

The Gospel According to Saint Matthew

Session 3

Summary to Date:

One of the key things we have been doing in the first two sessions is seeing how Matthew uses the Scriptures. As noted, Matthew has more than 60 explicit quotations from the Old Testament, and a great many more allusions to it, which is more than twice as many as any other gospel.

His knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the tradition of interpretation, is deep. He knows them well enough that he is able to play with them, in order to make a commentary on the Jewish Faith, and to make comments about Jesus as the one toward whom all Scripture points. The whole of Scripture is prophetic.

On the one hand Matthew roots the gospel of Christ firmly in the Hebrew Scriptures. We know who Jesus is only by seeing Him in the Old Testament.

But on the other hand, Matthew urges the Church to read the Scriptures only in the light of Christ. There is nothing in Scripture that does not pertain to Jesus. When they are read through the lense of Jesus we discover deeper meaning in God's Word, and in God's activity in the life of Israel.

Matthew holds these two perspectives in a lively tension with each

other: The authority of Scripture as received, on the one hand; the true interpretation of the Scripture in the light of Christ, on the other.

A distinctive feature of Matthew is the so-called *fulfilment quotation*.

There are ten quotations that use a special introduction formula containing the word *fulfil*, or *it is written*.

(1:22; 2:15; 2:17; 2:23; 4:14; 8:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9; possibly 13:14; 3:3).

(*it is written* (2:5; 11:10, 26:31).

We encountered the first example, in chapter 1:22. *All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and His Name shall be called Emmanuel' which means, 'God with us'.*

This is very specific; Matthew asserts that Isaiah wrote this specifically about Jesus.

But we discovered in Chapter 2, that many of Matthew's *fulfilment quotations*, do not predict future events. We touched on some of them last time, but we need to examine them a bit further to discover some of the principle themes running through the rest of the gospel.

There are four *fulfilment quotations* in chapter 2, and they all have a geographical locator.

I

The first is in V6, and it is a quote from Micah 5:1 & 3.

And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.

The first reason Matthew quotes this passage is that Bethlehem is the birthplace of King David, and so he is emphasizing again the connection between David and Jesus. Perhaps, also, it is significant that the name Bethlehem means House of Bread.

But when we actually turn to Micah 5 we find a far richer series of ideas being associated with Jesus. The passage opens: *With a rod they strike upon the cheek the ruler of Israel*, then follows the quotation. It evokes immediately the suffering servant passages of Isaiah we know so well from Holy Week. *By his stripes we are healed.*

There are at least 7 ideas or themes in this passage from Micah 5 that Matthew wants to bring to our mind so that we will associate them with Jesus.

... from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore He shall give them up until the time when she who is in travail has brought forth; then the rest of His brethren shall return to the people of Israel. And He shall stand and feed His flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the Name of the Lord His God. And

they shall dwell secure, for now He shall be great to the ends of the earth.

- 1 City of David connects Jesus with **King David**, with a secondary connection of Jesus with the *House of Bread*
- 2 **Suffering Servant** – the ruler of Israel will be stricken for the healing of God’s people
- 3 *She in travail has brought forth* – A second reference to a *Virgin shall conceive & bear a son - God with us.*
- 4 *Ancient of Days* – brings to mind the prophet Daniel and his eschatological visions of judgement. *Eschatology, the end times* – is connected with the Sabbath Rest on the Octave Day – the eternal Promised Land of God’s kingdom.
- 5 *Return of God’s people, his brothers, from Exile.* In addition to the repetition / emphasis on the theme of Exile and Return, there is the additional idea that Jesus is *brother* to those returning home.
- 6 *Shepherd* – *he shall feed God’s flock as a shepherd,* associates Jesus with the true Shepherd of Israel, who is both God and the King. The true shepherd *lays down His life for the sheep*
- 7 *Great to the ends of the earth* – Jesus has come to open the Covenant to the Gentiles – adumbrated by the arrival and worship of the Magi.

II

In vv17 and 18, following the Slaughter of the Innocents we find another *fulfilment quotation.* Matthew quotes the prophet Jeremiah.

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more.

There is no sense ever in which that verse had been understood prophetically. Jeremiah was speaking poetically about the Exile. Israel was defeated, the Temple destroyed, and the people were taken into Captivity. On their way to Babylon they passed Rachel's tomb. The prophet Jeremiah says Rachel weeps for her descendants because they are no more - they no longer exist as a people.

Matthew's knowledge of Scripture and his creative and poetic use of it, is revealed in quite a remarkable way when he interprets this passage in such a fantastical way - associating it with the slaughter of the innocents.

He accomplishes two things. First, Matthew brings to mind the Exile and establishes it in connection with Jesus' birth. Second, he points his reader to the full verse in Jeremiah, which continues: *Thus says the Lord: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, says the Lord, and your children shall come back to their own country.* When we read this entire passage we realize that Matthew is not only connecting Jesus with the Exile, but also with the return from Exile, and consequently, with forgiveness and redemption, and rest in the Promised Land. The return from Exile is

thus connected with the killing of an Innocent.

III

At the very end of the chapter, v23, we read: *And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He shall be called a Nazarene'.*

This is a particularly interesting statement because there is no such quotation in the Old Testament. There is no passage in Scripture associating the Messiah with Nazareth. What is Matthew doing? It appears he is making up a quotation. But, again, I think we find Matthew using the scriptures poetically.

The construction of the word *Nazarene* is unclear. Some translations will read *Nazarite*. It seems that Matthew is deliberately using the word to draw together two unrelated ideas. First, he is making a reference to the town of Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. Matthew is placing Jesus in a particular time and place. Second, he is referring to people who undertook the vow of a Nazarene or Nazarite, which has nothing to do with the town.

