

Liturgical Gospel Introduction: for 2020 – St. Matthew – Cycle A

Historical Background of the Gospel

Jesus was born within a creed called Judaism. Judaism incorporates the tribal name of Judah who was one of the twelve patriarchs who fathered the twelve tribes of Israel. Of all those tribes, Judah was the one that survived into the time of Jesus – having maintained its identity as a “nation” even as it ceased to be a political entity. Politically it had been subject to Persia and then to Greek leadership and – despite rebellions – subject to the Roman occupation of Palestine, which assigned administration of the region to quasi-Jewish puppets – like Herod the Great and his family.

As a creed the Jews (both those who lived in Palestine itself and those who were living in the Gentile regions of the Mediterranean) focused on their socially stratified Temple in Jerusalem – wherein their God dwelt in its Holy of Holies. They lived their religion by rituals centered within this Temple and doctrinal instruction within their dispersed local synagogues.

The Temple focus was maintained by a group called the Sadducees (descendants of the high priest of Solomon’s original Temple named Zadok). They formed a caste based on genetic descent – exclusive of lay membership. And they considered only the first five books of the Bible (from Genesis to Deuteronomy) inspired; all the rest of the Bible, secondary – including the prophets. Nor did they believe in life after death. In other words they were very conservative and hierarchical - - - exclusive, a closed shop as far as the world was concerned. And yet they seem to have lived very worldly lives.

The other prominent sect within Judaism was the Pharisees. These were lay teachers, laymen educated in Judaism’s biblical law and other customs, more liberal-minded than the Sadducees; and they embraced the whole of the Bible as God’s word, not just the first five books. Once trained, they were ordained to preside over the synagogues where opinions on their Law were delivered and preaching occurred every Sabbath.

Given the subjection of Jews by the time of Jesus, their loss of their once prosperous kingdom under Kings David and Solomon, the destruction of their first Temple, their being surrounded by alien powers, their thoughts were more of the past and the future than of the present. They kept themselves immersed in the memory of their ancient Exodus, their past heroes, the wisdom of their values - - and looked forward to a future revival of their influence, indeed some victory over the false creeds and kingdoms of this world – even to the end of time, the end of history as we know it. And they looked forward to a justice that would reward their faithfulness and wreak revenge on sinners.

One could say they clung to remaining what they *were*, staying the same in every detail of their tradition – holding fast and exclusive, pure (Pharisee means separate) until some final moment vindicated them before all the world.

Foreword

Look at the distributed charts to see a table of contents and the architecture of the Gospel as perceived by modern scholarship.

Matthew's Gospel was composed sometime (in the 70's AD) after the publication of Mark's short Gospel (in the 60's AD). It adopts the plot and much of Mark's account with amplifications from an assumed collection of Sayings of Jesus and other sources, so that Matthew's Gospel is twice the size of Mark's.

Original Audience?

It is held that Matthew's Gospel was aimed at a Jewish audience (in Antioch of Syria) – either already converts to the Gospel or opposed to the Gospel as a betrayal of Judaism. For that reason Matthew's aim in part is to convince Jews in general that Jesus, far from being a renegade, was proclaiming the ultimate revelation of the Judaic tradition – indeed an authentically new Moses – drawing out of the God of the Law, the God of radical Grace.

Interpretation

Rather than explain the contents of Matthew's Gospel as a text laid out before us – an object of exegesis, i.e. a critical interpretation of the text such as you get in standard commentaries – I'm going to take the approach whereby we enter into the "world of the text", become caught up in its narrative as about us – here and now. And we shall begin with the adult appearance of Jesus, saving the story of his birth until next month.

Action 1 - 3:1-4:25

Initially we find ourselves caught up in a reform movement. A voice out of the desert, a man gaunt from fasting, wearing shaggy clothes, inviting us to experience immersion in the Jordan River - - indeed a re-immersion into the long ago events of Israel's Red Sea and Jordan crossings out of our enslavement to whatever depresses us due to the sedimentation of our tradition, its monotony, its everydayness, even its irrelevance to one's current world – to which Pharisees and Sadducees have contributed with their legalism and ritualism and I might add individualist pietism.

We experience John's urgency when he says to us: *You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? And don't presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father – or we are Christians, for I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham and raise up Christians from these very stones.*

And John the Baptist continues: *I'm just trying to prepare you to change the way you think (metanoia) but someone is about to appear who is mightier than I – he will*

baptize you, immerse you in Spirit and Fire – so if you feel like your life as become like chaff, seedless husks, dry as straw, watch out, you could become ablaze.

