns their criticism on themselves, *why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?* Jesus shows that the Pharisees themselves use the traditions of the elders to break the Law itself, *Honour your father and your mother* (Exodus 20.12). Their practice, he says, is worse than his, and he accuses of hypocrisy. The disciples are surely right when they say that *the Pharisees were scandalised when they heard what you said*.

The parable, which again Jesus explains to his disciples, demonstrates that it is not what is eaten that defiles, but what people do and say. But where Mark says *Thus he pronounced all foods clean* (Mark 7.19), Matthew draws back a little and, less controversially has Jesus say, *eating with unwashed hands does not make anyone unclean*. Matthew will not have Jesus, as Mark does, appearing to overturn even the tiniest part of the Law.

Jesus is clear to his disciples that they should not follow the ways of the Pharisees for they are *blind leaders of the blind*, recalling a passage from the Sermon on the Mount at Matthew 5.20, *if your righteousness does not surpass*

that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of Heaven.

Thinking it through

Do you think that Jesus deliberately antagonises the Pharisees? Why might he do that?

2nd April

Matthew 15.21-39 – The faith of a Gentile

Matthew changes this story, which is also in Mark's gospel. Rather than have Jesus going to gentile territory Matthew has the the gentile woman come to Jesus. She shows that she has faith by addressing Jesus as *Lord* and *Son of David*. In response to her faith, *Woman, great is your faith*, her daughter is healed instantly.

Matthew often writes of the great crowds that followed Jesus and does so again here. Jesus heals many of them. Matthew's commentary on these healings, *The crowds were astonished to see the deaf speaking, the crippled whole again, the lame walking, and the blind seeing*, brings to mind the answer that Jesus gives to John the Baptist's disciples when they come with John's question (Matthew 11.4-6).

And now Matthew records another miraculous feeding, this time of four thousand.

Thinking it though

How important do you think it is that Jesus healed people and cast out demons? Does it have direct relevance for us today?

3rd April

Matthew 16.1-12 – Signs from heaven

Again the Pharisees, this time with the Sadducees (the first mention of them) ask Jesus to prove himself, this time by giving a sign. Jesus refuses their request; they should read the signs of the times for themselves just as they do when they see a red sky at night or in the morning. Again, as at Matthew 12.39, Jesus says that the only sign that will be given is the sign of Jonah and, although less explicit here, Jesus is presumably referring to his resurrection as

the only sign which will be given, with the same implication that they will be unable to see it.

Jesus warns his disciples to *beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees*. They misunderstand his meaning and it is spelled out for them.

Thinking it through

Is it wrong for us to hope for signs from God? If so, why?

4th April

Matthew 16.13-28 – A turning point

The events recorded here mark a crucial turning point in the story that Matthew is writing in his gospel. The first question that Jesus asks his disciples, *Who do people say the Son of man is?* gives a context to the crucial one to follow. The answer that Jesus is given, *Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets*, reveal that the people do not yet understand. The follow-up, *But you, who do you say I am?* gets to the real point. The implication is that the disciples have now had time to decide who they think Jesus really is. Is he the Messiah, or is he just another religious leader who will be here today but gone tomorrow? Simon Peter's response, *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*, is commended by Jesus. The words of Jesus, *You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church. And the gates of the underworld will never overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of Heaven: whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*, reveal Matthew's great respect for Peter but also reveal a belief that the church and the kingdom are the same thing. As for the renaming of Simon, there is no evidence that Peter (*Petros* in Greek, *Cephas* in Aramaic) was ever a name until this moment where the nickname *Rock* is given to Peter.

This remarkable story is followed by the first explicit prophecy of the passion. This time Peter is the fool. He has understood that Jesus is the Messiah but fails to understand that therefore he must die. Now he is an obstruction for Jesus. The prophecy though is not only of Jesus' suffering but also of the total commitment required of his disciples, *Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine must renounce self and take up the cross and follow me*.

