

Anglican
Church
Diocese of Perth



REIMAGINING MATTHEW

A RESOURCE FOR ADVENT YEAR A



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THEOLOGY • EDUCATION • ADVOCACY

TRANSFORMING THOUGHT AND ACTION

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Foreword

THE MOST REVEREND ROGER HERFT

IT IS A DELIGHT to write the foreword for this 2013 Advent booklet. The eight Bible studies and epilogue have been written by nine priests of the Diocese of Perth. These are powerful, provocative and inspiring Bible studies. They are accessible, scholarly and imaginative; but above all faithful to the Word and to the task of preparing us to listen to “Matthew’s distinct ‘take’ on the Good News of Jesus Christ.” Thus they are an excellent preparation for our entry into Year A of the three-year lectionary cycle.

These reflections can be used as Bible studies, by individuals or groups. The reflections could also be used as a resource in the preparation for sermons (particularly the four which are drawn from the Gospel reading for the four Sundays in Advent). I offer a brief word about each of the eight studies and the ‘postlude’.

Dean Spalding opens the collection with an apparently uninspiring text, the lengthy family tree of Jesus. But Dean ably demonstrates that there is far more than first meets the eye with this text. Far from being dull, this turns out to be a finely crafted and colourful beginning to Matthew’s gospel. The genealogy proclaims loudly the nature of the world and the nature of the Messiah who enters it. The family tree turns out to be a ‘gospel in miniature’ which describes the wonder of salvation in which God enters intimately into the complex lives of those to whom he shows grace and mercy both in the past and today.

Peter Llewellyn writes about the text for the First Sunday of Advent – Matthew’s description of Jesus’ Second Coming. The three main themes are hope, fear and readiness. Peter’s reading offers us a way to ‘reimagine’ the second coming not as “a threat, nor a catastrophe, but the fulfilment of all that God has done in Christ.” This is the same Christ who describes himself as a lifter of burdens (Matthew 11:28-30).

David Wood’s study called “Matthew’s Terrifying Christmas Story” warns us of the losses if we sanitise Matthew’s account of the Jesus’ infancy narratives in order to make it more palatable for children. “We dare not reduce it to yet another story to grow out of rather than a story to grow into.” David’s detailed, thorough and imaginative analysis of the text is punctuated with excellent questions for a contemporary reader, including

the crucial question of how the Holy Family's flight to Egypt might alter our sense of responsibility for asylum seekers.

John Dunnill explains the 'double movement' of the text for the Second Sunday of Advent: The Proclamation of John the Baptist about Jesus. This double movement is a combination of 'looking back' (to the Hebrew Scriptures) and 'looking forward' to our hopes for the future (both immediate and long-term). John the Baptist's proclamation concludes with him "pointing away from himself, towards Jesus... All the force of our 'looking backward' from the whole history of God's dealings with Israel is now focused on this 'looking forward' to one man, Jesus."

Christine Simes' dealing with 'Jesus' Encounter with a Canaanite Woman' is a 'no-holds-barred' and utterly truthful examination of a difficult text in which it is clear that Jesus' starting position is confined to saving Israel. What transpires in all but the last verse or two of the passage is "pretty shocking to our ears." And yet this catalytic woman appears to change Jesus and the course of the ministry conducted in his name to the Gentiles (Matthew follows this extraordinary account by a mass healing of Gentiles who are moved then to praise "the God of Israel" and by a mass feeding filled with symbolic numerology that suggests that it was a feeding of Gentiles).

Gill Rookyard's powerful treatment of the text for the Third Sunday in Advent picks up where the Second Sunday reading of 'John the Baptist's Proclamation' left off. The two texts together form an evocative 'diptych,' and so too these studies that examine them. After the boldness of the proclamation in Matthew 3, the doubt-filled question that John asked from his imprisonment is poignant and moving. The honest expression of such doubts by this powerful prophet of God during the time of his trial offers Christians who doubt in times of trial great consolation. Gill tells an authentic Australian story of a faithful Lutheran missionary, Carl Strehlow, whose life story is another reminder that such questioning cannot be the final word – that it is not an unusual or shameful thing to struggle with doubts.

Ryan Green's provocative treatment of Jesus' Parable of the Sheep and the Goats reminds us to apply our reimagining of Matthew to Matthew's portrayal of the Church. "This is the Church reimagined – reimagined as a vulnerable and at-risk community standing in complete solidarity with the poor and outcast, those who not only side with the broken and the dispossessed, but a church itself comprising of 'the least of these.'" Ryan tells the story of the actions of Lawrence of Rome that led to his martyrdom. When a Roman prefect demanded that the treasures of the Church be collected by Lawrence so that they could be confiscated by the Roman Empire, Lawrence returned with the poor and the destitute, proclaiming, 'These are the treasures of the Church.'

Elizabeth Smith takes the text for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, and reclaims what is usually subtitled 'The Birth of Jesus' as 'The Annunciation to Joseph'. By shining a spotlight on the often neglected character of Joseph, Elizabeth teases out a sensitive portrayal

of ‘an excellent father’. Incorporating a survey of the telling comments of some contemporary parish children adds a delightful grounding to this reflection’s second part. The logic for the confidence in this positive portrayal of Joseph has a simple elegance. “We can count on it, simply because we know for sure that Jesus grew up to preach about a fatherly God who loves having all of us as his children. That was Jesus’ message, and it must have been Joseph’s gift, that he loved having Jesus as his child.”

The ‘postlude’ (‘Reimagining Matthew – Beyond Advent’) by Mothy Varkey and Dean Spalding extends the usefulness of this booklet by casting a glance into the rest of Year A, as the Lectionary guides us through a sample of most other parts of the Gospel of Matthew. Their note that the Lectionary has to be ‘choosey’ (as only half the text of the gospel can be covered in Sunday readings) is an apt reminder that reliance on Sunday readings alone cannot make an adequate scriptural diet. In order to experience the world transforming nature of scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we must try to supplement the meagre Sunday portions with fuller reading habits. I would challenge all to try and make an opportunity to read the whole of the Gospel of Matthew sometime in the New Year. Then we can better understand the context of those ‘samples’ that we read corporately on the Sunday as we gather together as the Church.

I wish to thank the nine contributors to this booklet, also for their willingness to conduct many of these Bible studies publically both at Swanbourne and ‘regionally’ (Esperance, Wongan Hills, Joondalup and South Lake). I also wish to thank Dean Spalding, the Dean of Studies at the Wollaston Theological College for instigating the writing of this resource and for his editing of the overall work.

I am happy to commend these Advent studies to the Church in the hope that they will be a blessing to those who use them.

+ *Roger*

The Most Reverend Roger Herft, AM
Archbishop of Perth

INTRODUCTION

Reimagining Matthew

DEAN SPALDING

MATTHEW'S GOSPEL has a reputation of being the 'church's gospel.'¹ Matthew's is the first gospel in the order that the four gospels are most frequently arranged in the canon of the New Testament. It is often the gospel with which Christians are most familiar.² Sometimes this familiarity has led, not to contempt, but to a level of 'domestication.' Our familiarity can make Matthew's gospel feel 'safe,' 'accommodated' and 'tamed.' There is perhaps a need among Christians today to come freshly to Matthew's gospel and in some sense, 'reimage' or 'reimagine' its message. Year A, the year in which we take our Sunday Eucharist gospel readings from Matthew, commences on Sunday 1 December 2013.

There are two streams to the following Bible studies. One stream examines the Matthew readings for the four Sundays of Advent. These four are:

- Readiness for Jesus' Coming – Matthew 24:36-44 (1st Sunday of Advent) by Peter Llewellyn;
- The Proclamation of John the Baptist – Matthew 3:1-12 (2nd Sunday of Advent) by John Dunnill;
- The Messengers of John the Baptist, and Jesus Speaks about John – Matthew 11:2-11 (3rd Sunday of Advent) by Gill Rookyard;
- The Annunciation to Joseph – Matthew 1:18-25 (4th Sunday of Advent) by Elizabeth Smith;

We have also deliberately chosen four surprising excerpts from Matthew's gospel to 'shake us' out from our dull assumptions about how well we know the message of

¹ Indeed, Matthew's is the only one of the four gospels to refer to the 'church' (*ekklēsia* – once in Matthew 16:18 and twice in 18:17).

² For instance, Christians are usually for more familiar with Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) than Luke's shorter version (Luke 11:2-4); and familiarity with Christ's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 4:23-7:29) is greater than the Lukan 'Sermon on a Plain' (6:17-49).

Matthew's gospel. These four readings are intended to be useful for mid-week Advent Bible studies. The four readings are:

- Jesus' Family Tree – Matthew 1:1-17 by Dean Spalding;
- Matthew's Terrifying Christmas Story – Matthew 2:1-23 by David Wood;
- Jesus' Encounter with a Canaanite Woman – Matthew 15:21-28 by Christine Simes;
- Jesus' Parable of the Sheep and the Goats – Matthew 25:31-46 by Ryan Green.

This resource concludes with a challenge to 'Reimagine Matthew – Beyond Advent.' This final section looks forward into the Lectionary reading for Sundays and seasonal Holy Days in Year A and makes some general comments about how contemporary scholarship views Matthew today and makes some recommendations for responsible reading of Matthew. Matthew's gospel can at first glance appear very severe in what it has to say about the keeping of the Jewish law or torah (Matthew 5:17-20), the final judgement (Matthew 25:41) and apparently xenophobic attitudes to Gentiles and other outsiders (Matthew 10:5-6). But on closer examination Matthew's comments about law-keeping are complex and not meant to be burdensome (Matthew 11:28); Gentiles (the 'outsiders') are shown in a positive light in episodes punctuating the entire Gospel (2:11, 15:28, 27:54, 28:19); and there is a permeating sense of the God who desires mercy, not sacrifice (9:13, 12:7 quoting Hosea 6:6) and who comes to lift burdens.³

³ One is referred to the first two introductory segments of Brendan Byrne's commentary on Matthew's gospel, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today* (St Paul's, Strathfield/London, 2004), pp vii–xiii, 1–8.

MID-WEEK BIBLE STUDY 1

Jesus' Family Tree: Skeletons in the Closet

MATTHEW 1:1-17 | DEAN SPALDING

FIRST WORDS are so important. So why, many of us wonder, would Matthew begin his Gospel with words so astonishingly dull as Jesus' lengthy family tree? So what, if Abiud was the father of Eliakim, or that Eliakim was the father of Azor? How could that possibly be 'Good News' (or Gospel)? And why right at the beginning? Isn't this a good way to lose an audience? Even our Lectionary avoids this reading on Sundays and has it safely tucked away on a weekday Eucharist!

► *Commence by reading, preferably aloud, Matthew 1:1-17.*

We need to remember that to Matthew's original audience these forty-two names were not all strangers. At least half the list was recognisable to those familiar with the Old Testament. About a third was Jewish monarchy. But even if many of the names were known figures, it would still make a very dull read if it weren't for Matthew's fine crafting of this genealogy.

There is a mathematical precision to the editing down of the lists: the 42 men in the family tree are divided very precisely into three groups of fourteen. Matthew may have skipped a generation or two here and there! David, whose name figures prominently throughout the genealogy has a three-lettered Hebrew name spelled *dalet-vav-dalet* (or 'DVD' – Hebrew had no vowels) which in Hebrew arithmetic adds to fourteen (4 + 6 + 4). So even the *structure* of the genealogy (3 × 14) cries out (at least to someone who was familiar with Jewish numerology) that Jesus is the rightful 'son of David'.

The three-part division into fourteen also makes mention of some key events in the history of Israel: patriarchal beginnings (with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), the establishment of monarchy (with David the son of Jesse) and the exile or deportation to Babylon (mentioned twice to emphasise its devastating significance). There is the allusion to Israel's hope for an anointed king (or Messiah) to fill the shoes of David (David whose number is fourteen). But most remarkably there is the surprising intrusion of four

women. I say ‘intrusion’ because women didn’t usually figure in family trees. And they’re not Hebrew princesses either.

► *If doing as a Bible Study, you may wish to break into four groups at this stage and read of these four women. The four accounts are in: Genesis 38; Joshua 2 and 6:22-25; Ruth 1–4; and 2 Samuel 11 and 12:1-24.*

The four women are:

- Tamar, a Canaanite woman who sleeps with her Hebrew father-in-law to shame the clan which has forgotten her social welfare. Her father-in-law, Judah, had promised her his youngest son after the untimely death of his two elder sons had left Tamar a widow (twice!), and worse, childless. In those days children were your social welfare for your old age (‘It’s all there in Chapter 38 of Genesis’ – the chapter Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical *Joseph and His Technicolour Dreamcoat* tactfully omitted).
- Rahab, a Gentile prostitute from Jericho whose life is spared (when ‘the walls come tumblin’ down’) because she has provided lodging for the Hebrew spies and told a timely lie to aid their escape (Joshua 2 and 6:22-25).
- Ruth, another foreigner, a Moabite woman (another widow) whose love for her Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi, takes her to Bethlehem where she is redeemed by a marriage to a Hebrew kinsman, but not until she is rejected by a closer kinsman who will not risk any loss to his personal estate. The “scheme” that Naomi comes up with to achieve Ruth’s marriage to good old Boaz is most unorthodox: the plan involves bathing, perfume and timing Ruth’s visit to the threshing floor where the men have been celebrating the harvest, so that they have had some time to drink and then the instruction to lie close and uncover his ‘feet’ (Ruth 1–4).
- And lastly, an unnamed Jewish woman whom we know to be Bathsheba. Bathsheba had married a Gentile (a soldier for King David named Uriah the Hittite). Bathsheba is forced to betray Uriah when her king, David, makes his adulterous proposition (which, given the power disparity, really amounts to rape). This is the same David who adds to his sins by murdering Bathsheba’s husband to conceal the truth about the inception of Bathsheba’s pregnancy (2 Samuel 11 and 12:1-24).