And sure enough this Jesus (this new Moses and Joshua) appears to show us how we must respond: he undergoes John's baptism and emerges out of the waters in such a way that the heavens, the world we have known, even the tradition of our ancestors opens up and we thrill at the sight of a dove, of peace, shalom descending and we hear a voice saying: *This is the Other (with a capital O) who can make you Other than you have ever been.*

Then suddenly we find ourselves in a desert with this Jesus who has been there forty days and forty nights even as ancient Israel went through forty years of desert wandering before reaching a promised land. And we experience with Jesus something adverse to our very existence that would drag us back to our remaining a face in a crowd, the same old you, non-existent, a thing, a statistic. It argues: *If you are hungry, turn nature into bread; you have the brains and skills to do it. You don't need any kind of poetic engagement with life - except for entertainment.*

And we sense our voice blending with that of Jesus: *One does not live by bread alone; nature and technology aren't enough to satisfy the hunger we feel. We can not only make bread but airplanes and bulldozers and haute cuisine and skyscrapers, fashion nature in every which way, and we still remain as hungry as ever for something so much more.*

Then with Jesus we are told to take a leap from a high place; after all, as Scripture says, *He will command his angels concerning you and with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.* And along with Jesus we respond: *We shall not stop at a literal reading of God's word; the words you quoted are from a psalm, a poem that speaks extravagantly, imaginatively of God's providence – obviously you don't know much about metaphors, how words can have a deeper meaning than they have at face value. How shallow, adversary, how uncultured can you be?*

Finally we are carried with Jesus to a high place whence the wealth of the world is displayed – all of it ours if we agree with Michael Douglas in the film *Wall Street* that Greed is Good – grasping, not giving is what works. To which with Jesus we quote from ancient Moses: *The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.* In other words *There is this Other with a capital O that you should get to know to become Other than just the self, the identity you carry in your wallet.*

Word 1 - 5:3-7:28

We remember how Moses, after leading Israel out of the Red Sea into a desert, ascended a mountain whence he delivered the Old Law of the Otherness of God to these refugees – and now we watch this new Moses named Jesus (Jeshua) also ascend a mountain to deliver a New Law – which he insists is in continuity with the Old as he says *Do not think I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have*

come not to abolish but to bring it into blossom. So retain the language of that Old Law in its apparent sense but also as a terrain within which are deeper insights that indeed exceed the interpretations of its experts, the Pharisees. Rather, draw out of its deeper ethic, that emotional, far-ranging element, the excess, the hyperbolic possibilities, that divinity that as human beings you can be capable of. For instance, you read it to say: You shall not kill . . . but I say to you, even words can kill.

Adultery? To look on a woman as a mere object, a thing instead of a marvel of creation and what's more, man's equal, one on one, is already seriously abusive. Oaths? Why guarantee what you say is true? Keep it simple: let your Yes mean Yes and your No mean No – tell it like it is; don't let explanations or excuses run away with you. And no more *eye for an eye and tooth for tooth*. Superabundance is what is required. If struck on the right cheek, offer the left as well. If sued over your shirt, offer your coat as well. Someone forces you one mile, stay with him two.

Extravagance, let go, stop recoiling from care, loving others – for excess, grace is of the very nature of God. Stop worrying. Look at the birds of the air, they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns (they don't hoard, bank more wealth than one needs in a lifetime), yet your heavenly Father (who is grace) feeds them. Are you not even more wonderful than they? Build your life upon rock, not upon sand – you know what I mean!

And we sense as we hear this flowering of our Mosaic tradition, that this Jesus teaches with an authority we can *feel* – and not as a scribe who only *explains* the Law to its tiniest footnote.

When Jesus finished these words, the crowds were astonished at his teaching.

Action 2 - 8:1-9:34

And now we are launched into the effect this discourse, this spirit of Jesus can have. A series of eleven specific healings are narrated in quick succession – and they all happen to us. A leper is cleansed, a centurion's distant servant is healed – an elderly woman is raised from a sick bed. Other healings occur, too many to count. A storm at sea, endangering a boat's passengers, is muzzled by Jesus. Two demoniacs, chaotic characters, tomb dwellers, are cleansed, their demons transferred to a herd of swine who return to the chaos whence they came. A paralyzed person is raised to his feet to walk again – worry over his sins is dismissed. Two women, an old one and a mere girl are given new vitality. Two blind men have their sight restored. A man who cannot speak now begins to express himself. And so it goes, as it says: *Jesus went around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness.– At the sight of the crowds, at the sight of you and me, his heart moved with pity for us because we feel troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd.*

And we note that everyone of those healed is a marginal character, outside the mainstream of ordinary life due to disease, foreign origin, aging, feeling lost at sea,

possessed of some antisocial streak, paralyzed in some way, unable to get up off one's back, adolescent, bleeding, sightless, tongue-tied. In other words we realize it is people handicapped like us who are the focus of this Jesus' power, his healing word, his vital touch.