The disciples have seen who Jesus truly is and now the focus moves towards his journey to Jerusalem and his necessary death on the cross.

Thinking it through

What does it imply for us that Peter (and the church) is given the power to forgive sins?

5th April

Matthew 17.1-13 – Transfiguration

Jesus ascends the mountain just as Moses had and there both encounter God's presence. Just as Moses' face shone when he came down from the mountain (Exodus 34.29) so is Jesus transfigured. Jesus is acclaimed by a voice from heaven just as was heard at his baptism by John, *This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favour. Listen to him.* The appearance of Moses and Elijah reinforce the message in the last section that Jesus is the chosen Messiah and that his coming has eternal significance. The presence of Jesus' closest disciples declares that the coming of the Messiah should not be a hidden event but one in which the Messiah is revealed to the world. So significant is this event to Peter that he offers to build three shelters to preserve the moment but that is impossible.

The disciples know the tradition that Elijah's return will precede the coming of the Messiah and they are led to understand that he has returned in the person of John the Baptist, whose significance is gradually revealed up to this point in Matthew's gospel. This moment is not to be spoken of, says Jesus, *until the Son of man has risen from the dead.*

Thinking it through

In what ways have you encountered the glory of Jesus Christ?

6th April

Matthew 17.14-27 – Faith to move mountains

The healing of the epileptic demoniac is used by Jesus to teach about faith. The disciples are unable to cast out the demon although they have been given authority by Jesus (Matthew 10.1). Jesus' complaint, *Faithless and perverse generation* is a reference to Deuteronomy 32.5, perhaps another parallel with Moses who complains of the Israelites, *They have acted perversely.* When the disciples ask why they were unable to drive out the demon Jesus tells them it was because they *have so little faith.* Then he says words which must have astonished the disciples, *if your faith is the size of a mustard seed you will say*

to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move; nothing will be impossible for you. The saying is certainly hyperbolic (a device Jesus uses occasionally, see Matthew 7.3-5) but may also be an implied criticism of the disciples’ lack of faith and an assertion that even the least significant amount of faith can achieve remarkable things.

Now we hear a second prophecy of the passion following quickly on the last (Matthew 16.22), again with a prophecy of the resurrection to follow.

In the book of Exodus (30.11-16) we read of the Law which requires every Israelite to pay an annual half-shekel tax to redeem their lives. Peter is challenged about whether Jesus pays; he does, says Peter. Later Jesus tells Peter that they should not have to pay because they are sons, but sends him to find a shekel in the mouth of a fish to pay the tax for both of them to avoid offence (recalling Jesus’ justification of his receiving Baptism from John, Matthew 3.15).

Thinking it through

How seriously should we take Jesus’ words that with faith *nothing will be impossible for you*?

Lent 5 – 7th April

Matthew 18.1-10 – Who is the greatest?

Chapter 18 contains Jesus’ fourth section of teaching in Matthew’s gospel. It begins with Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ question, *Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?* Jesus asserts that only those who *change and become like little children* will enter the kingdom of Heaven. Humility, says Jesus, is the key; welcoming the child (the humble one) is welcoming Jesus. But those who cause a child to stumble would be better thrown into the sea with a *great millstone round the neck*. Jesus then changes to talking about the disciples themselves and how they might cause themselves to stumble. Whatever causes them to stumble should be rejected, *it is better for you to enter into life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire*.

Thinking it through

This passage is often considered an encouragement to us, but is it rather one of Jesus’ harder sayings?

8th April

Matthew 18.11-20 – Recovering the lost

Here is one of Jesus' best loved parables, the parable of the lost sheep. Luke here groups together two more parables about recovering the lost – the lost drachma and the Prodigal son (Luke 15.4-32). Matthew does not feel the need to ram the point home (or possibly does not know of the other two parables in Luke 15). Nevertheless his point is well made; the rejoicing of the owner of the lost sheep demonstrates the joy in heaven because *it is never the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost*. Matthew does not share Luke's verse, *there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner repenting than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance* (Luke 15.7)

The paragraph that follows, though, does add context to this parable as Jesus outlines a means of settling differences in the faith community. Jesus recalls his charge to Peter (Matthew 16.19), *whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*. Sins can be forgiven, differences settled and prayers answered if the community is united, *if two of you on earth agree on any matter, whatever you ask, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them*.