Perhaps Matthew’s genealogy isn’t so dull after all, and deserves a closer look!

Despite David’s gross failings, God, because of God’s faithfulness, had promised to establish an everlasting kingdom through David. Therefore the Jews expected the Messiah to be the ‘son of David’. But just what sort of Davidic King would the Messiah be? How would he fill this role? Well, many Jews saw his role purely in terms of ‘saving Israel’. The Messiah would be the hope of those with whom God has worked in the past. This thinking puts God squarely on the side of Israel: the Messiah will come as Good News (or Gospel) but only if you’re a Jew! Israel’s enemies, like the Egyptians, or the Philistines, the Babylonians, the Greeks and now the Romans, are God’s enemies. God will



This painting depicts Rahab sitting in her window letting out the scarlet cord.

Gwen Meharg, *Rahab*, watercolour, 22 × 30 cm

Source: <http://www.drawneartogod.com>; used with permission.

act to restore Israel and defeat her enemies – or so one could conclude if you ignored the amazing surprise of the four women in Matthew’s genealogy.

These women stand as testament to three radical truths. First, God is not merely concerned with men of renown (nor even merely with men!). As demonstrated in the past, God is also concerned for women, and their welfare. In particular God has shown a compassionate interest in the least powerful and most vulnerable women: childless widows. This is Good News! Tamar and Ruth are both childless widows and therefore, in that time, socially and financially destitute. And it is to such that God shows mercy and brings salvation.

Second, the four women serve to remind us that God’s concerns radiate beyond Israel’s borders. Tamar is a Canaanite; Rahab is a citizen of Jericho; and Ruth is a Moabite, a people to whom some Jews displayed racial hatred. God, it would appear, has no great respect for the concept of ‘nationalism’ or ‘establishment.’ If God did, then surely the ‘chosen people’ would be at the front of the queue into the Kingdom, but instead Matthew recalls that Jesus told a parable about the guests on the first guest list making all sorts of excuses and of the second guest list including anyone who can be found (Matthew 22:1-10). This too is Good News!

The Gospel then has a warning. That God has worked and done great signs with one generation of a group, does not ensure that God will continue to do so in the next generation. There is no resting on the laurels of our ancestors. Each generation has the option

to seek the will of God and the courage to show mercy and lift burdens. God shows no favouritism or partiality. The offer to enjoy a relationship with God is an egalitarian one. Christianity is not an elitist spirituality. God has as much steadfast love and interest for shepherds as for monarchs; for factory labourers as for bishops. Two of the women in the genealogy remind us that God has as much steadfast love for prostitutes as for the men who abuse them.

Third, God is not a God who associates only with those with their respectability intact. The scandalous stories – of Judah and Tamar, or of Ruth going down to the threshing floor to ‘uncover the feet’ of the drunken Boaz, or of adulterous David and violated Bathsheba – show that God’s holiness is resilient. **God can get intimately involved in the lives of the walking wounded, in all the gore and mess and tangle, and still remain the awesome, numinous creator of the universe.** This is really Good News! This same resilient holiness manifests itself in the person of Jesus, who was constantly criticised by the religious people of his day for associating with the disreputable (Matthew 9:11; 11:19).

The genealogy (despite first appearances!) is the Gospel in miniature. If by some chance we had lost Matthew’s gospel and only the family tree of Jesus remained we would still have an idea of what to expect from the Christ who was breaking upon the world. Christ was coming into a real world, with hardship and famine (like the famine that drove Naomi and her family from Bethlehem to Moab); Christ was coming into a real world grieved by premature deaths (like that of Naomi’s husband and both sons); Christ was coming into a real world with destitution and desperation (like Tamar’s or Ruth’s); a world in which promises are broken (like Judah’s promise to Tamar regarding his youngest son – “don’t call us, we’ll call you” – Gen 38:11), a world in which moralising is used to create further injustice (as when hypocritical Judah suggested that Tamar should be stoned for ‘playing the harlot’ – until she produced the evidence that he was her sole client!). Matthew’s genealogy posits that Christ was coming into a real world distorted by racism (such as Ruth potentially faced in the fields of Bethlehem); into a world distorted by greed (which corrupted the kinsman who failed Ruth); that Christ was coming into a world marred by murder (like David’s murder of Uriah the Hittite), and perversions of the course of justice (as when David acted to hide the consequences of his adultery).

With the inclusion of these four women, Matthew evokes a world stage into which Christ enters as Saviour, as lifter of burdens, and as an example of mercy. The salvation that comes through Christ resonates with the stories of redemption in the lives of these four women. Such salvation is not entirely wrapped up in the future – in a person’s eternal destination – it also shows itself in a changed present. Those who call themselves ‘evangelicals’ would do well to remember the broad evangelicalism of William Wilberforce, Thomas Fowell Buxton, Elizabeth Fry and Thomas Clarkson who concerned themselves not only with the grace that would see souls heaven-bound but that would also see bodies freed from earthly slavery and oppression, here and now.

The genealogy clears up a powerful misconception: that ‘a past’ or a ‘present complexity’ would disqualify someone from participating in God’s Kingdom. The infancy stories in the gospels make it clear that Jesus, the Son of God and Saviour, wasn’t just beamed down from heaven in immaculate glory. Jesus came in continuity with colourful human history. The colour comes from the rich blend of good and bad, the same good and bad that is in the background of all our lives. Professor Brendan Byrne SJ, makes the point succinctly in his popular commentary on Matthew’s gospel called *Lifting the Burden*. “There are skeletons in [Jesus’] family closet just as there are in ours. Nor was his line ‘pure’ in an ethnic sense or exempt from sexual scandal or exploitation” (or, I would add, the rumour of it – think of the situation of Mary, the fifth mother of the genealogy – see ‘Mid-week Bible Study 2’ on page 14). Byrne continues, “But it is through just such a human history that the thread of salvation runs.”⁴

The Reverend Dr Elizabeth Smith has written a beautiful song about Matthew’s genealogy with an introductory verse and then a verse about each ‘mother’ in Jesus’ genealogy from Matthew’s gospel: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary; but then the song concludes with a poignant verse that transports us from the past of the narrative into the present of the narrative’s hearer:

*So if you are from a family with a history full of strife,
or if you are not quite standard when it comes to family life,
you are part of God’s own story, you can share the Christmas joy.
So please come and help us celebrate the birth of Mary’s boy.*

As we remember the ‘skeletons’ in Jesus’ family tree – instances of hardship, desperation, broken promises, the scandal of seeming impropriety, unmerciful moralising, injustice, racism, class-discrimination, greed, exploitation and abuse – we should also remember that being connected with these things did not prevent the Son of God from sharing God’s mercy with the world.

► *To finish, take an ‘Ignatian moment’ – a moment to imagine yourself into the text; identifying the connection between your narrative and the narrative of the gospel. Think of the skeletons that trouble your own family history or your own life story. Remind yourself that it is amidst the skeletons that God works grace, redemption and salvation. Thank God that amidst the skeletons, amidst strife and injustice, hardship and abuse, God weaves healing, grace and mercy – God ‘lifts the burdens.’*

May God give us courage to be gracious and merciful as we follow Jesus. Amen.

⁴ Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew’s Gospel in the Church Today* (St Paul’s, Strathfield/London, 2004) p 22.

SUNDAY TEXT FOR ADVENT I

Readiness for Jesus' Coming

MATTHEW 24:36-44 | PETER LLEWELLYN

HOPE AND FEAR: two of the most powerful and overwhelming of human emotions, are both evoked in dramatic fashion in the Lectionary for this first Sunday of the Church's three-year cycle. For many Anglicans the word "Advent" suggests preparation for the wonderful celebration of the coming of Jesus as a helpless baby in Bethlehem. We hold off the carols until Christmas Eve and get annoyed with shopping centres and the media for jumping the gun. We anticipate in hope the night of nights, the Holy Night when Christ is born, when the Word is made flesh and the long journey of redemption and reconciliation is launched.

It is right and good so to do; far be it from me to take such joy away from the people of God. Even so, the first Sunday of Advent sounds a different, more ominous note. The great Collect for Advent, which used to be prayed every day for the four weeks until Christmas Eve, exhorts us to take account of the enormous changes which the return of the Lord Jesus Christ will bring upon the world, and to live accordingly.

► *Pray this Collect aloud – if you are in a group, do it together. Be silent for a minute or so afterwards.*

*Almighty God,
give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness
and put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life
in which Your Son Jesus Christ came among us in great humility,
that on the last day,
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty
to judge the living and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

We have a 'Way to prepare,' a 'Highway for our God,' which of course in the Biblical story leads across the deserts to Mount Zion, the most holy place in our world, the mountain of the Lord. Do you find it intriguing that the readings from Isaiah and the Psalms, set for this first day of the Church's new year speak so emphatically of Jerusalem? "In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it" (Isaiah 2:2). "O pray for the peace of Jerusalem!" (Psalm 122:6). We are swiftly connected to the ancient hope of Israel: that the Holy City would be the centre of the earth, that it would be for all peoples – using the powerful, disturbing image that Israel itself conceived – the very "navel" linking our fragile incarnate planet by a mystical umbilical cord to the Heavenly Mother. Do not quickly or lightly trade-in these pre-Christian symbols for a new model! For several hundred years "enlightened" modern people have simplified the ideas of the return of Christ and the final establishment of the reign of God, in the process making them more accessible but also far more literal – and in the process much less believable.

► *Stop here for a moment: Think about how you imagine the return of Jesus Christ. What might it look like, sound like, feel like?*

The Advent Collect partially derives from the Epistle of the day: "You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light" (Romans 13:11-12). For St Paul everything without exception is built on the foundation of the coming of Christ – his first coming in which his death and resurrection turned the world order upside down, and his return which demands that we live in its fierce uncompromising light: "Let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Romans 13:13-14).

► *Stop again for a moment: reflect on Paul's exhortations in these two parts of Romans 13.*

Our brief glance at the other scriptures to which the Lectionary directs our attention on Advent 1 is justified by the ability of scripture to interpret scripture. These other scriptures and the Collect, prepare us at last to hear the Gospel according to Matthew, as it were for the first time in our new year. Note that we do not immediately hear the gentle call "Come to me, all who are heavy laden" (Matthew 11:28). Nor do we hear "Blessed are the poor in spirit... the grieving, meek, broken and persecuted" (Matthew 5:3-12). Instead we hear a note of uncertainty, of trouble, a solemn warning to be ready for the entirely unexpected:

About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Matthew 24:36-44

► *It seems to be a strange place to begin the year of Matthew. How do you feel, hearing this? How can this be compatible with Matthew's Jesus who 'lifts burdens'?*

The passage is extracted from a long chapter, the whole of which is about events (real or symbolic) that in the time of Jesus remain as yet in the future. Chapter 24 is itself full of problems; much of the language and images, including some in this gospel passage for Advent 1, are more reminiscent of the time when the might of the Roman Legions was unleashed on rebellious Israel. This occurred during the Great Revolt of 64–73 CE, around four decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus. A contemporary Jewish Midrash describes the Pharisaic Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkai walking in the besieged city of Jerusalem, and seeing desperate people soaking straw and drinking the water. “People who soak straw and drink the water!” said the Rabbi. “Who can stand against the forces of Vespasian? I will go out of here.” So he did, taking his disciples with him. Jesus undoubtedly anticipated something like this dreadful, pointless Great Revolt. One did not need to be divine or even a great prophet to see the writing on the wall. So as he speaks of things to come, Jesus does not hesitate to draw images from other wars in the long, sad history of Israel, as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures and even more graphically described in the Greek translation we call the Septuagint. In the same manner, Jesus warns his disciples of coming threats to the church, of persecution, of the total destruction of the city of Jerusalem. This total razing of the city actually happened at the end of the Second Revolt (really the third) against the Romans, in 135 CE.

Jesus also speaks of the dark and dread “Day of Yahweh” when the whole world order would be shattered. In Matthew 24:29-31 cosmic chaos is described, culminating in the Coming of the Son of Man, who sends out angels to gather the chosen people of God “from the four winds”. Our passage relates to this.