For it would be a mistake to think Matthew is just reporting events of the past – within the modern constraints of objective history. These Gospel narratives are not historical accounts in the modern sense of – say – an account of the building of the Erie Canal. They are mirrors in which we find ourselves – sick as we are – and we are expected to *experience* the word, the touch of a compassionate Power that unlike the gods of history is Grace, Compassion, Mercy – and the remedy it applies to you and me here and now is the release of our own capacity for creative Grace, Compassion, Mercy – the release of that horn of plenty that can cascade from us – we ourselves – once this Jesus has touched us – in depth.

That Jesus had some ability to heal physical or psychosomatic ills seems valid. But these so-called miracle stories are presented in this Gospel as *sacraments* to be not simply read but *gone through*, like out of a Red Sea, our once confining limits, into far wider horizons of being – as if infinite.

And indeed, although I simply listed them, they are *each* of a depth that demands *frequent* immersion in them – contemplation – as they *continue* to contribute to our arriving at ever newer levels of self understanding, of a changed being that can impact on our world. As some scholars say, once we get into the narrative, sense its impact upon us as readers, our own imagination is triggered into extending the narrative in details drawn from our current state of being – so that we apply the narrative by our own amplifying it. Our own experience and applicability of the miracle adds to its resonance.

For instance take the one about the cure of the mute person, which amounts to three verses. How do I experience it? I feel possessed by an acquired doubt about myself, my worth, taught by rote, canned questions and canned answers, trained to speak platitudes, slogans, the same stale jokes, to fear opening my mouth being unsure of my accuracy, my environment; mute among people I don't trust lest they find out what I really think of them; mute about how I really feel, dishonest, mainly because I don't know how I really feel . . . lock jaw. And then this Jesus reveals the Source of my Being as not just another potentate or "authority" or judge or censor – but as my closest friend, gracious beyond any measure conceivable, allowing me to speak in diminutives like Abba, *padre mio* – and I begin to speak with authority the way Jesus does, to speak like an adult.

Word 2 - 9:35-11:1

Compassion - harvest abundant
 Instructions to the Twelve
 I am sending you like sheep
 Courage
 Causes of division
 Conditions of disciple
 Rewards

Limiting myself to the commissioning of the Twelve to duplicate or multiply Jesus and his power, again it becomes you and me, convinced that something true has entered history – in the flowering of the old into something radically new – God as grace, humanity become graceful with all the possibilities that implies. Jesus sends us as reflections of himself, with a warning not to bog down – get too institutionalized and dogmatic that we advance like a turtle with a heavy shell on our back. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse, expose the demons, lead an exodus . . . make haste. But then we hear: Behold, I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves . . . as in the title of that movie: *There will be blood*.

Action 3 - 11:1-12:50

Messengers from JB
 Witness to John
 Unrepentant towns
 Praise of Father
 Come to me . . .
 Grain on Sabbath
 Withered hand
 Withdraws . . . bruised reed he will not break
 Jesus and Beelzebul
 Tree and fruits
 Demand for sign
 True family of Jesus . . .

Word 3 - 13:1-53 - Parables

Listen now to Jesus encouraging us, as multiplications of himself, to maintain great expectations – despite opposition. And he uses parables – an episodic way of conveying deeper meanings. He uses them not to baffle people; nevertheless scribes, legalists who take everything at face value, may be confused by the metaphorical challenge of such discourse – unable to wrap a story up into a balanced and settled equation.

In the **parable of the sower** he compares his words [and us, too, as extensions of his words of grace] as seed sown in a field. It won't all take root. Knuckleheads won't even know what we are talking about. Shallow minded people will not be impressed. Minds entangled, obsessed by trivia, the news of the day . . . they won't get it. But hang in there – for there is rich soil out there, people ready for something

else, something real – who will respond incrementally from day to day – thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold.

