

## 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time — Matthew 5: 1-12<sup>8</sup>

### The sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount is the first of the five discourses which are a central part of Matthew's Gospel.

The beginning of the Sermon, which we know as "The Beatitudes", summarises the values of the Kingdom.

Matthew has modified the 1st, 4th and 9th Beatitudes from Luke's Sermon on the Plain, the rest are thought to be his own composition.

### Jesus sits down to teach

This is a significant detail.

When a Jewish Rabbi was teaching officially, he sat down. When Matthew uses the word 'taught' he uses a past tense which in Greek means that Jesus' teaching was repeated and habitual.

The Sermon on the Mount was not one sermon, but rather it was the essence of all that Jesus taught throughout his ministry.



### The Beatitudes

The word "beatitude" comes from the Latin *beatus*, meaning blessed or happy.

The word 'blessed' or 'happy' which Matthew uses in each beatitude comes from the Greek *makarios*, which specially describes the gods.

Thus there is a godlike joy in the people he is describing. It is something they already have, rather than something they hope to achieve in the future.

In effect, Jesus is saying that there is great joy in living out the values of the Kingdom, values the world finds difficult to accept and understand.

### The poor in spirit.

In the first three beatitudes, Jesus singles out groups normally considered in need of pity.

In the Old Testament the poor (the anawim) are those without material possessions and who trust in God. (Is. 61:1 Zeph. 2:3.) Matthew has added 'in spirit' indicating their complete dependence on God. The same phrase is found in the Qumran literature.

# PREGO EXTRA

## Background notes for the Gospels of January 2011 Year A



## The Baptism of the Lord— Matthew 3: 13-17 2

### This is my Son, the beloved

This episode in the life of Jesus is described in all four gospels.

### The river Jordan

It is the largest river in Palestine. It is 200 miles long and flows into the Dead Sea. From 90 to 100 feet wide, its depth varies from three to ten feet.

In the Old Testament, Namaan the leper is cleansed after washing himself in the Jordan (2 Kings 5:10-14). At the time of Jesus, Jewish residents of Nazareth and Galilee avoided going through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem by crossing the river from the western to the eastern side at various fords.

### The Baptism in water

Jews reserved this baptism ritual to ordain a person to ministry if they were descendants of Aaron, a priestly class.

Here John the Baptist simplifies this ritual by using a busy thoroughfare and opening it to all. It is also possible that John had been close to the Essenes, noted for their ritual daily ablutions. John's baptism is different. It cannot be repeated and indicates the start of a new life.

### John tries to dissuade Jesus

This dialogue is only found in Matthew's gospel. If John is preaching a baptism of repentance, why should Jesus, the Sinless one, want to be baptised? John's reluctance underlines the true identity of "the one who is to come".

Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his public life. It shows his solidarity with all those around him, sinful people aspiring to change.

## The Kingdom of Heaven 7

As previously mentioned (2nd Sunday of Advent), this is a specifically Matthean phrase. The word Kingdom does not refer to a geographical area but to the exercise of a particular power. It is synonymous to the word reign.

### Jesus calls four fishermen

Jesus calls people where they are, as they are. In this case, the men he chooses are at work, they have no formal education.

He does not give them any indication of what they are going to have to do.

Being a fisherman in Jesus time was not an easy life.

Their social ranking

was low. They were

not self-employed

but worked for

masters or for toll

collectors who

exerted control

over fish quotas and licensing. Following Jesus was

breaking with their masters and their Roman rulers in favour of the Kingdom of God.



### Fishers of men

The whole society around the Sea of Galilee revolved around fishing and boats; people were very familiar with fishing-related metaphors.

It is worth noting that fishing in this instance is done gathering fish with nets and not with line, hook and bait.

### Preaching and healing

The region at that time was full of healers to whom people travelled in the hope of being cured. Here, it is Jesus who goes towards people and meets them where they live.

**Follow me!**

This episode of Matthew's Gospel occurs just after Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. It marks the beginning of his public ministry as recorded in the Gospels.

**Jesus goes to settle in Capernaum**

Capernaum is a thriving, predominantly Jewish town, on the banks of the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is larger than Nazareth.