All these different symbols and images are mingled through this complex chapter. All of them are about what was future at the time of Jesus, but they refer to vastly different periods – by no means are all of them meant to be about the time of the return of Christ. It is a challenging task to disentangle the material that prophesies the Great Revolt and that which describes the much more distant Second Coming of Christ. The disentangling is made harder by the fact that many of the early Christians expected the Second Coming in their own lifetime; so when the Great Revolt began, some would have thought it was the trigger or at least the sign of the final coming of the Kingdom. Fortunately, for this particular study, most of the mingled material is in verses 1-31 of chapter 24. (If you would like to see how it can be disentangled, read the sensible work of William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew vol. 2*, St Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1957, pp 331–336.)

Matthew, who knew the Septuagint and possibly also the Hebrew version, and writing probably a decade or so after the end of the Revolt, knew well the horrors of the war. But he makes no attempt to disentangle the strands. Throughout his Gospel he provides the resource for the teachers of the church by bringing together materials from the teaching of Jesus, probably from many occasions and from very flimsy notes taken by himself or others. (The narrative sections and some of the teachings may have been brought over from Mark's Gospel, or perhaps they both used another narrative source.) Matthew accumulates the material but does not sort it out – that is our job. We might wish he had done it, but he didn't and we must make the best of it.

In the previous section to the passage for Advent I, Jesus tells his disciples that they can discern the signs of the times just as anyone can tell when figs are ripening on the tree. This relates to what we said previously – Jesus himself could see the signs of the tragic events that would unfold over the next decades, and so could others. But they could not predict the coming of the son of Man – the return of Christ. No one can, not even the Son – only the Father. Only foolish people would try... and yet there seems to be a large crowd of those who'll have a go!



Oops! – got that wrong...

And when it does happen, it will be without warning, sign or time to sort out our lives. Jesus mentions the Great Flood, where Noah spent a whole century building the ark – yet the people took no notice, and it came upon them without further warning. There are two pieces of advice. One is based on the suddenness of the event: two people going about their business, when Whoosh! It happens. (Don't be deceived by the popular but wildly incorrect and dangerous "Left Behind" theology. "Being taken" from the field or the kitchen is not the so-called "Rapture" – which is not taught in the Bible – but means being taken into the Kingdom here on earth as Noah and his family were taken into the ark.) The other piece of advice reminds us that we can't predict catastrophe – if we could, like the householder lying in wait for the burglar, we would prepare specifically. But we cannot, so what we need to do instead is to follow Paul's advice in the Epistle: live every day "in the armour of light," being awake, alert and devoted to walking the way of discipleship. We will then be far too busy to speculate about what we cannot and need not know.

This is not different advice from all the other exhortations in the Bible for us to live righteously and well. It doesn't add to the obligations that arise for us from our having been baptised into Christ, it merely puts them into a different perspective, adding a touch of urgency. The life of discipleship is thus brought into immediate focus, on the very first Sunday of the Church's cycle – exactly as it should be.

- *Reflect on 'Then Will He Come,' by my favourite poet, Geoffrey Anketell Studdert Kennedy, World War I Padre:*⁵

*When through the whirl of wheels and engines humming,
Patient in power for the sons of men,
Peals like a trumpet promise of His coming,
Who in the clouds is pledged to come again.
When through the night the furnace fires flaring,
Loud with their tongues of flame like spurting blood,
Speak to the heart of love alive and daring,
sing of the boundless energy of God.
When in the depths the patient miner striving,
Feels in his arms the vigour of the Lord,
Strikes for a kingdom and his king's arriving,
Holding his pick more splendid than the sword.
When on the sweat of labour and its sorrow,
Toiling in twilight, flickering and dim,*

⁵ G.A. Studdert Kennedy, *The Unutterable Beauty* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1929 and later editions). Please forgive the gender exclusive language of that period.

*Flames out the sunshine of the great tomorrow,
When all the world looks up – because of Him.
Then will He come – with meekness for His glory,
God in a workman's jacket as before,
Living again the eternal Gospel story,
Sweeping the shavings from His workshop floor.*

When Jesus comes, it will be personal, public, a total surprise – and it will be the fulfilment of the human story. The Second Coming of Christ is not a threat, nor a catastrophe, but the fulfilment of all that God has done in Christ. His Face of Love is not changed to a face of doom, but steadfastly looks on us. I look to hear only these words, which I hope and pray I may deserve: “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord.” With that I shall be – not merely in hope, but in the certainty of God’s grace which relieves every fear and fills up all my poverty – truly and eternally satisfied. Thanks be to God.

MID-WEEK BIBLE STUDY 2

Matthew's Terrifying Christmas Story

MATTHEW 2:1-23 | DAVID WOOD

*Words and miracles are swift and rude
and sometimes words are the flags or tendrils of
miracles. I find that stories often have doors and
windows through which you can see the miracle.
Miracles in my experience are not naked, and do
not arrive with trumpet flourishes, and announce
themselves, and register with the local authority,
religious or civil. Miracles are in general uncivil,
in fact.*

*One reason we invented the poem
is to try to say what cannot be said...*

Brian Doyle

- ▶ *Select someone to read aloud Matthew 2:1-23. Take it slowly. Listen carefully. Refrain from following the text in individual Bibles. Gospel drama is designed to engage the Christian community by ear, not by eye. Try to imagine you are hearing this story in worship for the first time. When the reader finishes, be quiet together. Spend time allowing the story to live in you and engage your imagination. When time for sharing comes, these questions might be considered: What strikes you most about this text? What ideas or images are repeated? What words are used again and again?*

THE SECOND CHAPTER of Matthew's gospel concerns itself with responses to the appearance of God in the world, the emergence of Emmanuel, God-with-us, and does so in a way that foreshadows all that is to happen later in the gospel. Reading his Hebrew Bible, Matthew recognises Christ as belonging to the same family as the patriarchs and prophets of old. All in their day were God speaking to us, manifestations of the self-same Word of God which finally becomes flesh and blood. In the

Incarnation, prophecy becomes biography, the story of a life, and yet this is never biography in the ordinary sense of the word. First and foremost, the gospels are theological biography, not disinterested, unbiased accounts, but books written that we might see what the church sees, namely the true identity of the baby born in Bethlehem. What the Fourth Gospel says in so many words is true of the first three as well: “these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 28:30).

In other words, the nativity stories of Matthew and Luke are part of the gospel, and this means that they are Easter stories, for from end to end the gospels proclaim the resurrection of the crucified Lord. The Christmas stories have the same depths as the accounts of Good Friday and Easter Day. As Peter de Rosa writes,⁶

Unless we bring Easter faith to his birth, we may find ourselves indulging in pious talk about a delightful baby boy born in a setting called a stable but which, as many Christmas cards prove, would pass with minor modifications as a travel brochure for the blue grotto of Capri.

There are no sentimental overtures in the evangelists' accounts of the birth of Christ. On the contrary, they are asserting: Here we are dealing not with a repeatable, commonplace happening but with the decisive, saving word and deed of God. Here we are reflecting on the meaning and implications of God's Son sharing our weak, mortal human condition. Here is divine weakness that is ultimately stronger than human power.

It was far from the evangelists' intentions to depict the Son's birth as picturesque, charming, heartwarming. This coming is a contradiction; it is brutal and searching like a two-edged sword because it is the breaking in of that folly of God which is wiser than the wisdom of all wise men. God's word is at work here judging history and all human affairs; and, despite all appearances, it is finally triumphant.

Sometimes at Christmas we try to pretend we don't know the end of the story. For the sake of the joyous festivities, we close our mind to the fact that this child is going to be crucified and rise again. What we try to forget or, at least, to put in parentheses, is precisely what the evangelists insist we remember. They want us to know that Jesus' life is, theologically speaking, all of a piece. This poor child in his crib is the crucified, the risen and coming One, this is the Saviour of the world.

The title of this study, Matthew's Terrifying Christmas Story, captures the breadth and depth of the tale he has to tell. Matthew's story is an uncompromisingly adult story, clearly directed at an adult audience, and attempts at making it family friendly can risk blunting its edge and losing sight of its wider context. Obviously, this raises hard

⁶ Peter de Rosa, *Jesus who became Christ* (Collins, London, 1974), p 33.

questions about how we use the story liturgically, and particularly about how we adapt Matthew's story for children without compromising its integrity. At first blush, it seems to have the makings of a good fairy tale – a wicked king, oriental magicians, threats against a new-born child's life, supernatural protection, guidance by a star, messages from heaven – but we dare not reduce it to yet another story to grow out of rather than a story to grow into. But we should leave the hard questions for the moment, and simply immerse ourselves in the text as it comes down to us. Conveniently, this can be done under a number of headings.

RISING STAR & RISING JOSEPH

Stars are not moderately sized lanterns dangling in the heavens to guide foreign tourists on their adventures, but whatever else we might think of the star which leads the wise men to Bethlehem, note how Matthew describes it: 'the star at its rising' or 'the star they had seen at its rising.' This careful repetition of the word 'rising' should surely be ringing Easter bells for us from the very first pages of his gospel. More difficult to spot in most English translations, is the repeated use of the word 'arise.' In verses 13/14 we are told that an angel of the Lord says to Joseph 'arise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt. Then Joseph arose and took the child and his mother by night.' This is repeated in verses 20-21: 'Arise, take the child and his mother, and go. Then Joseph arose, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.' The fact that translators routinely render this striking Easter word as 'get up' or something similarly pedestrian is distinctly unhelpful.

► *Can you think of other instances in the gospels where the full sense of 'arise' is in play?*

WISE MEN

Matthew uses the word 'magi' to identify these wise men from the East. We are never told precisely where they come from, nor their number. We assume there are three visitors because they bring three gifts, but there could be more or fewer. Such details are insignificant. The point of the story is that wise men from distant horizons, astrologers who follow their own wisdom, come seeking the incarnate Word, the Wisdom of God born in a manger. Bishop Krister Stendahl observes that the magi come, they see, they worship, they return home. Following their own star, trusting their own insights, they are not dependent on revelation or scripture. Chief priests and scribes identify Bethlehem as the place where the Messiah will be born, but the rising star leads the magi there rather than any religious map. The whole episode affirms the value of the native wisdom of the magi. While Matthew doesn't say that these Gentiles are converted, or that they return to Iran and found a church, by their presence we already glimpse what will be fleshed out in the body of the gospel: namely that the Jesus movement is not just about reforming Judaism, but embraces everyone without distinction. Matthew's

note that when the wise men see the star stop over the place where the child is, they are 'overwhelmed with joy' (v 10) is his way of saying that they are well on the way to salvation.

► *In discovering the ways of God with us, are we in a world of scripture alone, or is God's truth revealed in other places as well?*

TWO KINGS, NOT THREE

Christian tradition has identified the 'magi' as kings – 'We three kings of orient are' we like to sing, and the cathedral at Cologne claims to preserve their relics. Christmas Crib magi are more often than not crowned heads. But this tradition obscures the fact that there are only two kings in Matthew's story, not three. The magi are ancient scientists, not kings. The only royalty in Matthew's story are bad King Herod and good King Jesus. This flags the political dimension of Jesus' ministry right from the start. We are to rid ourselves of silly ideas about what unfolds being a 'spiritual' story devoid of everyday reality and everyday implications. The good news of the gospel is the in-breaking of God's kingdom now, the inauguration of a time of justice and freedom and peace for all. In the end, Jesus is put to death for naked political reasons – because he champions the poor and the outcast, predictably enough upsetting along the way a dangerous coalition of powerful vested interests in church and state.

► *Where does this leave the notion that religion and politics should never mix?*

GIFTS

In Christian preaching, much is sometimes made of the three gifts presented by the magi – gold for a king, incense for a god, myrrh for anointing a dead body. Matthew doesn't make such connections, but the fact that we do might suggest that in thought and prayer we are not so very different from Matthew after all. In other words, we too cannot help making connections which speak of who baby Jesus really is in our own experience – Son of David, Son of God. This should caution us against dismissing Matthew's story as unhistorical, pure invention, or myth. Here is the poetry we cannot do without in proclaiming truths too deep for words.

MARY HIS MOTHER

It is worth noting that Joseph, the major protagonist in chapter 2 of Matthew's gospel, vanishes from sight at one crucial point. In verse 11 the magi enter the house and see the child with Mary his mother. There is no sign of Joseph. Why? Because here we have Matthew's version of the Nicene Creed. This child is born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. This is the Christian way of saying that he is God's own child, God-with-us, both truly human and truly divine, the perfect expression of what it means to be a human

being and live a human life, and the perfect expression of who God is and how God acts in the world, as weak and helpless as the man on the cross.

► *Do you imagine God out there beyond the furthest star, or with us, within us, or both?*

DREAMS

Matthew's literary device in which dreams are the locus of revelation is simultaneously ancient and modern. We too have learned to pay attention to our dreams, although the ancients understood that something more than what we would call the subconscious can be at play in our dreams. Angels, messengers of the Lord, can and do appear to Joseph in his dreams – to warn, to guide, and to direct. This very Jewish phenomenon speaks of the imminence of God, for these angels seem to be stand-ins for God who is really present in our struggles. What a wonderful affirmation of God's action in these events, as in all human history! The impassive, unfeeling, uninvolved god of Greek philosophy is not the God of the Hebrew Bible, and cannot be the God of Christian understanding either. This we see most clearly at the cross, when the final veil is drawn back, and we see God suffering with us and for us.

