

The virginal conception of Christ

A Gospel for the Jews.

Matthew recounts the Messiah's birth not by focussing on Mary and her yes to God, as Luke did, but by focussing on Jesus himself. He is a Jew, writing for Jews who had become followers of Jesus and who were coming under pressure to abandon their faith. He wants to encourage them by demonstrating that Jesus is truly the one who has come to fulfil the prophecies. This theme, usually expressed as 'this was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.' occurs as often as sixteen times.

The significance of names.

'Jesus': The Greek for 'Yahweh helps', which was also interpreted as 'Yahweh saves'. It represents, in first century Judaism, the Hebrew name Joshua:

The 'Angel of the Lord': In the Old Testament, it was a common designation of God in communication with a human being, sometimes in dreams.

'Joseph, Son of David': This is the name used by the angel when he tells Joseph that he need not fear to take Mary as his wife as she has conceived by the Holy Spirit, thus echoing the prophecy 'Listen now, House of David:...' Is 7:13,14'

Emmanuel, God-is-with-us. This is not an ordinary name, but is a 'throne name', that is a name taken by rulers, giving the theme of their reign. Matthew begins and ends his Gospel with this theme recalling it in the last line when the risen Christ appears in Galilee: 'And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time."

Jewish law and tradition.

In Judea, betrothal included the right of co habitation and in Jewish Law, if a girl could not show evidence of virginity she could be stoned to death. (Deuteronomy 22:20)

The Jews believed that the Holy Spirit was the one who brought God's truth to men and women, and enabled them to recognise that truth when they saw it. They especially connected the Spirit of God with the work of creation. Joseph was familiar with all of these things and responded in faith.



Divine intervention in the birth of God's chosen was a tradition in Israel's faith, for example as in the conception and births of Isaac, Jacob and Samuel. (Gen.18:11-14, and 25:21 also 1Sam.1: 4-20)

PREGO EXTRA

Background notes for the Gospels of December 2010 Year A





St Irenaeus seems to have been one of the early Church theologians who identified the four evangelists with the four living creatures found in the prophecies taken from the prophet Ezekiel, the book of Daniel, and the book of Revelation.

Matthew is depicted as a man, whereas all the other evangelists are associated with animals, possibly because he writes about the human nature of Christ and he begins his gospel with Jesus' genealogy.



Reeds and robes

Some scholars see an indirect allusion to Herod in this phrase. Images of reeds figured on Herod's currency and he was renowned for his fine robes in contrast to John's camel hair garment. Others suggest that the swaying reeds refer to John's doubts.

John the prophet

Jesus praises John. He is the messenger announced by the prophet Malachi (3: 1). In fact John the Baptist is the last of the great prophets of the old order. The fulfilment of the Kingdom, promised in the Old Testament, announced as being imminent by John the Baptist, is realised in Jesus. We have here one of the major themes of Matthew's gospel.

The least in the Kingdom of heaven

John may be the last prophet, but to be in the Kingdom is such a great privilege that the least important person in the Kingdom of Heaven, is greater than the Baptist.



Messengers from John the Baptist

John the Baptist in prison

John has been arrested for speaking out against Herod Antipas marrying Philip's wife, Herodias. Philip was Herod's brother and was still alive at the time of the marriage. It is also possible that Herod feared John was inciting the Jews to rebellion.

He is detained in Machaerus, a fortress about five miles east of the Dead Sea.

Despondent and anxious in his cell, hearing about Jesus' deeds and realising they were different from what he had announced previously (see last week's gospel), John starts doubting and sends his messengers to clarify the situation.



Jesus' answer

Jesus does not answer directly but quotes Isaiah (29:18, 35:5, 42:18, 61:1) Matthew emphasises that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Old testament. This is a prominent theme in Matthew's gospel. Jesus does not reproach John for having doubts. The messengers are simply to tell him what they see Jesus do. His deeds speak for themselves.