But that's not all he says. He implies that it is me myself that is a composite of trodden ground and rocky ground and thorny ground . . . hard to penetrate. But I am also a terrain of rich soil, ready to produce fruit thirtyfold or sixtyfold or a hundredfold. From somewhere deep within me Christ will rise to visibility, perhaps only like a dandelion – but have you ever really studied a dandelion – the way the great poet Goethe once did?

Of course there will be reaction. Amid the good seed you sow, others will maliciously or unconsciously **sow weeds** – enough to hinder the growth of the good seed – you will run into contradictions from people who claim to know better than you, from philosophies, ideologies that deny any truth but calculated facts – or from people whose only philosophy is a philosophy of suspicion (suspect everything, criticize from morning to night, voluminously). Let them be – excommunication isn't going to change things. Waiting is what works – for the Source of our Being arises from below things – even as grass grows. Christ will rise again.

Not making enough progress? The Gospel community dwindling in numbers, even in faith? Too small to survive? Seeds, especially the mustard seed start out small out of which rises a tree – even as $\frac{1}{4}$ of an ounce of yeast is needed to bake a loaf of bread. Again the Gospel has a way of creeping up on people, catching them off guard – widening their scope, deepening their way of being. So don't fret.

Indeed it has this way of surprising you – as if you were to unearth a buried treasure in recently purchased property or found a real gem on a counter spread out with junk jewelry or came up with a catch too overwhelming to haul in – that takes everything you've got to sort out, that you need several lifetimes to consume.

Do you understand? Then every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and old.

When Jesus finished these parables, he moved on . . .

Action 4 - 13:54-17:23

Rejection at Nazareth

Herod's opinion

Death of JB

Return of 12 Feeding five thousand

Walking on Water

Healings at Gennesaret

Pharisees tradition break law . . . not what enters . . .

Canaanite woman faith

Feeding four thousand

Demand for sign
 Leaven of Pharisees and Sadducees
 Peter's confession
 1st prediction of passion
 Conditions of discipleship – lose life save it
 Transfiguration
 Coming of Elijah
 2nd prediction of passion

Rejection at Nazareth

Despite the surge in enthusiasm we experienced over the first half of this drama, the adversarial tendency that confronted Jesus in the desert remains, permeating all levels of society itself. There are many ways of interpreting our existence, some optimistic or prudent by way of reason itself. And then, according to Paul Ricoeur, there is the school of suspicion – in modern times exemplified by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud – moved by a constant readiness to question Otherness.

Already synagogue leaders have suggested that Jesus is an agent of Beelzebul, questioned the somewhat carefree behavior of his disciples. We sense something ominous rising – like a cloud it grows even as Jesus' popularity grows. It comes to a head during his return to his hometown of Nazareth. His very wisdom and healings beget a negative reaction. Another's success breeds envy, a take down. How come he's so smart, so popular. He's a carpenter's son - a member of our class. We know his family – nothing special about it – people we meet on the street. Where did he get an education? Did he pass a proficiency exam? Why is he questioning our tradition, talking back to our credentialed authorities? It's scandalous. And so it becomes clear that something of cosmic proportions is brewing. The Good News of this Jesus – about Grace and Mercy and freedom from fear – about growth and not sedimentation – isn't going to be all Good. Rejection, ridicule, Bill Maher is part of our destiny. Face up to it. Indeed, it can be invigorating.

Nor is it just the people of Nazareth. We are the people of Nazareth even as we are the hearers of Good News –Nazareth is something in us that wants to stay put; recoils from Otherness with a capital O, from Being with a capital B. There is something in us that would wish Jesus and his Gospel to go away.

To be continued

Postscript**Nocturne at Bethesda** (the pool in John's Gospel stirred by an angel)

By Arna Bontemps (1902-1973)

I thought I saw an angel flying low,
I thought I saw the flicker of a wing
Above the mulberry trees, but not again.
Bethesda sleeps. The ancient pool that healed
A host of bearded Jews does not awake.
This pool that once the angels troubled does not move.
No angel stirs it now, no Savior comes
With healing in His hands to raise the sick
And bid the lame man leap upon the ground.

The golden days are gone. Why do we wait
So long upon the marble steps, blood
Falling from our open wounds? And why
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Is there something we have forgotten? Some precious thing
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Unrepentant towns

Praise of Father

Come to me . . .
 Grain on Sabbath
 Withered hand **withered humanity**
 Withdraws . . . bruised reed he will not break
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 Tree and fruits
 Demand for sign
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