► *How might we distinguish angelic messengers from wishful thinking? Is there any difference between day-dreaming and prayer?*

MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

Moses was the great saviour of the Jewish people. We know the story. The book called Exodus tells of a tyrant king, the Pharaoh of Egypt. Fearful that the Hebrews are growing too powerful and numerous, he orders midwives to kill at birth every male Jewish child. When the midwives refuse, all these children are thrown into the Nile. Moses, aged two months, is hidden by his mother in a basket woven from bulrushes. Pharaoh's daughter finds him and adopts him as her own. Moses grows up, and leaves Egypt for a time because someone has witnessed his murder and burial of an Egyptian who was beating one of his people. He returns from exile, and leads the Hebrews out of bondage into the desert where God makes a covenant with them, giving them on Mt Sinai the law by which to rule their lives.

Matthew sees Jesus as the new Moses, destined to set his people free from slavery more terrible than Egypt's. Jesus hands down a new law to live by on another mountaintop, a new law which stresses interior worship and love, and he forges a new and everlasting covenant between God and humankind in his own blood by dying for love of us. The new Moses is also depicted by Matthew as pursued and persecuted by a tyrant king, Herod, who fears for his throne and his kingdom just as Pharaoh did. Jesus escapes the latest slaughter of Hebrew children by – irony of ironies! – fleeing to Egypt, safely returning home after Herod's death, as if to fulfil the prophecy, 'Out of Egypt I have called

my son.’ (Hosea 11:1) The reader knows, of course, that the people of Israel are daughters and sons of God, while Jesus is God’s son in a singular sense. As Brendan Byrne reminds us, in reliving the story of his people Israel by being called out of Egypt, Jesus is called ‘son’ in a far more personal and realistic sense than was ever the case with Israel.

- ▶ *In drawing on his sourcebook, the Hebrew Bible, to write his infancy narrative, is Matthew being unhistorical, creating out of nothing a fairy tale, developing a myth out of thin air, or finding the imagery and language he needs to tell the truth about the crucified and living One?*

ASYLUM SEEKERS & REFUGEES

To quote Fr Byrne again, ‘This conflict between the divine power of salvation that has entered the world with the birth of Jesus and the authorities whose current grip on power it threatens comes to the fore in a series of scenes that make the infant Messiah and his family refugees, exiles, returnees, and eventually settlers in a locality (Nazareth in Galilee) that was not their original home (Bethlehem in Judea). The family of Jesus have to yield before the naked force of worldly power. Like refugees today, they have no control over where they may safely live but face constant uprooting as circumstances determined by those in power change.’⁷

- ▶ *Does this story in any way soften our hearts or change political allegiance in an anxious Australia dealing so badly with asylum seekers and refugees? How does Matthew’s presentation of Jesus the asylum seeker alter our sense of responsibility for those who suffer unimaginable hardships?*

NAZARETH AND NAZARENE

Nazareth and Nazarene, place and person, are in fact unrelated, so this strange allusion seems to be no more than word-play by Matthew. The ‘quote’ does not correspond to any text in the Hebrew Bible, but it does correspond to a dedication service known as the ‘nazirate.’ By a personal vow or a parent’s promise, a man could be marked out for a period of time or for life as consecrated to God in a special way. One of the most famous nazirs dedicated to God by this ceremony is Samson. The word nazir has nothing to do with the village of Nazareth.

- ▶ *Can we perhaps conclude from such free-wheeling association that we too are free to play with sacred texts? Can we be relaxed and sufficiently secure in our own discipleship to imaginatively explore the beautiful poetry through which truth is conveyed?*

⁷ Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew’s Gospel in the Church Today* (St Paul’s, Strathfield/London, 2004) p 31.

SUNDAY TEXT FOR ADVENT II

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

MATTHEW 3:1-12 | JOHN DUNNILL

IN ADVENT we are always looking backwards in order to look forwards. This double movement is realistic, because Advent is a season of hope but not of mindless optimism. It is a time to reflect on what the revelation of God in the past enables us to hope for in the future (both the immediate future and the longer term). Where do we find this in this passage about John the Baptist?

► *Begin by reading Matthew 3:1-12, aloud if possible.*

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARDS I

Matthew begins his account of the adult ministry of Jesus (who will appear shortly, in verse 13) by locating us first in the ministry of John the Baptist. All four Gospels do this. John was a well-known figure, recorded by the Jewish historian Josephus, a popular prophet who died around the year 27 CE but whose disciples remained a large sect for decades (see Acts 18:24–19:7). But who was he?

All four Gospels identify who John was through a quotation from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 40:3): he was ‘a voice crying in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord”’. This prophetic ‘voice’ originally foreshadowed the return of Israel from its punitive Exile in Babylon in the 6th century BCE. But in Jesus’ day the same passage was widely understood as pointing to the present time, giving hope of a new act of divine liberation which was about to take place in the near future: liberation from the power of pagan Rome, from the power of sin in people’s lives, and even from the conditions of earthly existence. John was the one who announced the coming of this great event.

‘The wilderness,’ away from the comforts and powers of the city, was the place to ‘prepare the way of the Lord,’ and the members of the Qumran sect who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls understood themselves to be doing the same thing, in fulfilment of the same quotation from Isaiah 40:3. In their case they did this, not by baptising, but by keeping the Law with scrupulous attention to minute details.

- ▶ *If you compare this quotation with the Hebrew original in the Old Testament you will find some differences. Does 'in the wilderness' refer to where the voice was, or where the act of God was to happen? Does it matter?*

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARDS 2

John is also compared to another prophetic figure out of Israel's past, 'Elijah the Tishbite'. His clothes (made of 'camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist') clearly remind us of Elijah: 'a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist' (2 Kings 1:8). Like Elijah, too, who was fed by ravens during a drought (1 Kings 17:5-6), and fed by an angel in the desert (1 Kings 19:4-9), John's diet of 'locusts and wild honey' suggests he relied directly on God for his food. This is like the condition of Paradise in the first age of the world, in which Adam and Eve were fed by God from the trees in Eden (Genesis 2:16); and like the time of the Exodus, when Israel was fed on manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16:31).

John's direct dependence on God for food, drink and clothing also looks forward to the new age which Jesus brings. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus urges his hearers: "Do not worry saying 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'... Strive first for the kingdom of God and all these things will be given you as well" (Matthew 6:31,33). So the passage looks back to Eden and forwards to the eschaton, the last days.

- ▶ *What enables us to do the same thing, or hinders us from doing it?*

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARDS 3

John reminds us of Elijah in another way. Our Old Testament comes to an end with the prediction: "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse" (Malachi 4:5-6). This figure is both terrifying and gracious. In Jesus' day it was believed there had been no prophets for centuries. So, if a figure like Elijah appeared it seemed that the curse (or the blessing) could not be far away. The only response was to 'turn,' and that is what Matthew tells us people did.

- ▶ *In what ways was John the Baptist really like, or unlike, this figure in Malachi 4?*

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARDS 4

John went by the nickname 'the Baptiser' or 'the Baptist' because of his use of water to signify turning, 'repentance,' the change of heart (*metanoia*). That too was a reference backwards in order to look forwards. He dipped people in the River Jordan recalling the entry of Israel out of the wilderness into the promised land of Canaan (as recorded in Joshua 3) when God parted the waters (like the Red Sea earlier, Exodus 14) to enable

them to cross, and they entered the land as a purified people (Joshua 5) ready to obey God in all their ways. He was doing it now to make them ready for the coming of God.

► *What is Christian baptism? How is it related to John the Baptist or other past events? How does it help us to look forward?*

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARDS 5

So we hear many stories from the past hovering around the figure of John the Baptist: the Exodus and entry into the land; Elijah and his dependence on God; Israel's Exile in Babylon and deliverance by God. All these cast the mind also forwards to the hope of a new 'promised land' free from sin and evil, a condition of innocence in obedience to the Holy One. There is one more look backwards and forwards. Matthew begins his story here (verse 1) with the words 'In those days'. In *which* days?

The previous verses (Matthew 2:13-23) have narrated Jesus' childhood, his journey into Egypt to escape from Herod and his family's settling in Nazareth. This happened after Herod the Great died (4 BCE) and while his son Archelaus was ruler of Judea (he was deposed in 6 CE). So if Jesus was born around 6 BCE, as most scholars believe, he was at most 12 years old when they settled in Nazareth, probably much younger, so this leaves a gap of 15 or 25 years before he appeared as an adult.

If 'in those days' was meant to point to a past moment, Matthew's timing is vague, to say the least. But since Matthew attaches mysterious significance to the name 'Nazareth,' perhaps he means something different: that John the Baptist appeared "in the days when Jesus was 'a Nazorean,'" and before he commenced his ministry.

But here is another thought. Scattered through the prophetic writings we find the phrase 'in those days' used to name a future event when God will bring about decisive transformation. Jeremiah 31:33 speaks of the 'new covenant' which God will make with his people 'after those days'; Joel 3:1 speaks of how God will restore the fortunes of Israel 'in those days'; perhaps most of all Zechariah 8:23 looks forward to a time when Gentiles will come seeking out Israel's God: "In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment, and saying 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'"

'God is with you.' Compare Matthew's prediction of Jesus: "They shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us'" (Matthew 1:23, citing Isaiah 7:14). For Matthew, Jesus is the one who makes God present in the world, who invites all to recognise him, both Gentile and Jew (the Magi as well as Herod, in the birth narrative of Matthew 2:1-12), and who will inaugurate the new covenant through his death (Matthew 26:28) and begin a new time in which, he promises, 'I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20).

► *If that is true, are we still living 'in those days'? Is time since Jesus' coming different from time before?*

TWO KINDS OF CHILDREN, TWO KINDS OF FRUIT (VERSES 7-10)

Verses 7-12 take us into the contents of John's proclamation. These words come from the so-called 'Q'-material common to Matthew and Luke (but not found in Mark or John). Luke reproduces them almost exactly (Luke 3:7-9,16-17) but includes some extra teaching on justice (3:10-15).

The only difference between Luke and Matthew here is in the first words. Were they spoken to 'the crowds,' as Luke says (Luke 3:7), or to 'Pharisees and Sadducees,' as Matthew says (Matthew 3:7)? If both writers are working from the same source, or one copying the other, has Matthew changed the general 'crowds' into the specific 'Pharisees and Sadducees,' or is it the other way round?

It is not important at this stage to know who these two groups were, or how they differed. For Matthew, they typify the Jewish opposition to both John and Jesus (and he brings them together again, in opposition to Jesus, this time, in Matthew 16:1-12). Here, even though they come 'for baptism,' John greets them with harsh words. But Jesus could do this too: you might compare Jesus' harsh words to 'crowds following him' in Luke 14:25-6.

These leaders are 'a vipers' brood,' children of the devil, who think of themselves as 'children of Abraham,' the father of Israel (v 9). Both Jesus (in John 8:31-58) and Paul (in Romans 4) question whether being descended from Abraham counts for anything. Maybe all three passages are influenced by the fact that, a few decades after Jesus' death, the Christian church was attracting more disciples among Gentiles than among Jews. Paul argues (Romans 4:13-16) that salvation is based not on descent from Abraham, but on faith, which is available to anyone.

► *How important is ancestry? How important is attachment to tradition? John the Baptist dismisses both, looking only for 'fruit worthy of repentance'. Is he right?*

THE MORE POWERFUL ONE (VERSES 11-12)

These last verses bring us back to John's central task to 'Prepare the way of the Lord'. Whatever the impression John may have made on the crowds in Judaea, the gospels present him as pointing away from himself, towards Jesus. In John 3:20 he describes himself as 'the friend of the bridegroom', the Best Man at a wedding, who takes the second place: 'He must increase but I must decrease'. Matthew tells us he declined to think himself worthy to baptise Jesus until Jesus persuaded him (Matthew 3:13-15). All the force of our 'looking backward' from the whole history of God's dealings with Israel is now focused on this 'looking forward' to one man, Jesus.

But as a description of Jesus, verses 11 and 12 are puzzling. Do we recognise Jesus in this picture of a stern judge, or a giant armed with axe and winnowing fork, cutting down dead trees, separating wheat from chaff? Jesus is called ‘the one who is more powerful than I’, and yet in the story that follows Jesus appears as a figure whose initial success in teaching and healing gives way to failure and weakness, as his life leads inevitably to the cross.