Thinking it through

Is the parable of the lost sheep a comfort or a challenge to us?

9th April

Matthew 18.21-35 – Not seven times

In response to Jesus' teaching his disciples about settling differences Peter asks him how often *must I forgive a brother or sister who wrongs me? As often as seven times?* There must be a limit, he thinks. Jesus response in another example of hyperbole in his teaching, *Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times*. There can be no limit; the number Jesus gives is beyond counting (at least in the context). He then goes on to teach the disciples about the values in the kingdom of Heaven through a parable, *The kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king... who settles his accounts and cancels a servant who has an enormous debt to him*. Although the servant promises to repay his master if he gives him time both must know that this could never happen. The servant, though, does not show such mercy to a fellow servant

from whom he demands a the repayment of a tiny debt. The master hearing of it *handed him over to his torturers till he should pay all his debt*. Jesus sums up by saying *that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother and sister from your heart*. God's forgiveness is dependent on us being forgiving (compare with Matthew 6.12).

Thinking it through

Are there circumstances in which it would be permissible to withhold forgiveness?

10th April

Matthew 19.1-12 – Marriage and divorce

Jesus' teaching on marriage is rooted in the Law as he quotes from Genesis 2.24, *a man leaves his father and mother and becomes attached to his wife, and the two become one flesh*. His interpretation of this text is that therefore, *what God has united, no one may divide* and rules out divorce. When his disciples pointed out that Moses permitted divorce Jesus claims that this was never the intention of the Law but was a provision made because *you were so hard-hearted*. Jesus makes an exception in the case of an *illicit* marriage, which probably refers to a marriage under gentile law. The disciples' response that *it is not good to marry* probably accords with Matthew's own view and is certainly in keeping with much of the early Church's teaching, and particularly Paul (1 Corinthians 7).

Thinking it through

This teaching seems harsh to us now. Why? How far should we accept Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce?

11th April

Matthew 19.13-30 – The camel and the eye of a needle

It would appear that the disciples have still not grasped the teaching of Jesus about welcoming children (Matthew 18.1-11). They turn away the children brought to Jesus but Jesus welcomes them warmly. He blesses them and gently reminds the disciples that *it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs*.

The story that follows is perhaps included here as a contrast to what has come before. The children, who bring nothing, are the possessors of the kingdom, the rich young man who has great wealth excludes himself by his attachment to earthly riches. Although he has kept the commandments it is not enough, *If you wish to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give your money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come follow me.* This is entirely consistent with Jesus' teaching in the sermon on the mount (Matthew 6.19-21). The young sadly goes away but we are not told whether he followed Jesus' advice.

Jesus uses this as an opportunity to teach more about how wealth is a barrier to the kingdom, *it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven.* The disciples again are shocked by Jesus' teaching, *Who can be saved, then?* But Jesus explains that nothing is impossible for God.

Thinking it through

How should Jesus' instruction to the rich young man affect what we do with our *wealth*?

12th April

Matthew 20.1-16 – Fair pay for a day's work

Another parable here to help us understand what the kingdom of Heaven is like. Here it is like a landowner who hires labourers to work in his vineyard. He takes them on throughout the day and at the end of the day, when he pays them for their work, he begins by calling the last to come. Each one he gives one denarius, the wage for a day's work. When the last is called he expects more; he's worked all day in the heat of the sun. But he too receives a denarius – and grumbles about the unfairness. The landowner tells him that he has not been treated unfairly because he agreed the wage at the start of the day, *My friend, I am not being unjust to you; did we not agree on one denarius? I choose to pay the last as much as I pay you. Is it not permissible for me to do what I like with my own? Or are you envious because I am generous?* And Jesus concludes with the words, *Thus the last will be first and the first, last.* The kingdom has only one reward and that is for everybody who comes into it. If Jesus' final word in this paragraph seems harsh it is in keeping with his teaching about the joy over the penitent and the finding of those who are lost.