Happy is the one who does not lose faith

Being Happy or Blessed is an important theme for Matthew. We remember the beginning of the Beatitudes. They are words of assurance for all disciples. This is what awaits them as they work for the kingdom in spite of their doubts or fears.

An Introduction to the Gospel according to Matthew

This month marks the beginning of a new Church year, a new year of Liturgy. This is the first of a three year cycle labelled A B and C and which use the texts of Matthew, Mark and Luke's gospels respectively. They are referred to as synoptic, (from the Greek, 'seeing together'). They share more or less the same theology and vision of Jesus.

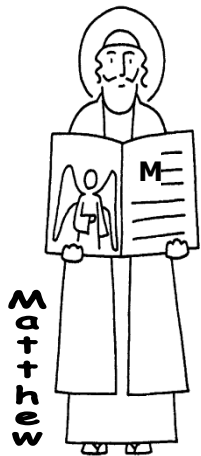
Matthew's gospel usually heads the list of these three gospels. However it has become clear through recent study that Matthew [and Luke's] writing depended on Mark and that the Greek text of Matthew's gospel could not be a translation of an Aramaic original.

Matthew's gospel makes a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and to the Judaism reborn after the catastrophe. It should therefore be dated in the years 80-90. By the time Matthew wrote his Gospel, Peter and Paul had both died and Christianity had spread and developed.

Most scholars agree that Matthew is an educated Jewish Christian of the second generation, who knew Greek well. His style is conversational giving us a scrupulously faithful portrait of Jesus, presenting him as the supreme Teacher. He writes in excellent Greek but constantly refers to Hebrew thought and poetry.

Just as there are five books in the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) making up the Law of Moses, there are five great discourses in Matthew that make up the Law of Jesus, the fulfilment of the law of Moses. Matthew portrays Jesus as the new Moses, giver of the New Law.

It is thought that Matthew lived outside of Palestine, perhaps Antioch in Syria, a town with a large Jewish population. His job was a difficult and sensitive one, as he endeavoured to reconcile the Pharisees and the Nazarenes, (as Jesus' followers were called), the two surviving groups of the destruction of Jerusalem, each representing a different strain of Judaism. No other evangelist makes so much use of the Old Testament.



Many scholars think that the following verse of chapter 13 of his gospel is in fact a self-portrait:
 " Every scribe who becomes a disciple is like a householder who brings out of his storeroom things both old and new."(v.52)

Brood of vipers

John's preaching is forceful and direct, especially when the Pharisees and Sadducees approach him. This is the first time they are mentioned in Matthew's Gospel and both groups are seen in a negative light. It is in keeping with this that they are addressed as vipers, a snake whose presence is unsuspected and deadly.

John warns them not to take Salvation for granted, it is not their birth right. The Jews thought that Abraham's favour with God was so great that all his descendants were safe in the life to come.

Not fit to carry his sandal

John makes it clear that Jesus is more powerful than he is. Here Matthew differs from the other Gospel writers when he speaks of 'carrying' Jesus' sandals as opposed to 'untying' them. This may reflect a later teaching that a disciple should do everything for his teacher just as a slave would for his master, except take off his shoes

A winnowing fan

The Jews had not heard the voice of the prophets for 400 years. They believed that the Kingdom was to be ushered in by a judgement in which sinners would be condemned and perish. This expectation was shared by John the Baptist, who portrays Jesus discriminating between the good and the bad, using the harvesting image of wheat and chaff. The winnowing fan was a shovel with which the threshed wheat was thrown into the air. The kernels fell to the ground; the light chaff, blown off by the wind, was gathered and burned up.





The preaching of John the Baptist

Matthew presents John the Baptist as the prophet who forms the link between the Old Testament and the New. His description of John's clothing recalls the austere dress of the prophet Elijah. (2 Kings 1,8)

The Kingdom of Heaven

John proclaims the coming of the kingdom of heaven. It is what Mark calls the 'Kingdom of God'. John's use of the word 'heaven', literally 'the heavens', is a substitute for the name 'God' which was avoided by devout Jews of the time out of reverence.