► *What kind of power do we find in Jesus? How does the proclamation of John the Baptist help us to understand who Jesus really was and is?*

In some sense Matthew’s account of John the Baptist from this passage alone (Matthew 3:1-12) is incomplete. The season of Advent picks up the next instalment of the Baptist’s story in the following week at Matthew 11:2-11 (the reading for Advent III; see ‘Sunday Text for Advent III’ on page 31). There we will hear John ask from imprisonment a question of Christ which resonates with our own “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

MID-WEEK BIBLE STUDY 3

Jesus' Encounter with a Canaanite Woman

MATTHEW 15:21-28 | CHRISTINE SIMES

THIS ACCOUNT OF JESUS and the Canaanite woman is certainly not Jesus at his most attractive. It is one thing to hear him calling religious leaders 'hypocrites' or 'vipers' or 'sepulchres rotten on the inside,' but here he calls a woman, desperate for the healing of her daughter, a dog. However you try to tone this down (and many have tried), Jesus first ignores her, then rejects her and then calls her a 'dog.' Let's unpack this story and see what Matthew is telling his community and us.

► *If you are using the study in a group, read the following passage as a drama.*

Narrator Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting,

Woman Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.

Narrator But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying,

Disciples Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.

Narrator He answered,

Jesus I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Narrator But she came and knelt before him, saying,

Woman Lord, help me.

Narrator He answered,

Jesus It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.

Narrator She said,

Woman Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.

Narrator Then Jesus answered her,

Jesus Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.

Narrator And her daughter was healed instantly.

CANAANITE DOG

Jesus has withdrawn in the face of hostility from the Jewish leaders (15:1-21) with his disciples to this northern part of Palestine. This is Gentile territory. Tyre and Sidon

are practically short hand for faithless lands of the Gentiles. Matthew has previously mentioned these cities as those outside Israel.⁸ Matthew calls this woman a Canaanite to emphasise that she is a Gentile, a person outside the people of Israel. To see just how intentionally Matthew is making this emphasis we can compare this account with Mark's account of the same story.

²⁴From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin.

Mark 7:24-30

Mark only mentions Tyre and calls the woman a Syrophenician. The Canaanites were the ancient enemies of Israel. According to some parts of the Hebrew tradition, the people of Israel were to separate themselves from the 'abominations' of the Canaanites and other nations.⁹ Matthew is making sure his audience understands just how far outside the fold this woman is.

When the woman approaches Jesus she is shouting. Jesus ignores her. 'But he did not answer her at all.' Then his disciples tell him to send her away. Neither Jesus nor his disciples show any care for the woman. This is pretty shocking to our ears. At this point we hear Jesus' position regarding the woman. 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' Jesus believes that his mission is only to Israel, the people of God. 'I was sent,' implies that God has sent Jesus for this exclusive task. The woman persists, kneeling, 'Lord help me' and Jesus intensifies his response. 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' The children are the children of Israel. The dogs are the Gentiles, the nations outside Israel. Jesus is refusing the woman's request, referring to her as a dog. Because this is such a derogatory image a lot of interpretation has sought to soften it. The word in the text is a diminutive form. Some say it means little dogs, puppies or pet dogs. None of this reforms the story. A dog is a dog! Mark's story is less hard-line. In Mark Jesus says, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' (Mark 7:27) In Matthew there is no suggestion that the woman's turn will ever come. She is not one of the lost sheep of the house of Israel. The astonishing thing is that the woman breaks through this social and religious

⁸ Matthew 11:21-22 "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you."

⁹ See Ezra 9:1-2 for a reflection of this 'separatist' attitude; for parts of the Hebrew tradition that contrast this attitude see the stories of Ruth, Rahab (Joshua 2 and 6:22-25), Asenath (the mother of two tribes of Israel, the daughter of a pagan priest – Genesis 41:45, 50-52) and many others.

barrier and Jesus changes his position. She retorts that even the dogs eat the crumbs falling from the table. She a Gentile, a woman, begging for her Gentile daughter to be fed something, some small crumb of healing. Jesus responds. Her daughter is healed from a distance. Those who were far off begin to come in.

► *How do you see Jesus in this story? Is this a moment of conversion? Does Jesus see his mission to all, not just the lost sheep of the house of Israel, after this encounter? Does the woman change Jesus?*

MISSION

All of the gospel texts operate at three levels. There is the remembered history, what Jesus did and said. There is the gospel story that tells of Jesus but in its own way and to its own audience. Then there is the gospel speaking to us in our time.

This gospel story remembers an incident, an encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman, or the Syrophenician woman in Mark's gospel. Mark and Matthew tell the story slightly differently. They tell the story to different communities of the church. Matthew's community was a very Jewish one, only just coming to terms with the reality of Gentile inclusion in the church. We can hear the Jewishness all the way through this gospel, particularly. The story of the birth of Jesus in Matthew is punctuated by the refrain, "This happened to fulfil what was written by the prophet *x*." This gospel reassures the Jewish people who have become followers of Jesus that all that has gone before, all that has formed them and all that they have loved, is part of salvation history. Now, that salvation is widening out to include the nations. This is foreshadowed in the genealogy ('Mid-week Bible Study 1' on page 3) that included four Gentile women: Tamar, a Canaanite; Rahab, a Gentile; Ruth, a Moabite; and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. It is foreshadowed in the visit of the magi who return to their own lands. Matthew is telling his own community that all the world will bow down and pay homage to Jesus. This is not an easy thing for them to hear. As Brendan Byrne reminds us, 'It is not easy for modern readers to grasp the immensity of the barrier being broken through here, one that preoccupied the church for at least two generations.'¹⁰ Matthew addresses this issue of the nations, the Gentiles, belonging to the kingdom of God throughout his narrative. The Canaanite woman is part of this theme. She worships Jesus and she is given bread.

WORSHIP

²⁵*But she came and knelt (prosekunei) before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'*

The word translated here as knelt is also translated as pay homage or worship. The magi follow the star to Jesus and when they find him in the house, they kneel down and

¹⁰ Byrne, *Lifting the Burden*, p20.

worship him or pay him homage. The leper worships Jesus (8:2). The leader of the synagogue kneels before Jesus pleading for his daughter who has died (9:18). The women who see the risen Lord fall at his feet and worship him (28:9) and when the disciples gather on the mountain with the risen Lord they worship him (28:16). Each time it is this same word translated 'kneel before' or 'worship'. The Canaanite woman is worshipping Jesus just as all those who belong to the church community do. We also hear her pleading with Jesus in the language of the prayer of the church. She comes to Jesus pleading, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David.' Have mercy on me, kyrie eleison, Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy. This is the language of the prayer of the church. 'Lord' is the Christian way of speaking about Jesus as God. 'Jesus is Lord' was the ecstatic cry of faith. 'Son of David' is the claim that Jesus is the Messiah. Matthew uses this title far more often than the other gospels because he is writing to a Jewish audience.¹¹ We might reflect on whether the Canaanite woman actually said these words or whether the story gives them to her. Was she someone who knew about Jesus and believed in him? Or is she a symbol of the Gentile who is now just as much a part of the church as those original Jewish followers of Jesus?

► *What issues of exclusion does the church face in our day? What groups of people have been or are 'outside'?*

BREAD

The story of the Canaanite woman is set within a very intentional structuring of the gospel story. Matthew largely follows the structure of Mark.¹² The linking theme through these stories about the mission of Jesus is bread. Bread is life. It's a basic food. The Israelites were given bread in the wilderness to sustain them. We pray for our daily bread. We gather around the Eucharistic table and eat the bread of life. Bread is a symbol and reality at the heart of our faith. Let's follow the bread line through this gospel and we will see at the centre or hinge point, the Canaanite woman.

- 14:13-21 Jesus feeds the 5000 with bread and fish
- 15:1-20 Controversy with the Pharisees and scribes about eating bread without washing hands.
- 15:21-28 Canaanite woman: '...even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.'
- 15:32-38 Feeding of the 4000 with bread and fish: 'All of them ate and were satisfied.'
- 16:5-11 The disciples had forgotten to bring bread. 'Beware of the yeast of the scribes and Pharisees.'

¹¹ See Matthew 1:1, 1:20, 9:27, 12:2, 15:22, 20:30, 20:31, 21:9, 21:15, 22:42 compared with three times each in Mark and Luke.

¹² If you want to read about the synoptic theory online have a look at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synoptic_Gospels.

The story of the Canaanite woman asking for the crumbs that fall from the table comes between the two miraculous feeding stories. Since the early days of the church interpreters have seen these two feeding miracles as symbolic of feeding first Israel and then the Gentiles. The symbolism is in the numbers. The five thousand is reminiscent of the five books of the Law or the Pentateuch, the twelve baskets left over of the twelve tribes of Israel. The second feeding is to the four thousand, the four corners of the earth with seven baskets left over signifying wholeness, like the seven days in the creation story. The story of the Canaanite woman sits between these stories like the turning point or the symbol of the mission of God becoming one to the whole world. In Mark's gospel it is clear that the feeding of the five thousand takes place in Jewish territory while the feeding of the four thousand takes place in Gentile lands.¹³ Matthew doesn't make it clear which side of the Sea of Galilee the feeding of the four thousand takes place. Matthew instead places the feeding of the four thousand on a mountain. This is the setting:

²⁹After Jesus had left that place, he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down. ³⁰Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, ³¹so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

Jesus began his ministry on the mountain, sitting and preaching the beatitudes, now before he turns to Jerusalem he is on the mountain again, sitting in the stance of the teacher, the teacher greater than Moses, healing and feeding all the people who come. The fact that the crowd that experienced healing “praised the God of Israel” implies that they were Gentiles, which is reinforced by the symbolism of the numbers in this second miraculous feeding (the four thousand fed, the seven loaves, and the seven baskets left over). The first hearers of this gospel would see in this the consummation of the ages, the feast for all on the mountain of the Lord.¹⁴ Matthew tells us that after the feeding of the four thousand “all ate and were satisfied.”

At the end of this gospel Jesus will give the Great Commission, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (28:19). The Gospel of Matthew takes its readers on a journey of conversion to show that those outside are coming in and will sit at the table of the Lord and be satisfied. It is much more than a story of persistent faith. It is a story of a new and expansive inclusiveness.

¹³ Mark 7:31 “Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, through the region of the Decapolis.”

¹⁴ Isaiah 2:2-3, Micah 4:1-2.

ARE CRUMBS ENOUGH?

This brings us back to the woman who begs for crumbs. We see her great faith, in comparison with the 'little faith' of the disciples that we so often hear about in this gospel. We see her daughter healed. We hear her speaking in the language of the prayer of the church. We see her placed between the feeding of Israel and the feeding of the Gentiles. Are we content to imagine all she was given were the crumbs that fall from the table? Or is it true that Jesus doesn't deal in crumbs?

In Jesus' economy, as represented in the two feedings, there is enough to satisfy all who have come...and more left over, as if to declare that there is even enough for those who have not joined us yet.

- *How might you this day extend the hospitality of God to an 'outsider'? I wonder what you think of the following prayer in the light of this Bible study? Could you suggest some changes to the prayer?*

*We do not presume to come to your table, merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in your manifold and great mercies.
We are not worthy
so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.
But you are the same Lord
whose nature is always to have mercy.
Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord,
so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ,
and to drink his blood,
that we may evermore dwell in him,
and he in us. Amen.*

- *We leave the last words to songwriter Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, who penned this song in 2002.*

She Came to Jesus (may be sung to SLANE 10.10.10.10 "Be Thou My Vision")

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1. <i>She came to Jesus from outside the fold—
Canaanite woman! Persistent and bold!
Looking to Jesus, she wanted to see
One who would help her and set her child free.</i></p> | <p>2. <i>Claiming a blessing, a touch of God's grace,
She knew God's love was not bounded by place.
Jesus, you listened, debated— then healed—
For in her asking, her faith was revealed.</i></p> |
| <p>3. <i>God, you still bless those who seek you in prayer.
You welcome dreamers who faithfully dare.
In Christ, now risen, your mercy extends:
Those on the outside are welcomed as friends.</i></p> | |

SUNDAY TEXT FOR ADVENT III

The Messengers of John the Baptist, and Jesus Speaks about John

MATTHEW 11:2-11 | GILL ROOKYARD

OUR SUNDAY GOSPEL READINGS move now from the third chapter of Matthew, in which John the Baptist announced the coming of one “more powerful” than he, to the eleventh chapter, in which John sends his own disciples to ask Jesus whether or not he is “the one who is to come,” the expected Messiah. For many of us this question may come as a surprise. Didn’t John recognise Jesus? Why the doubt?

Consider the following quotations:¹⁵

There is much honest doubt that should be encouraged. History, for instance, is literally patched together by doubt. There could be no progress without it. Galileo doubted that the Earth stood still. Copernicus doubted that the Earth was the centre of the universe. Columbus doubted that it was flat. Newton doubted that nature was erratic, and Einstein doubted that the Earth was fixed.

Larry Jones

The doubt of an earnest, thoughtful, patient and laborious mind is worthy of respect. In such doubt may be found indeed more faith than in half the creeds.

John Lancaster Spalding

Doubt is the vestibule through which all must pass before they can enter into the temple of wisdom.

Charles Caleb Colton

Doubt, indulged and cherished, is in danger of becoming denial; but if honest, and bent on thorough investigation, it may soon lead to full establishment of the truth.