Thinking it through

Is the landowner being unfair? Would God be unfair to treat the most recent entrant into the kingdom less well than the first?

13th April

Matthew 20.17-34 – Not to be served but to serve

Now we encounter Jesus' third prophecy of the passion and resurrection. Jesus is now on his way to Jerusalem. In the first prophecy of what must happen Jesus said he was to *suffer grievously at the hands of the elders and chief priest and scribes* (Matthew 16.21); in the second he said that he would be *delivered into the power of men* (Matthew 17.22) and here that he will be *handed over to the chief priests and scribes*. The whole array of authority in Jerusalem is against him; there can be no doubt about what will happen, and there will be no more prophecies about his death.

The mother of James and John, *the sons of Zebedee*, requests seats at the right and left hand of Jesus in the kingdom. These places are not Jesus' to grant but the request provides him with another opportunity to emphasise that discipleship cannot be the easy option. They cannot have the places of honour but can they *drink the cup that I am going to drink*?

This is followed immediately by another healing story, of two blind men. Again, Matthew gets this story from Mark, and again he doubles the number of men healed by Jesus. This story surely relates to the request of the brothers. They showed their spiritual *blindness* and hear Jesus heals the blindness of two men who subsequently follow him, becoming disciples.

Thinking it through

What is it about being Jesus' disciple that you find challenging?

Palm Sunday - 14th April

Matthew 21.1-17 – Destination Jerusalem

Jesus finally arrives at Jerusalem. In Matthew's gospel this is Jesus' first visit to Jerusalem. It's more than likely that he had been there before but this entry is so important in the gospel and that importance is emphasised by it being the first visit recorded. It is, of course, the visit during which Jesus will be arrested, put on trial, condemned and die on the cross. It will come as no surprise that prophecies are fulfilled as Jesus enters the city: Zechariah has

prophesied that *your king is coming, humble and riding on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden* (Zechariah 9.9); the song of the crowd is from Psalm 118.26, *Blessed in the name of the Lord is he who is coming*. The story also focusses on the popularity of Jesus with the people. He is heralded as *the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee*.

But already there are signs of that tension between Jesus and the religious leaders, which now will take on a more sinister turn. Jesus' first act in Jerusalem would appear calculated to stoke the embers. He overturns tables and ejects the money changers and dealers. The crowd acclaim him the *son of David*, a messianic title. The chief priests and scribes question this but Jesus accepts the crowd's acclaim, *Have you never read: By the mouths of children, babes in arms, you have made sure of praise?* which is a quote from Psalm 8.2.

Jesus withdraws to Bethany, outside Jerusalem, but these events have set the scene for all that is to follow.

Thinking it through

Matthew portrays Jesus as a king as he enters Jerusalem. Why do you suppose this might anger the authorities?

15th April

Matthew 21.18-22.22 – Follow the right leader

The story of the fig tree is a strange one. It is not immediately obvious what it means. It does provide an opportunity for teaching about the things that can be done with faith, *if you have faith, everything you ask for in prayer, you will receive*. This is followed by a debate about authority with the chief priests and elders. Jesus refuses to answer their question unless they can tell him whether John's baptism had a human or divine origin. It is an impossible question to answer and so Jesus declines to identify the source of his authority.

Three parables follow which reveal the consequences of the religious leaders making poor choices about what being a disciple means. They will be rejected, like the son who does no work, the tenants who exploit the vineyard rather than paying the owner and the wedding guests who do not come.

And finally Jesus gives his view on tribute to Caesar; except that it turns again into a challenge to the religious leaders, *Pay Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and God what belongs to God*.

