

## The Gospel According to Saint Matthew

Session 4 – Wednesday April 22, 2020

We ended last time by looking at the Temptation of Jesus in the Wilderness. The *forty days and forty nights* of fasting emphasises the idea that Jesus is the personification of Israel, and that *being tempted in the wilderness* is somehow part of what being the *son of God* entails. Whereas ancient Israel failed in its temptation, (Psalm 95) Jesus proves faithful. The chief question raised in the narratives surrounding John's baptism, and Jesus' temptations, is: What constitutes righteousness? The answer is not yet clear; but involves fulfilling God's will, both in an individual's unique ministry, and within the life of the nation of God's people. These ideas are beginning to emerge as we see both the continuity between Jesus' identity and ministry in relation to Israel, and in His role as a second Moses, and in what is unique in Jesus' ministry – the difference between leading a people to the Promised Land, and the One who leads God's people into God's Kingdom.

Matthew 4:12-end

While Jesus is being tempted in the wilderness, John the Baptist is being arrested by King Herod. The incarceration of John leads directly to the inauguration of Jesus' ministry.

Not surprisingly, Matthew records the beginning of Jesus' ministry with another *fulfilment prophecy*.

*The land of Zebulun, and the land of Naphtali, toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned. Isaiah 9:1f*

This is a quote from Isaiah 9.

Given how Matthew began his gospel, with a decidedly Jewish genealogy, it is a bit surprising that Matthew chooses to announce the beginning of Jesus' ministry proper, he does so with a quotation that expresses clearly the Messiah's mission to the Gentiles.

When we look at Isaiah 9 in its entirety, as we've seen Matthew encouraging us to do, we find the familiar passage, with its clear reference to the Messiah as the descendant of King David.

*For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and His name will be called: Wonderful Counsellor, mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

Matthew intends his reader to understand that Jesus' mission is not two part – first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles – but that there is no other Messianic mission than to the whole human race.

*From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*

*The Kingdom of Heaven* is Matthew's favourite expression. He uses it 33 times, and none of the other synoptic gospel writers use it. Matthew also uses *Kingdom of God*, but rarely.

The phrase *From that time Jesus began to preach... v17* is found again in 16:21, with a variation: *From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things... and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*

This phrase acts as bookends for the period of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Everything that takes place between 4:17 and 16:21 takes place in Galilee. Then the action moves to Jerusalem. The second phrase also gives content to the *preaching* of Jesus – a point we will pick up on again shortly.

It is significant that Jesus begins His ministry using the same words that John the Baptist employed. This not only underscores the continuity between their ministries and mission – both to individuals and to the nation, but as we discerned that John's ministry was a continuation of Isaiah's, so we are to recognize that Jesus is also continuing the prophetic ministry to God's people.

Further, when Matthew records John the Baptist's call to repentance, Matthew follows immediately with a quote in which God promises to act

quickly in response to the people's penitence: God Himself will straighten and level the road to bring people back to Himself. Matthew reiterates the Baptist's words in order that we recognize Jesus is claiming for Himself the job of levelling and straightening. His ministry is that very work that will bring people to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus' first act is to call His disciples. Jesus calls two sets of brothers to follow Him: Peter and Andrew; James and John. *Immediately, they left their nets and followed Him.* It is reminiscent of the prophet Elijah calling Elisha to be his disciple and heir to ministry. 1Kg 19:19. Elisha is plowing the field with 12 oxen – a number significant for reference to the Twelve Tribes of Israel – the nation. At first, Elisha asks permission to kiss his father farewell before taking up his role as disciple, but Elijah forces him to choose between following immediately or not following at all. Without a backward glance Elisha leaves his father to follow the prophet.

*To follow* seems to be a particularly important idea for Matthew. He uses that word more than do Mark or Luke, and, interestingly, Matthew inserts the word into eight passages that he otherwise lifts from Mark's gospel. It is a word especially connected with *discipleship*. 8:22; 10:38; 16:24; 19:21, 28 To be a *disciple* is to be a *follower*.

Alongside the call to follow is given the promise to equip them for their ministry. *I will make you fishers of men.*

Later, in Chapter 9:9, we have the account of Jesus calling Matthew *to follow*. Matthew calls Matthew, *Matthew*, whereas Luke refers to Levi.

These are the only disciples called specifically, but the list of the Twelve is given in 10:2.

Having begun His ministry with the call to repentance, and having called the first disciples to follow Him, we then are given a summary of Jesus' ministry in verses 23-25. Teaching and preaching are foremost, followed by healing diverse illnesses and weaknesses.

Verse 4:23 is repeated in 9:35, which again, may suggest that we are to understand this section as a unit, tying together the teaching and healings in the chapters 5-9.

Jesus' ministry is shown to be as powerful and appealing as was John the Baptist's. We are told in 3:5 *that Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the regions about the Jordan, went out in response to John's ministry*. The same is said of Jesus, but with the addition of *the Decapolis* - the Ten Cities, which were largely Gentile, not Jewish.

One final observation: John's mission began with the call to repentance, Jesus' ministry began with the call to repentance, and then immediately He calls His disciples. In Chapter 10 we shall hear Jesus sending out these disciples with the command to call for repentance *because the Kingdom of heaven is at hand*.