Tryon Edwards

¹⁵ All these quotations and others can be found at <http://thinkexist.com/quotations/doubt>; sourced 17/09/2013.

- *Read Matthew 11:2-11. This passage can be divided into two distinct parts – verses 2-6 and verses 7-11.*

VERSES 2–6

In Matthew's gospel, John is arrested before the beginning of Jesus' public ministry (see Matthew 4:12), thus John did not witness Jesus' ministry; he simply heard about it while he was in prison. We know from earlier in the Gospel that John had recognised Jesus, and announced to the crowds gathered around the Jordan that he was the 'Coming One' (Matthew 3:11-12). Why now is he hesitating?

The question posed to Jesus by John's disciples in v 2 reveals the beginning of some doubt. It seems that the kind of Messiah they expected was quite different from the kind of Messiah that Jesus turned out to be. From part of last Sunday's reading (Matthew 3:7 – 12), we could assume that John was expecting a harsher and more judgemental Messiah than Jesus turned out to be. Sure, Jesus was summoning people to repentance in view of the coming kingdom, but this was woven into the engagement of healing afflicted crowds with great mercy and deep compassion. This was not the kind of Messiah John had announced or expected.

Jesus does not answer their question directly. He does not say, "Yes, I am the one who is to come". Instead, Jesus draws the attention of John's disciples to his works, "Go and tell John what you hear [that is, his teaching] and see [that is, his healing]: ..." (v 5). The signs (works) that Jesus points to are the same as those that Isaiah names when he talks about the coming of the Lord (Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1):

*Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you."
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*

Isaiah 35:4-6

Basically, Jesus' response challenges them to consider whether he can actually be the Messiah – I may not be fulfilling the Messiah's role just as you think I should, but are my works really at odds with what the prophets foretold? He calls those who are able to see and understand this truth 'blessed' (Matthew 11:6) as God's grace is already at work in their hearts preparing them for life in the kingdom.

- *Why was John in prison (see Matthew 14:1-5)? How might prison have given rise to John's doubts?*

- *As a Christian, is it wrong to doubt? When do you experience doubt in your discipleship? What experiences, environments, thoughts and feelings have created doubt for you and how did you deal with them?*

VERSES 7–11

After John's messengers depart, Jesus speaks about John to the crowds. His exposition seems somewhat ambiguous! While John is certainly heralded as a great prophet – ascetic, fearless and wholly dedicated to his message – he is also respectfully but firmly 'put in his place' in the greater scheme of salvation.¹⁶

The wilderness along the Jordan did contain reeds blowing in the wind and palaces inhabited by people dressed in royal robes (Herod's fortress palaces of Herodium, Machaerus and Masada). Naming these seems to point to Jesus meaning 'that reeds and robes may be there, but that is not the reason you went there; you went to see a prophet'. Or the thrust of Jesus' rhetoric might simply be emphasising John's prophetic credentials and strength. He was no weather vane who took his direction from changing political currents, but stood against the stream; he was not dressed in the finery of court lackeys, but, like Elijah, wore the rough garb of the wilderness prophet. In either case, Jesus' point is to affirm that John was truly God's prophet.¹⁷

The Jewish people had not heard the voice of God spoken through the prophets for some time. The last book in the works of the prophets is Malachi, which dates to the time after the Babylonian exile, some 450 years before Christ. Jesus is quoting Malachi 3:1 when he says, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." It's interesting, however, to note the subtle change to the text.

In the Book of Malachi, the prophet speaks the Word of God saying, "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me." By changing Malachi's 'me' to 'you,' Jesus is reinterpreting the passage to refer to himself. The answer, therefore, to John's original question, "Are you the one who is to come?" is YES! Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, even though he is a very different kind of Messiah to the one John and his contemporaries expected.¹⁸

- *How does John fulfil Old Testament prophecy (see Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6)? In what way does he exhibit the faith of the Old Testament? How might John play a decisive role in the history of salvation by forming a dividing line between the old era and the new era of God's reign?*

¹⁶ Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today* (St Paul's, Strathfield/London, 2004), p 92.

¹⁷ Eugene Boring, 'The Gospel of Matthew' in *The New Interpreter's Bible Volume VIII* (Abingdon, Nashville, 1994), pp 267–268.

¹⁸ Margaret Nutting Ralph, *Breaking Open the Lectionary: Cycle A: Lectionary Readings in Their Biblical Context for RCLIA, Faith Sharing Groups, and Lectors* (Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey, 2007), p 22.

- *What are the 'reeds' and who wear the 'robes' that threaten the coming of the kingdom of God for us today? To what kind of Messiah do your attitudes, perceptions, behaviours and beliefs point?*

A SHIFT IN CONTEXT...

Pastor Carl Strehlow was the missionary at Hermannsburg in central Australia for 28 years, from 1894–1922. During this time, his achievements as a student of Aboriginal language and culture, as translator, preacher and teacher, and as a mission administrator were outstanding. He died prematurely at the age of 52, while attempting a journey south from Hermannsburg to the railhead at Oodnadatta to get medical aid. He was suffering from pleurisy and dropsy. After an agonising journey by horse and buggy through rough country, he died at a place called Horseshoe Bend on the Finke River. He lies buried there in a lonely outback grave, in a coffin made from whiskey cases.

Carl Strehlow had always been a strong man – strong-willed and strong of faith. He had left his homeland and devoted his life whole-heartedly to mission work among the Aboriginals. Some months earlier, before he had become sick, Strehlow had silenced the doubts expressed by his wife about their uncertain future by assuring her that, if they had complete faith in God, God would – in fact must – answer their prayers. He added that if God did not keep God's promises, they would have the right to throw the Bible down at God's feet.

A few months later, on that painful journey down the Finke River, he is said at one stage to have picked up his Bible, looked at it for some time, and then thrown it into the bush. Not only was he suffering physical agony, but he was also undergoing an intense spiritual struggle. He was overcome by the sense of having been abandoned by God, by God's seeming lack of compassion, and by the wall of silence that met all of his prayers. After serving God so faithfully, he seemed to be abandoned out here in the lonely desert, to die a painful death.¹⁹

- *Spend some time drawing the parallels between the passage we have just studied and this Australian parable. In what ways were Carl Strehlow and John the Baptist similar? In what ways were their ministries alike? What were the 'fruits' of their ministry?*

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS...

For Matthew, John is a true prophet with a legitimate divine message, who proclaims the same message Jesus will proclaim, and who recognises Jesus as the Messiah when he comes for baptism. John is imprisoned because his prophetic preaching offends the authorities, and later dies a martyr's death. Nonetheless, John wavers in his faith. For Matthew, this is the nature of discipleship and faith, which must be constantly renewed.

¹⁹ John Pfitzner, *Australian Parables* (Lutheran Publishing House, Adelaide, 1988), p 79.



Carl and Frieda Strehlow at Hermannsburg (1890s). Source: Strehlow Research Centre.

John becomes an object lesson to Christian believers, who must not regard salvation as a static possession, but must take heed lest they also fall away.²⁰

► *Call to mind the any doubts you may have concerning your faith. Prayerfully offer these God, inviting the Spirit to open your eyes and ears to the truth of Jesus Christ.*

To some extent, John's question (11:3) may already be ours. John may speak for those who were once sure of their faith but now are not so sure, or for those who are impressed by Jesus' accomplishments but wonder whether there is some clue in them to the ultimate meaning of things. Matthew does not consider the asking of such questions as closing the door of faith. The ways of the world force such questions on honest minds: Is there really a God who knows and cares? Does this God have a plan for the world? For me? If so, is Jesus the definitive revelation of that God, or should we look elsewhere for answers to those ultimate questions? Those who seriously ask such questions may be closer to the kingdom than those who say that, of course, God exists and, of course, Jesus is God's Son.²¹

► *What are some of the 'big questions' of your faith? Share these with a trusted companion.*

It is not an unusual or shameful thing to struggle with doubts. Jesus is not offended by our questioning. Faith is a precious gift of God, but there are times when it becomes a fearful struggle. All we can do is hold on to Jesus' words and look at what he has done. His words and actions are an encouragement for us to believe, in spite of all appearances, that he is the fulfilment of all God's promises, that he is the one sent by God to save and heal.

Praise God for the confidence we can have in Christ – the one who is, and who was, and who is to come!

²⁰ Boring, 'The Gospel of Matthew,' p 270.

²¹ Boring, 'The Gospel of Matthew,' p 271.

MID-WEEK BIBLE STUDY 4

Jesus' Parable of the Sheep and the Goats

MATTHEW 25:31-46 | RYAN GREEN

THE GOSPEL IS ABOUT a revolution of the imagination. The passage before us is one of shock and surprise, a parable in every sense as it leads us down the garden path in terms of expectation – where we are in this parable, who is welcome, and who is excluded – and then turns everything violently on its head. In the end everyone is as shocked as everyone else to end up where they are, and the hospitality of God, the way God welcomes us, depends entirely on the welcome that we have shown – or have failed to show – others. This parable overturns our understandings of judgement, inclusion and exclusion, how Christ is present in our world, and is about the final working out of a refrain we hear constantly in Matthew's gospel: 'Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'

► *Read Matthew 25:31-46, preferably aloud, as it is good to be reminded that our gospels were really written to be performed for a community rather than to be read quietly at home by an individual*

Pivotal to this story of judgement is Jesus' statement first to the sheep: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these..., you did it to me." And then to the goats: "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." Throughout the pages of Matthew's gospel reference is made to 'the least of these,' but these words have become so familiar to us that they have been drained of almost all their power. And yet, if we look a little deeper, we may find they still have the ability to shock and disturb us into the kingdom of heaven as, in Matthew's gospel, it is 'the least of these' that mysteriously convey the presence and purpose of God in our world.

Perhaps the best known of Matthew's stories of 'the least of these' appears in chapter 19 where some 'little children' are brought forward to receive a blessing (Matthew 19:13-15). Completely on the wrong side of things as usual, the disciples try to stop them, but Jesus is having none of it. 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.' Once again our modern ears

have been stopped from hearing the true revolution behind this statement as our imaginations are immediately filled with cooing babies with cute booties and rosy cheeks. But Jesus has none of that in mind. Jesus here understands that children are those with no economic or political power, those who are entirely dependent upon others in trust and vulnerability. Jesus is saying that the most vulnerable and the most powerless, those who are most at risk in our violent and disordered world are precisely those who are at the centre of God's concern.

As Reimagining Matthew seeks to remind us, Matthew is well-known for being the 'gospel for the Church,' being the only gospel that makes use of the word *ekklēsia*. What is more important for us here is that, in Matthew 18, Jesus gives us a dramatic and surprising image for the Church. Not hundreds and thousands gathered in a megachurch, or a rich and successful congregation replete with mission-programmes, giant events, or even thunderous pipe organs, but 'two or three' gathered in the name of Christ. This is the church reimagined – reimagined as a vulnerable and at-risk community standing in complete solidarity with the poor and outcast, those who not only side with the broken and dispossessed, but a church itself comprising of 'the least of these.' We must remember, as David Bentley Hart reminds us, '[it is only] after Constantine that the church became that most lamentable of things – a pillar of respectable society.'²² But for now, in Jesus' imagination at least, the Church remains a scandal to respectability as it recognises the blessing of God in precisely those who are excluded from the normal arrangement of things. We only need to remember Matthew's Beatitudes to be confronted once more with the spiritual revolution that the gospel brings. There the pursuit of power, wealth, comfort and influence are at radical odds with the in-breaking kingdom of heaven. Only those who are left out of such power games – the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who yearn for justice, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted – really 'get it.'

Of course, 'the least of these' are seen most prominently in the passage we are considering today. And here they are far from cute. The threatening stranger, the disturbingly naked, the contagious sick, the potentially dangerous prisoner. All these groups represent risk. They are people fundamentally at risk in our world as they have no power, no voice, no leverage in the world – but they also represent a risk to us as they threaten to confuse our categories, to disturb our comfort, to unsettle our neatly ordered way of being and doing.

It is here that Matthew's Jesus pushes us into a new imaginative space. 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me.' All of these people are those of whom the world has had enough. They have been 'written out' of the world – 'written off'! They are the dangerous, the needy, the hopeless, the meaningless,

²² David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies* (Yale University Press, Yale, 2009), p 171.

the useless. But, says Jesus, I am with and in people just such as these. Rowan Williams writes,²³

Wisdom will always be an exile, a refugee, in a world constrained by endless struggles for advantage, where success lies always in establishing your position at the expense of another's. The first step in acquiring God's Wisdom is therefore to search for what one recent writer has called 'the intelligence of the victim' – not because it is good or holy in itself to be a victim, far from it, but because looking at the world from the point of view of those excluded by its systems of power free us from the need always to be securing our own power at all costs.