Thinking it through

What *false* authorities do we see in our own time?

16th April

Matthew 22.23-23.39 – The greatest commandment

The teaching continues but all of it challenges the authorities to respond. This is all aimed at the leaders. The Sadducees question Jesus about resurrection and they are shown to be asking the wrong question: it is not about death but about life, *He is God, not of the dead, but of the living.*

The Pharisees and Sadducees get together to try to catch Jesus out. Their question is designed to trip him up, perhaps by getting him to say something unorthodox, but his answer could not be more orthodox. But Jesus follows up with a question of his own, *What is your opinion about the Messiah? Whose son is he?* Their answer allows Jesus to show that they have not fully understood who the Messiah actually is. His challengers are made to look foolish.

The whole of chapter 23 is a searching criticism of the Pharisees and the scribes. His great criticism of them is that they are hypocrites, *They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, but they do not lift a finger to move them; Alas for you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites!*

The chapter ends with the last words of Jesus to the crowds in the gospel and those words are a lament over their city which has killed *the prophets* and stoned *those who are sent to it*. He prophesies its downfall.

Thinking it through

Hypocrisy is a charge sometimes levelled at the Church. Is that fair?

17th April

Matthew 24.1-25.46 – The end is nigh

Chapter 24 is full of prophecies about the end-time. Jesus speaks of times of great tribulation to come. The faithful need to beware of false prophets, take care not to be led astray, be alert and ready for the second coming. The images are vivid and urgent.

The chapter ends with two parables about the need for readiness. And the whole of chapter 25 picks up the same theme, developing it with the need to prepare for a time of judgement.

The parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25.31-46) is the longest in Matthew's gospel and also among the most developed in terms of the *story* it tells. Much of Jesus' teaching in Jerusalem has been about the indifference of the religious leaders to the plight of ordinary people. This parable tells of a judgement which rewards compassion and punishes indifference, legalism and avoiding the reality of the lives of so many who suffer, *Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or needing clothes, sick or in prison and did not come to your aid?*

Thinking it through

Jesus makes clear that doing nothing about suffering is not an option. What can we do to relieve the needy?

Maundy Thursday - 18th April

Matthew 26 – The last supper and the arrest

The whole tone changes now as Matthew begins his account of the Passion of Jesus. The chief priests now plot to find a way to arrest Jesus and have him killed. Meanwhile, Jesus, a guest at the house of Simon the leper, is approached by a woman who pours expensive ointment on his head. The disciples are indignant but Jesus tells them that the woman has a better grasp of what is now happening than they, *When she poured this ointment on my body, she did it for my burial... what she has done will also be told, in remembrance of her.* Judas, perhaps using this event as a pretext for his betrayal, goes to the chief priests and negotiates to hand Jesus over to them. Jesus sends his disciples to prepare for the Passover meal. At the meal he tells them that one of their number will betray him. They all question who it could be, each denying that it is he; Jesus responds, *It is you who said it.* Judas is not identified by Jesus and it might be that Matthew believes that Jesus is not yet sure exactly who he can trust among the twelve.

Matthew records the institution of holy communion, instructing the disciples to remember him in breaking bread and sharing wine.

Jesus may not know exactly who will betray him, but he knows that Peter will deny him, which, of course, he denies. Jesus leads his three closest associates into the Garden of Gethsemane where he prays, *My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Only not as I want, but as you.*

The arrest takes place in the garden and Jesus is taken to the high priest, Caiaphas, where two witnesses are found who give evidence against him. When questioned Jesus does not directly deny that he is the *Son of God* and

the priests condemn him. Meanwhile, Peter out in the courtyard, denies three times that he knows Jesus. Hearing the cock crow Peter remembers Jesus' prophesy and goes outside and weeps bitterly.

Thinking it through

Little betrayals matter. Peter's denial makes no difference to Jesus' fate, but how do you think Peter was changed by it?