This is an important point for Matthew, and very different from Mark's presentation. For Matthew, the earthly ministry of Jesus is the ground upon which the disciples' ministry rests. It is true of Jesus' disciples in every age.

In Mark's gospel, the identity of Jesus is kept hidden. Jesus is referred to as *the Son of Man*. It is only in the light of the Resurrection that Jesus' identity is revealed. Consequently, the readers of Mark's gospel read the events of Jesus' life and ministry with a knowledge and understanding not available to the characters in the gospel who encounter Jesus. Recall the confession of Thomas, *My Lord, and my God!* Thomas's insight into Jesus' identity is only possible post-Resurrection.

Not so with Matthew's gospel account. The disciples know who Jesus is, and they call Him *Lord* throughout the gospel – only the disciples do. The significance of this point is that what Jesus says and does in Matthew's gospel has a direct impact on what Jesus' disciples say and do. We are to teach and do the very same things He teaches and does. Remember the phrase that acts as bookends to Jesus' ministry: *From this time forth Jesus began to preach...* and the content of the preaching of the Church is the death and resurrection of Jesus. All of this says something about the nature of the Church and the way disciples in every age access the life of Jesus.

## Chapter 5

5:1-12 & 5:13-20

The *Sermon on the Mount* is the first and longest of the five collections of Jesus' teaching in Matthew's gospel, running for three chapters.

Setting is important to Matthew, as we have seen, and we have already been primed in early chapters to think of Mount Sinai and the giving of the Law to Moses. This connection is perhaps underscored by the observation that there are five large teaching sections in Matthew's gospel. There are Five Books of Moses, also referred to as the Books of the Law.

There are points of similarity, and dissimilarity between Moses going up Sinai to receive the Law, and Jesus going up to teach the Law. Moses went up the mountain in fear and trembling. Jesus goes up and sits down comfortably. Jesus brings the people up with Him, whereas the people were left at the foot of Mt Sinai. There are two different reasons given for that in the OT. One is that God forbade the others from going up with Moses; the other that they were too afraid to go up. Neither is the case with Jesus.

While it is true that a crowd ascends the mountain with Jesus, yet Matthew specifically says that what Jesus teaches is directed specifically to His disciples. The crowd overhears and is moved.

We shall encounter some other mountain – top passages in Matthew’s gospel. In particular, toward the end of the gospel, after foretelling the destruction of the Temple, Jesus goes up Mt Olivet, sits down, and the disciples come to Him, and He teaches them. Again, it appears that Matthew is providing us with bookends – Jesus’ ministry begins and ends by teaching on a mountain-top.

Beatitudes are not uncommon in the Old Testament (Isaiah 30:18 – *the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him*; Jeremiah 17:7 – *Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, who trusts in the Lord...*). They are found also in Hellenistic literature, where the blessings promised are largely materialistic.

There are other beatitudes in Matthew, for example *blessed is the one who takes no offence in me.* 11:6, 13:16; 16:17; 24:46.

The perennial question about the Beatitudes is how seriously we are to take them. Are they guiding principles or commands? Again, worth noting, that Jesus is principally addressing His disciples.

The word *blessed* begins each beatitude. Translators try to convey the meaning of the word in different ways. Many modern versions use *happy*. Others try to get at the nuance of the word through other means: *They are God’s People, who...; O the bliss of those, who...; Congratulations to you, who...*



One of the challenges with the translation *happy*, is that it may convey the idea that it is something that wells up within a person, whereas the idea of *blessedness* has the connotation of being something that comes from above. I think we want to have both ideas in mind.

In the biblical context *blessedness* describes happiness that comes from a right relationship with God. For example, the first Psalm begins:

*Blessed, or happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked... but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law they meditate day and night.*

Being in the right relationship with God constitutes blessedness. God is always the reference point of the blessedness or happiness. And, at the same time, it arises from the aligning of our wills with God's will.

The state of blessedness is now available to us in a new way *because the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*

Saint Luke's version of the Beatitudes is different from Matthew's. First, Matthew's is considerably longer – he gathers together a lot of teaching that Luke spreads out across his gospel. Second, Luke says simply: *blessed are the poor*, in contrast to Matthew's *blessed are the poor in spirit.*

It may be that we moderns are more conscious of there being a difference between these two statements than would have been the people of Jesus'

day. There is some evidence that the two phrases were used interchangeably. The significance being that *the poor* were also the most likely to be *the poor in spirit*. The linking of the two has a long tradition in expressions of Israel's eschatological hope. Isaiah 61:1, for example: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the poor and the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captive...* This is the verse Jesus quotes in response to the followers of John the Baptist, who questions whether Jesus is truly the One Israel has been expecting Mt 11:5.

The Psalter is an important source for insight into the state of *blessedness*, and all the other concepts explored in the Beatitudes. The third beatitude, *blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth*, is very closely aligned with Psalm 37:11: *the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity*.

The Sermon on the Mount will be a good future study, so we will go over the rest of the sermon rather lightly in this study.