The expression 'King of Heaven' occurs only in Matthew, meaning the effective rule of God over his people.

Prepare a way

John is quoting Isaiah 40:3, when he preaches the need to prepare the way for the King. In those days there were few surfaced and artificially made roads. All such roads were originally built by the king for his own use.

They were called the King's highway and were kept in repair as and when the king needed them.

John first appears preaching in the desert of Judea, the barren region west of the Dead Sea extending up the Jordan valley. The preparation that John is preaching is one of repentance, a change of heart.

Baptising with water

John's baptising with water may have been related to the purificatory washings of the Essenes (a Jewish sect around the time of Jesus). Ritual washing had been practiced by various groups in Palestine between 150 BC and AD 250.



We move from Autumn - that evocative season of changing light, colours and scents - into winter. With the beginning of Advent, the Church also awakens our senses. She puts on purple, changes her song and moves into a different rhythm of worship; more contemplative and silent.

Advent means 'Coming'.

Since the 4th century it has been the season of preparation for the coming of Jesus, the Christ. But in fact, we celebrate three 'comings'.

1. The coming of Jesus into the world as a human being.
2. His final coming in judgement.
3. His coming into our hearts.

At the heart of our faith is the conviction that in Bethlehem in Judea, God gave us in Christ the definitive answer to all our longing and all yearning. 'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.' John 1:14

[Bp. John Crowley]

The Advent liturgy and hence our prayer, has perhaps two main qualities: a longing and a wakefulness of mind and heart.

Together they prepare us to enter into the mystery of the divine gift:

God is with us.

The liturgy slowly teaches us to listen to this longing and, as we attend, we can begin to sense another longing that is its source: The longing that is in God - for us.

The grace of Advent is to grow in the virtue of hope that God is present even when he seems to be hidden from us.



1st Sunday of Advent — Matthew 24:37-44

Be on the alert!

Matthew Chapter 24

At first sight it might seem strange that the Church chose to use chapter 24 out of 28 of Matthew's gospel to begin the Year of Matthew and the time of Advent.

Two possible explanations could be put forward.

One is that it provides continuity with the discourses on the end of time from the previous weeks (32-33rd week in Ordinary time).

The second is that Advent looks forward to the coming of Christ in judgement—sometimes called “the Second coming” or Parousia (from the Greek presence, arrival)

The Son of Man

This phrase, Aramaic in its origin, does not indicate a traditional father and son relationship; rather it is used to represent an individual member of the human species: “a human being”. It is first to be found in the prophet Daniel (7:13-14.) in an apocalyptic vision. Matthew uses this term in connection with the Second Coming. The term emphasises the humanity of Jesus and his community with us all.

Noah's Days

People at the time Matthew was writing were very familiar with the story of Noah. What is at stake here is not eating, drinking and getting married, which in themselves are not sinful occupations but the fact that they were not aware of what was happening around them.

One will be taken, the other will be left

The one who is taken is the one God has chosen; the other, like the people around Noah were going about their daily occupations, but had allowed their inner spirit to fall asleep. They had lost their sense of anticipation and vigilance.

They may have looked the same outwardly, but God is able to see the difference between one person and another.

Similar images are found in other parts of Matthew's gospel, for whom Judgement is a major theme: The sheep and the goats, the wise and foolish virgins, the wheat and the chaff.

Time of the Coming

The emphasis is on being ready and alert.

Matthew's readers had expected the Second coming to happen very soon after Jesus' death and resurrection; as nothing materialised, they were starting to lose heart and go back to their old ways. He is reminding them to be prepared at all times. Knowing the exact time is not the important thing.

The burglar

Palestinian houses were often built of clay bricks and so relatively easy to breakthrough.