Good Friday - 19th April

*Matthew 27.1-56 – **The trial and sentence***

Jesus is taken from the high priest's house to Pilate. Judas realising that he has done wrong tries to return the *blood money* and went and hanged himself. The money is taken and used to acquire the potter's field for the burial of foreigners. Matthew says that action fulfils the prophecy of Jeremiah although the passage he quotes is from Zechariah 11.12-13.

Jesus stands before Pilate who asks him, *Are you the king of the Jews?* To which Jesus replies, *You say so.* These are the last words Jesus speaks in Matthew's gospel before he is nailed to the cross. Matthew gives the strong impression that Jesus need say no more because his destiny is now fulfilled. His death is inevitable. The provocation of the authorities has run its natural course. Jesus, although suffering, has won.

He is condemned and taken to be crucified. He is mocked by the soldiers and a crown of thorns is placed on his head.

The silence of Jesus from his last answer to Pilate makes Matthew's account of the crucifixion especially bleak. Every word that is spoken, every action is to torture Jesus, emotionally, physically or spiritually.

On the cross Jesus cries out with words of desolation, quoting from Psalm 22, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* The psalm, though, begins with these words of desolation but by the end is a hymn of triumph to God.

Jesus cries out and *yielded up his spirit.*

Matthew concludes his account of Jesus' death with material most of which is found only in this gospel. The rising of the dead and their appearance after Jesus resurrection is probably Matthew's way of telling us that the resurrection is for all and not for Jesus alone.

Thinking it through

What does the suffering of Jesus on the cross have to say about the suffering in the world?

20th April

Matthew 27.57-66 – Jesus is buried

Joseph of Arimathea comes to ask Pilate for the body of Jesus so that he might be buried. Pilate grants permission. Joseph, a disciple of Jesus is mentioned in all four gospels, but only in the account of the burial. Although there are legendary stories about him (such as that he brought Jesus to Glastonbury as a boy) these few brief verses are all that we know of him.

Jesus is laid in the tomb and the large stone rolled across its entrance. *Mary of Magdala and the other Mary* are witnesses of this. The chief priests and Pharisees ask Pilate to set a guard so that Jesus' disciples cannot *come and steal him away and tell the people, "He has been raised from the dead."*

Matthew includes all this detail to show that the resurrection cannot have been a fraud. The authorities were guarding the body; the resurrection must have been a miracle – there is no other way that the tomb can have been found to be empty on the third day.

Thinking it through

What do you think the disciples were doing while Jesus was lying in the tomb?

Easter Day - 21st April

Matthew 28.1-10 – He has been raised from the dead

On the first day of the week Mary of Magdala and the other Mary come to tomb and witness the opening of the tomb by an angel. The guards are clearly rendered unconscious. The tomb, though, is already empty and the angel explains, *Do not be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus, who has been crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said.* The women are instructed to go to the disciples and tell them that Jesus has been raised and that they must go to Galilee.

As they leave they see Jesus himself, who greets them and tells them that he will meet all his disciples in Galilee.

Thinking it through

All the gospels tell us that it was the women who found the empty tomb and first saw the risen Jesus. Why do you suppose God chose them rather than the twelve?

22nd April

Matthew 28.11-15 – Hush money

The guards tell the chief priests what has happened and a story is concocted to discredit the disciples account of the events of that morning. The guards are bribed with *a considerable sum of money* to say that the body was stolen by the disciples while they slept. The chief priests will ensure, in return, that they do not get into trouble.

Thinking it through

Is it possible to keep such events quiet?

23rd April

Matthew 28.16-20 – Go, make disciples of all nations

Matthew, like Mark has few resurrection appearances of Jesus. Apart from the appearance to the women on the day of the resurrection this is the only one. It corresponds to the story of the ascension in Luke's gospel. The command he gives them on the mountain in Galilee has formed the prime commission for the Church ever since, *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe everything I have commanded you. And, look, I am with always till the end of time.*

Thinking it through

What does it mean to you that Jesus rose from the dead, and that he has given this commission to his Church?



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