Scholars offer different reasons to explain why Jesus left his own town of Nazareth in favour of Capernaum. He may have wanted to reach a wider audience or he may have felt it was a safer place to start his ministry. Matthew uses the Greek verb meaning "to move as a result of imminent danger" to indicate Jesus moving to Capernaum. John the Baptist has just been sent to prison.

**Land of Zebulun and Naphtali**

This is the land of the first two Israel tribes to be conquered by the Assyrians and separated from the Kingdom of Israel 700 years previously. This reference enables Matthew to introduce his quote from Isaiah.

**The Prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled**

Throughout his Gospel, Matthew is at pains to show that Jesus' ministry stands in line with God's purpose as stated in the Old Testament. There are no fewer than 14 instances where he shows how what is happening to Jesus is fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy.

In the water of the river Jordan, he begins to take upon himself the sins of others. The full meaning of Jesus' baptism is to be found in his death on the cross.

**We should do all that righteousness demands**

This obscure phrase has been much discussed and studied by scholars. The most common explanation is that righteousness means "doing what God wants", a total acceptance of the will of God. It is that same wish to do what is righteous which can be found in Gethsemane (Mt 26:39).

**The Spirit of God, like a dove.**



Matthew uses the image found in Genesis of the Spirit of God hovering over the water (Gn 1: 2). It is indescribable, hence the word "like" a dove.

**This is my Son, the beloved**

The voice here addresses the onlookers whereas it is addressed to Jesus in Mark and Luke's gospels. The phrase is a combination of Psalm 2: 7 and Isaiah 42:1.

It is the first reference to the Trinity: the Spirit of God, the Son and the Father. We will find it again at the very end of Matthew's gospel, after the

Resurrection. It links Jesus' baptism to our own: "Baptise them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." (Mt 28:19)

**The witness of John the Baptist.**

This Sunday we read of Jesus’ Baptism as described in St John’s Gospel. John’s style differs from that of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Whereas they focus on what happened at the time, John’s emphasis is on the identity of Jesus.

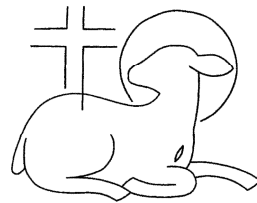
After seeing the spirit descending on Jesus like a dove at his baptism, thus fulfilling God’s words, John the Baptist is in no doubt that Jesus is the one for whom he has been preparing the way. (Matt: 3:1-12).

**The dove**

In Palestine the dove was a sacred bird. It was neither hunted nor eaten. At the time of Jesus' baptism the Christian doctrine of the Spirit had not yet come into being, John the Baptist was thinking in Jewish terms. The Jewish word for Spirit is *ruach* which means wind, indicating power, life and especially God.

**'The Lamb of God'**

John the Baptist gives witness to Jesus’ identity through the titles he uses for him. They could be given to no one else. Here John gives Jesus a title found nowhere else in the New Testament, except in the Book of Revelation. There the sacrificial 'Lamb' is mentioned many times, particularly in Chapter 17:14 ‘...the Lamb is the Lord of Lords and the King of kings,...’. This title is now used in the Christian Eucharistic liturgy.



There are several possible reasons why John may have used the title 'Lamb of God'.

It may have been in reference to the coming Passover Feast (Exodus 12:11-13.), or being the son of a priest, he may have been thinking of the twice daily ritual of sacrificing a lamb in the Temple for the sins of the people. (Exodus 29:38-42).

A third explanation is that he may have been remembering the prophecies found in Jeremiah 11:19 and Isaiah 53:7 who both spoke of the Lamb who would be slaughtered.

Another image which was very familiar to the Jews was that of the horned lamb which was seen as the symbol of a conquering champion for God. The word Lamb sums up the love, sacrifice, suffering and triumph of Christ.

**The meaning of baptism**

The Greek verb *baptizein* means to dip or submerge. It can be used with reference to clothes, ships and even drunkenness.

John here makes a distinction between his baptism with water, which simply meant physical and spiritual cleansing, and Jesus' baptism which anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power (Acts 10:36).

The Church has retained the traditional two-fold symbolism of water in its Baptism liturgy: water can bring death (dying to our previous life) but it can also bring new life (as a follower of Christ). In our Baptism we experience the death and resurrection of Christ.