Another revolutionary theme in this gospel is that of 'God-with-us'. Right at the beginning of the Gospel, in a wonderfully familiar Christmas tone, Matthew quotes from Isaiah, the prophet of hope: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which, he reminds us, means "God is with us." And right at the end of the Gospel, the risen Jesus' final words to his followers are, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

It should come as no surprise that the gospel writer who gives us this most devastating and revolutionary of parables – the parable of the sheep and the goats – gives us these two extraordinary images of this divine presence that so transforms the world. The first is in the vulnerability of a wordless child, miraculously born to a couple on the edge, a teenage mother and a foster-father, soon to be driven into Egypt as refugees fleeing from the violence of a political tyrant (see study 3). The second is this same Jesus, this time as an adult, stripped, mocked, beaten and crucified, outside the structures of power, broken by violence and death. God's presence, wrapped up in a vulnerable and helpless baby, hung limply on the cross in death, is finally also to be found in 'the least of these,' the hungry and the naked, the stranger and the prisoner.

But what is our response going to be?

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

Lawrence of Rome, a deacon in ancient Rome, was asked by the Roman prefect to bring forth the treasures of the Church that they might be given to the Roman Empire. Ambrose of Milan tells us that he went away only to come back with the poor and the destitute. 'These are the treasures of the Church,' he exclaimed. So revolting was this to the prefect that Lawrence was violently martyred by being burnt alive on a gridiron.

- ▶ *What do you think Saint Lawrence meant when he called the poor 'the treasures of the Church'? Why do you think this act produced such a violent response?*

²³ Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial, How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (HarperCollinsReligious, New York, 2000), p 45–46.



In this icon of Christ Pantocrator, we see two images of Christ combined. If you draw a line down the middle of this icon and look to the left you see Christ's hand raised in blessing and an open and gentle face of welcome. On the other side you see the book of judgement and a penetrating gaze. This icon gives us the 'double-edged sword' of Christ's rule: judgement and blessing.

- ▶ *What are the things or people that you most treasure in your church community? How does your church community respond to the needs of others? How do you?*

RESPONSE TIME

Take some time this week to seek out someone in your life who is 'the least of these.' Find the person whose voice you've ignored, or whose presence you have left unacknowledged, someone you've dismissed as useless and meaningless, and let them back into your world.

- ▶ *Ask yourself why you have pushed them to the side in the past. How do they disturb or challenge you? See how they might bear the promise of God to you again.*

FURTHER PROVOCATIONS I

Consider this portrayal of Christ's coming taken from Rowan Williams' poem, 'Advent Calendar':²⁴

*He will come, will come,
will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.
He will come like child.*

²⁴ Rowan Williams, *The Poems of Rowan Williams* (Perpetua, Oxford, 2002), p 15.

Here the poet uses different images for the coming of Christ, 'like crying in the night,' 'like blood,' 'like breaking.'

- ▶ *What might these images mean? What does it mean for you for God to 'come like child'?*

FURTHER PROVOCATIONS 2

Consider this quotation:

Judgement is whispering into the ear of God the life-story you have been too afraid to tell.

Desmond Tutu

- ▶ *The passage before us places the theme of judgement squarely before us. What do you think about when faced with the question of God's judgement?*

FURTHER PROVOCATIONS 3

Watch 'A Day in Macabud' on YouTube: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=zQ4hLcPFZH8>. (Macabud is on the outskirts of Manila, on the edge of a rubbish dump.)

- ▶ *Does this video clip add anything to your reflections on Matthew 25?*

A PRAYER

*Loving Father,
whose Son Jesus Christ has taught us
that what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters
we do also for him:
give us the will to be the servant of others
as he was the servant of all,
who gave up his life and died for us,
and yet lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

A Prayer Book for Australia, p583

SUNDAY TEXT FOR ADVENT IV

The Annunciation to Joseph

MATTHEW 1:18-25 | ELIZABETH SMITH

POOR JOSEPH! Art, literature and song conspire to keep him out of the spotlight in the story of the birth of Jesus. Among the countless images, stories and carols featuring the mother and child, only a tiny fraction mention Joseph. If he is present, he is usually in the background, protective of his celebrated wife or awestruck by her astonishing son. Rarely is he the centre of attention, though the early-18th century painting *St Joseph with the Child* by Francesco Conti is an exception in showing Joseph alone with the child Jesus. Even though Matthew gives Joseph a key role in the story of Jesus' birth, there are still some things in Matthew's narrative that keep Joseph from coming clearly into focus.

► *Read Matthew 1:18-25, preferably aloud.*

JOSEPH OVERSHADOWED

When we first meet Joseph, he is carefully described by Matthew as “the husband of Mary” (Matthew 1:16). This is definitely not normal. Joseph was a common name for Jewish men in the first century, so most Josephs would acquire a nickname based on their father's identity, their trade, their town of origin or some other personal characteristic. But to be identified by your wife's name would certainly raise eyebrows. We don't even find out that Joseph was a carpenter until a passing reference in Matthew 13:55, where Jesus' father's trade but not his name is mentioned, though Mary and four brothers – James, Joseph, Simon and Judas – are all listed. Joseph is overshadowed by his ancestors in the genealogy of Matthew 1:1-17, and by the rest of his family from then on.

JOSEPH SILENT

Second, Joseph never gets to say a word in Matthew's narrative. We are told a little about his decision-making, first to dismiss Mary and then to go ahead and marry her. But there is no direct speech for Joseph, no conversation with Mary herself or with her family



Francesco Conti, *St Joseph with the Child*, oil on canvas, 62×51 cm.

over the out-of-order pregnancy, and no dream-conversation with the angel, either, who comes to tell him what to do about it. Even bad king Herod gets a bigger speaking part. We don't hear Joseph's voice.

JOSEPH WITHOUT SOCIAL CONTEXT

Third, there is no scene-setting to help us picture Joseph in his world. No town, no time, no home, no wider family, no landscape is mentioned in which we can imagine Joseph thinking through his dilemma, dreaming his angelic dream, or getting married. There is not even a reference to the place where the baby is eventually born under Joseph's protection until well into chapter 2, when the Eastern visitors find the child and his mother – that high profile mother again – in a nondescript “house” in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:11). We don't see Joseph's world.

So what does Matthew give us instead of the carpenter, his conversations and his context? How does Matthew bring Joseph out of the shadows?

RIGHTEOUS JOSEPH

First, Matthew gives us Joseph the righteous man, thoughtful and considerate. When the bride-to-be is found to be pregnant, and not to the husband-to-be, Joseph chooses not to make a scene and shame Mary. Understandably, he does not want to be associated with her apparent promiscuity, but nor does he want to expose her to “public disgrace,” so he plans to “dismiss her quietly.” We see Joseph as an upright but gentle man, concerned not only for his own reputation but also for that of a vulnerable young woman. In a culture where every male needed to demonstrate and protect his public honour at every opportunity, this shows us a Joseph who is unusually humble, and willing to protect a woman subject to the very real perils of public shame.

VISIONARY JOSEPH

Second, Matthew gives us Joseph the visionary, dreamer of dreams like his famous namesake (Genesis 37–50). In the gospel episode, Joseph is visited in a dream by an angel of the Lord, and given firm instructions about what to do. Twice more there will be dreams for Joseph, once to send him with his little family to safety in Egypt (Matthew 2:13), and once to bring them back through Judea to Nazareth (Matthew 2:20). To receive a dream-visit from one of God’s messengers is a big deal in biblical terms. In dreams, Abraham, Jacob and the original Joseph all heard God give directions for their future. And our Joseph receives some very specific directions.

The angel gives Joseph his missing nickname, “son of David.” This is quite an honour, harking back to a most illustrious royal ancestor. The original David was famous for having multiple wives, but this son of David will be famous for being the husband of just one woman. The angel goes on to explain why Joseph need not be afraid to marry Mary: the child is not from some other man, but from the Holy Spirit. Joseph is even directed about how and why to name the child “God saves” – Yeshua, Joshua, Jesus (which are just different English transliterations of the same name).

With the angel gone, Matthew the narrator comes in with a formula that will be repeated many times in the next few chapters. The formula consists of a claim that scripture is being fulfilled, together with the relevant quotation from the Jewish scriptures. This one is from Isaiah 7:14, and the key words are about the virgin (Matthew) or young woman (Isaiah) conceiving and bearing a son. In the Isaiah passage, it is about a sign from God, given to confirm to a doubting leader that something good is going to happen quite soon: in not much more time than it takes to get pregnant and give birth, God will dispose of Jerusalem’s enemies. Much ink has been spilt over the differences in Hebrew and Greek between the words for “young woman” and “virgin.” Whatever was meant by Isaiah’s Hebrew original, when Matthew adapts it into Greek he wants to emphasise that it’s not some other man’s child that Joseph is being asked to acknowledge and to raise. The idea that it is actually God’s child that Mary is to bear comes from the end of the quotation, where “they shall name him Emmanuel,” translated for the reader’s benefit as “God is with us.” This second and quite different angle on the baby’s name is for us, not for Joseph. We are given an explanation that Joseph has not received.

OBEDIENT JOSEPH

Now Matthew tells us about Joseph’s actions. Joseph wakes up and does what the angel has commanded. There are three elements to his obedience. In active obedience Joseph marries Mary and, when the baby is born, takes full family responsibility for “her son” by naming him Jesus. In between, Matthew is careful to tell us what Joseph does not do: he does not have sex with Mary (NRSV “had no marital relations with her,” KJV “knew her not,” NIV “had no union with her”) until after the baby is born. This sequence of events leaves open the possibility that the brothers, James, Joseph, Simon and Judas,

are subsequent offspring of Joseph and Mary, but it completely closes off the possibility that Jesus is Joseph's biological son. Some later traditions want to see Mary as ever-virgin, and they ascribe to Joseph a previous family by a previous marriage to account for the brothers and sisters referred to elsewhere, in places like Matthew 13:54-58, Mark 3:31-35 and the book of Acts. But Matthew is simply not interested in Joseph's life before his marriage to Mary, or what happens between him and Mary after Jesus is born. It is the fact of Joseph's physical non-paternity of Jesus that matters, and also the fact of his gracious, obedient assumption of all the legal, social and spiritual responsibilities of fatherhood, when Joseph – not the famous mother, this time – names the child in obedience to the angel's commands.

So this traditional gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday of Advent sets out Joseph's righteous character, his visionary openness to God's direction for his life and his family, and his obedience to divine commands. All this will be reinforced in Matthew's second chapter, packed with more dreams and difficult journeys.

OUR CONTEXT: JOSEPH, AN EXCELLENT FATHER

Some years back, pondering Joseph's acceptance of the responsibility of being father to Mary's son, I surveyed some parish children to ask them what made a good father.

An excellent father – and Joseph was an excellent father – does things with his children, as well as for his children. And all his children feel that he has time for them and doesn't have favourites. Girl or boy, older or younger, each one gets a bit of an excellent father's time and attention. Now, as we noted above, the jury is out on whether Jesus had any younger sisters and brothers or whether he was Joseph's only child. But perhaps we can be confident that if there were other children apart from Jesus in the house, all of them got a good slice of Joseph.

An excellent father – and Joseph was an excellent father – gives the children both treats and duties. The children recognised that it is important that their dad makes them do their chores, because if he didn't, they might turn into lazy, bratty, boring children. An excellent father finds interesting things for his children to learn, and he also helps them learn the things that are less interesting, but still important, like times-tables. Children need companions in their learning. A very rare child might learn its times-tables on its own, or bury its nose privately in a book, or get fit and grow strong by getting its exercise in solitary splendour. But most children learn more, and enjoy learning more, when there's a grown-up there to cheer them on, and boost them up, and encourage them into the next tricky or exciting thing to learn. An excellent father will do that.

An excellent father – and Joseph was an excellent father – does not need to be top all the time. Maybe if the ball goes up on the roof and someone needs to get it down and it's not too dangerous, then maybe dad will hold the ladder while one of the children rescues the ball. But if it's really dangerous or the children are really scared, they know dad would do it for them. A good father has a sense of humour and he knows how to

make jokes and tease the children, but he never makes them feel small. In turn, he lets them tease him, too. And while some adults might get grumpy on being interrupted while doing some grown-up thing, an excellent father doesn't mind being interrupted by his children.

An excellent father – and Joseph was an excellent father – gives really spot-on gifts. He knows exactly what his children need. We won't go into how much of what he knows he gets from the children's mother, but if you want my tip as a keen observer of family dynamics, I would say that another qualification of any excellent father is the quality of his respectful, realistic teamwork with the children's mother!

Children of the age of the ones I was talking to don't tend to notice things that don't relate directly to them. But they did tell me one thing about their excellent father as a person in his own right: they said that he never gives up. When he's trying to do something really, really difficult he keeps trying until he does it. We can apply that to Joseph, too. He was asked to do the longest and most difficult thing of all: raise a child who would end up owing ultimate obedience not to him, but to God.

There was one more thing that the children noticed about an excellent father – and Joseph was an excellent father – and it deserves to stand as a famous last word on this topic. They said: "He loves having us as his children." Children can tell when they're loved. If a parent has a favourite among the children, they can pick it. If a father gets bored or angry or impatient with his children, they can pick it. But when a father genuinely, deeply, cheerfully and consistently "loves having us as his children," well, it shines out bright and clear.

Before Jesus was born, from the time he had that strange dream, Joseph had to make up his mind to accept Jesus as his child. But I think we can be confident that he did better than that. Joseph, that excellent father, managed to show to the boy Jesus the most important thing of all, that he loved having him as his child. We can count on it, simply because we know for sure that Jesus grew up to preach about a fatherly God who loves having all of us as his children. That was Jesus' message, and it must have been Joseph's gift, that he loved having Jesus as his child.

- ▶ *What images of Joseph can you recall from art, literature, carols and non-biblical stories? How do these connect with, expand on or diverge from Matthew's sketchy portrait of Joseph?*
- ▶ *What qualities of excellent fatherhood do you recognise from your own or other people's experience of being a father, or having a father?*
- ▶ *What recognition does your church give to fathers in general, and especially to those men who like Joseph have accepted spiritual, social or legal responsibilities towards children who are not biologically their own – adoptive fathers, foster fathers, step-fathers, mentors, teachers, coaches?*

POSTLUDE

Reimagining Matthew – Beyond Advent

MOTHY VARKEY & DEAN SPALDING

IN THIS ‘POSTLUDE’ OR ‘AFTERWORD’ we want to extend the usefulness of this ‘Reimagining Matthew’ resource beyond Advent. The Lectionary Table (based on *APBA*) at the end of this section plots the course for the rest of the liturgical Year A and where it takes us in the Gospel of Matthew. Because Matthew is a relatively large gospel, and only half the text of the gospel can be covered in Sunday readings, the Lectionary has to be quite ‘choosey.’

Particularly under-represented in the Lectionary’s choice are miracle stories and healings. The Lectionary omits the healings of: a leper (8:1-4); a centurion’s servant (8:5-13); two Gadarene demoniacs (8:28-34); a paralysed man (9:2-8); Jairus’s daughter and the woman with haemorrhages (9:18-26); two blind men (9:27-31); a man who was mute (9:32-34), a man with a withered hand (12:9-14); a blind and mute man (12:22-24); “many people” (15:29-31); a boy with a demon (17:14-21); and finally, two more blind men (20:29-34). Almost as if he knew he might be stretching people’s capacity for healing stories, Matthew’s healing stories tend to be shorter and more to the point than his synoptic companions (Mark and Luke), and perhaps this is why the Lectionary prefers the others’ fuller versions above Matthew’s. But these “omissions” mean that the reader, if limited to hearing the Lectionary’s choice, misses the beautiful balance of Matthew’s portrait of Jesus as a person of both great word and action. Matthew alternates the accounts of Jesus’ action (healings and feedings) with prolonged teaching sections (recounting Jesus’ speech). When many of those actions are omitted we can miss the overwhelming sense of the balance in the Good News that Jesus embodies – as teacher and agent, as personified Wisdom’s interpretation of the Law and the fulfilment of the Isaianic promised actions (Luke 11:5, 12:18-21, 15:31).

The reading prescribed by the Lectionary for St Matthew’s Day (21 September) is Matthew 9:9-13. And this is not only appropriate because it features the ‘Calling of Matthew,’ but because it has what Brendan Byrne identifies as a key verse of Matthew’s gospel. “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come

to call not the righteous but sinners” (Matthew 9:13). This is a lens we can hold up and use as an interpretive cross reference for wherever we find ourselves in the gospel. It can also work to temper what can otherwise read as very judgemental, legalistic and exclusivist sections of the gospel. If this key verse (Matthew 9:13) is held in healthy juxtaposition with the more ‘challenging’ readings, exegetes and preachers are more likely to bring the Good News to the fore in their studies, sermons and reflections. Hopefully this is what has been modelled in the eight studies presented in this resource.

Another approach to understanding difficult passages in Matthew is to understand something of the situation (“Life Setting” or *Sitz Im Leben*) of Matthew’s community.²⁵ While the detail of such positioning will always remain debatable, there are some things we can fairly confidently assert that go a long way to explaining why Matthew might write the way he does.

It seems that the community of Matthew were on the one hand, very Jewish. There is a high degree of respect for the authority of the Hebrew scriptures (“This was to fulfil what was spoken/written by the prophet...”). There is a high degree of respect for the Torah (“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees...,” and we know from Josephus that the Pharisees had a reputation for being the most Torah-abiding of all the Jewish sub-groups). On the other hand, it seems that Matthew’s readership is a very Jewish community which is just coming to terms with the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church. Instead of saying “just coming to terms with” we could have well written “are still struggling to come to terms with...” Consider the great tension between, on one hand, a gospel that is punctuated with accounts of godly Gentiles,²⁶ and on the other hand contains dismissive references to the “Gentiles” as if they were *anathema*.²⁷ This is precisely where Matthew’s community is located – right in the disturbing midst of transition and great uncertainty. Thus Matthew reads like the work of a person in a community who haven’t got everything all ‘smoothed out’ and neatly resolved. They know that the connection with the Hebrew tradition is vitally important to their understanding of the Messiah. But they know that the reality of Gentile inclusion in the church is real. And we see the tension writ large throughout the gospel.

²⁵ Matthew was in probability written between 70 and 100 CE, and in all probability between 85 and 90 CE. Although there are many proposed geographical locations proposed for its composition, Syrian Antioch seems to be probable. For a much fuller scholarly account of dating and provenance, see the PDF Reimagining Matthew – Beyond Advent on the web at <http://perth.anglican.org/matthew/beyondadvent>.

²⁶ Consider the following brief sample of the Gentiles in Matthew: the genealogy which contains Gentile women (1:3,5,6); the Magi from the east (2:1-12); a Roman centurion (8:5-13); a Canaanite woman (15: 21-28); a Roman soldier’s confession (27:54); the Great Commission (28:18-20).

²⁷ Consider Matthew 9:5 “Go nowhere among the Gentiles...”; Matthew 15:24 “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel...”; Matthew 18:17 “Let such a one [an offender who refuses to listen to the church] be to you as a Gentile...”.

And yet it is precisely this tension that makes Matthew's such a potent gospel for readers of the early 21st century. In the West we are contending with a whole new ball-game in terms of the past one hundred years' witnessing of the collapse of Western Christendom and simultaneously the rise of the Christian global 'South' and 'East'. Western Christians know that there are things they hold to be important and real from our Christian past. And yet like Matthew's community we haven't got things completely worked out in this new missional paradigm. The way ahead is largely uncharted territory.

And so like Matthew's community we open ourselves to the uncertain future while holding on to that which sustains us most – the promise that 'God with us' (Matthew 1:21-23), who is both our Good News and the 'Lifter of Burdens,' has promised an enduring presence with us – always, to the end of the age.

(For a more in-depth version of this final chapter, one can download a PDF from the Perth Diocesan website <http://perth.anglican.org/matthew/beyondadvent>.)

LECTIONARY TABLE

Sunday and Seasonal Holy Day Eucharist Gospel Readings

THE FOLLOWING IS INTENDED as a guide to show where the Lectionary takes us in the Gospel of Matthew with respect to Sunday Eucharist readings. It demonstrates that not every section of Matthew is represented. Supplementary readings are shown in italics; bordered rows indicate seasonal Holy Days that are not Sundays.

Sun 1 Dec 2013	Advent I	Matthew 24:36-44
Sun 8 Dec 2013	Advent II	Matthew 3:1-12
Sun 15 Dec 2013	Advent III	Matthew 11:2-11
Sun 22 Dec 2013	Advent IV	Matthew 1:18-25
Wed 25 Dec 2013	Christmas Day	Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20
Sun 29 Dec 2013	Christmas I	Matthew 2:13-23
Sun 5 Jan 2014	Christmas II	John 1:(1-9) 10-18
Mon 6 Jan 2014	Epiphany	Matthew 2:1-12
Sun 12 Jan 2014	Baptism of our Lord	Matthew 3:13-17
Sun 19 Jan 2014	Epiphany II	John 1:29-42 [<i>Matthew 6:1-6</i>]
Sun 26 Jan 2014	Epiphany III	Matthew 4:12-25
Sun 2 Feb 2014	Epiphany IV	Matthew 5:1-12
Sun 9 Feb 2014	Epiphany V	Matthew 5:13-20
Sun 16 Feb 2014	Epiphany VI	Matthew 5:21-37
Sun 23 Feb 2014	Epiphany VII	Matthew 5:38-48
Sun 2 Mar 2014	Epiphany VIII	Matthew 6:22-34
Sun 2 Mar 2014	Epiphany, Last	Matthew 17:1-9 (Transfiguration)
Wed 5 Mar 2014	Ash Wednesday	Matthew 6:1-6 (7-15) 16-21
Sun 9 Mar 2014	Lent I	Matthew 4:1-11
Sun 16 Mar 2014	Lent II	John 3:1-17
Sun 23 Mar 2014	Lent III	John 4:5-42 [<i>Matthew 26:57-75</i>]
Sun 30 Mar 2014	Lent IV	John 9:1-41 [<i>Matthew 27:1-31</i>]
Sun 6 Apr 2014	Lent V	John 11:1-45 [<i>Matthew 27:32-56</i>]
Sun 13 Apr 2014	Lent VI (Palm Sunday)	Matthew 21:1-11 (Liturgy of the Palms)

Sun 13 Apr 2014	Lent VI (Passion Sunday)	Matthew 26:14–27:66 or 27:11-54
Sat 19 Apr 2014	Holy Saturday	Matthew 27:57-66
Sat 19 Apr 2014	Easter Vigil	Matthew 28:1-10
Sun 20 Apr 2014	Easter Day	Matthew 28:1-10
Sun 27 Apr 2014	Easter II	John 20:19-31
Sun 4 May 2014	Easter III	Luke 24:13-35 or Matthew 28:8-15a
Sun 11 May 2014	Easter IV	John 10:1-10
Sun 18 May 2014	Easter V	John 14:1-14
Sun 25 May 2014	Easter VI	John 14:15-21
Thu 29 May 2014	Ascension	Matthew 28:16-20
Sun 1 Jun 2014	Easter VII	John 17:1-11
Sun 8 Jun 2014	Day of Pentecost	John 20:19-23 or John 7:37-52
Sun 15 Jun 2014	Trinity Sunday	Matthew 28:16-20
Sun 22 Jun 2014	Pentecost II	Matthew 10:24-39
Sun 29 Jun 2014	Pentecost III	Matthew 10:40-42 [<i>Matthew 12:9-21</i>]
Sun 6 Jul 2014	Pentecost IV	Matthew 11:15-19 (20-24) 25-30 [<i>Matthew 12:22-32</i>]
Sun 13 Jul 2014	Pentecost V	Matthew 13:1-9 (10-17) 18-23 [<i>Matthew 12:33-42</i>]
Sun 20 Jul 2014	Pentecost VI	Matthew 13:24-30 (31-33) 36-43 [<i>Matthew 12:43-50</i>]
Sun 27 Jul 2014	Pentecost VII	Matthew 13:44-58 [<i>Matthew 14:1-12</i>]
Sun 3 Aug 2014	Pentecost VIII	Matthew 14:13-21 [<i>Matthew 15:1-9</i>]
Sun 10 Aug 2014	Pentecost IX	Matthew 14:22-36 [<i>Matthew 15:10-20</i>]
Sun 17 Aug 2014	Pentecost X	Matthew 15:(10-20) 21-28 [<i>Matthew 15:29-39</i>]
Sun 24 Aug 2014	Pentecost XI	Matthew 16:13-20 [<i>Matthew 16:1-12</i>]
Sun 31 Aug 2014	Pentecost XII	Matthew 16:21-28 [<i>Matthew 17:14-27</i>]
Sun 7 Sep 2014	Pentecost XIII	Matthew 18:10-20 [<i>Matthew 18:1-9</i>]
Sun 14 Sep 2014	Pentecost XIV	Matthew 18:21-35 [<i>Matthew 19:1-12</i>]
Sun 21 Sep 2014	Pentecost XV	Matthew 20:1-16 [<i>Matthew 19:13-22</i>]
Sun 28 Sep 2014	Pentecost XVI	Matthew 21:23-32 [<i>Matthew 19:23-30</i>]
Sun 5 Oct 2014	Pentecost XVII	Matthew 21:33-46 [<i>Matthew 20:17-28</i>]
Sun 12 Oct 2014	Pentecost XVIII	Matthew 22:1-14 [<i>Matthew 20:29-34</i>]
Sun 19 Oct 2014	Pentecost XIX	Matthew 22:15-33 [<i>Matthew 21:12-22</i>]
Sun 26 Oct 2014	Pentecost XX	Matthew 22:34-46
Sun 2 Nov 2014	Pentecost XXI	Matthew 23:1-12 (37-39)
Sun 2 Nov 2014	All Saints	Matthew 5:1-12
Sun 9 Nov 2014	Pentecost XXII	Matthew 25:1-13
Sun 16 Nov 2014	Pentecost XXIII	Matthew 25:14-30
Sun 23 Nov 2014	Christ the King	Matthew 25:31-46

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