We aren't familiar with this vow, but the people of Jesus' day certainly were. The vow is described in the Book Numbers, Chapter 6. The vow of a Nazarene is a discipline one chooses to take on formally for a specified period of time. It can be undertaken by either a man or a woman. It is undertaken in order to be *holy to the Lord*. The key

elements include no wine, no shaving of the head, and then, when the time is fulfilled, to offer a sacrifice of a lamb for a sin offering; and bread for a cereal offering.

[When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazarite, to separate himself to the Lord, he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink... all the days of his vow of separation no razor shall come upon his head... he shall not go near a dead body... he shall be holy... and when the time of his separation has been completed: he shall... offer his gift to the Lord, one male lamb a year old without blemish for a burnt offering... and one ewe lamb...for a sin offering, one ram for a peace offering, and a basket of unleavened bread... [for a] cereal offering.]

Matthew says Jesus shall be called a Nazarene. But we know Jesus didn't undertake the vow of a Nazarene, because he drank wine.

Why is Matthew making this connection?

First, Matthew may simply be wanting to posit a few general ideas is association with Jesus; that Jesus undertook His mission voluntarily, by His own choice, to be *set apart by God to be Holy to God*; and that Jesus' mission is connected with bread and wine and the offering of a sacrificial lamb.

Again, these ideas would have come readily to mind for the people of Matthew's day familiar with the Scriptures and Jewish tradition, even if they could not be applied very specifically to Jesus.

Yet it is more likely that Matthew's chief interest is to have his readers think about the two persons in Scripture who are identified as Nazarenes. The first is Samson, the man of all braun and no brain, referred to in the Book Judges. (Samson and Delilah).

Why might Matthew want us to think about Samson in relation to Jesus? Samson was counted among the Judges of Israel – the rulers of Israel, in some sense. Samson was betrayed by someone who should have loved him, but essentially sold him. Samson was betrayed, beaten and bound, and then, while tied to a pillar, his strength returned and he chose to die for the nation by slaying the enemy of his people.

The second Nazarene in Scripture is the prophet Samuel. His mother Hannah was barren, and she prayed to the Lord for a child, promising that if her prayer was granted the child will be given to the Lord. You will recall that Hannah's song of praise is very much the same as the Magnificat, the song of Mary, recorded in Luke's gospel. Samuel is not conceived by the Holy Spirit, but his birth is made possible by God's direct intervention.

God responds to Hannah saying that she will indeed have a child, and that he will be a Nazarite from the womb. The child is the prophet Samuel, who is intimately tied with the Temple and with the kings of Israel. He anointed both Saul and David. But, critically, Samuel also pleaded with the people not to ask God for a king, saying that God Himself is the King of Israel. Not only is there is a need for another,

but it is blasphemous to ask for one. We shall see how important this idea is for Matthew later in the gospel.

IV

The fourth quotation is perhaps the most important. In verses 14 & 15 we read: *He rose and took the child and His mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt have I called my son.'*

There are two passages in the OT where this quotation is found: the Book Exodus 4:22; and the prophet Hosea 11:1. In the Hosea passage God says: *When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my SON. Hosea 11:1*

Israel is God's Son. The Nation is God's offspring.

Further, the context of this passage in Hosea is, once again, the return from Exile, and so it connects directly the Exodus from Egypt with the return from Exile, both of which Matthew again connects with Jesus' birth.

The passage in Exodus is more complex. It follows the conversation between God and Moses at the Burning Bush, where God reveals His Name – I AM that I am; Yahweh. And God tells Moses: *Go back to Egypt; for all the men who were seeking your life are dead. So Moses took his wife and his sons and... went back* vv19f. Matthew uses almost identical

language when he recounts God speaking to Joseph in a dream, telling Joseph it was safe for him to take Mary and Jesus back home.

Surprisingly, Matthew doesn't say that this was *in order to fulfil what was written*. But he doesn't have to do that, because he has already brought our attention to Exodus 4.

In Exodus, following God's instructions, Moses returns to Egypt.

Then God speaks to Moses, saying: *You shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord,*

Israel is my first-born son, and I say to you, Let my son go that he may serve me

4:22f

These passages from Hosea, and especially Exodus, are critical references for Matthew's gospel for two reasons. First, because Matthew is drawing a direct connection between Moses and Jesus. Second, because it raises the question of what it means to be God's Son.

Initially, Matthew draws a connection between Jesus and Matthew in a subtle way. At the beginning of Chapter 2, Matthew relates the story of Herod and the Slaughter of the Innocents in such a way as to bring to mind Pharaoh's command that all Hebrew baby boys be killed. Herod is presented as a new Pharaoh, ordering the death of Hebrew baby boys, as Pharaoh had done. And, as Moses was rescued from death in order that God could raise him up to bring God's people to freedom; so Jesus was rescued as a baby, in order to save His people from their sin.

The presentation of Jesus as a new Moses is a constant theme running through Matthew's gospel.

The idea that *Israel is my first-born son*, is another key, if more subtle, theme of Matthew's gospel. Jesus is presented as the personification of Israel. Jesus and the nation are one. They are both the same first-born Son; but, critically, Jesus is faithful Israel, responding fully to God's Law and Love.

We have already encountered this idea in Chapter 1. One of the purposes of the genealogy is to present Jesus as the fulfilment of Israel's history. Remember, there were three epochs of 14 generations, or six epochs of 7 generations. Jesus comes as the fulfilment of Israel's history to usher in the eschatological Kingdom of Heaven – the octave day of rest.

Summary: Matthew uses Scripture:

- 1 To teach that all of the OT is prophetic and finds its fulfilment in Jesus – sometimes very specifically, such as *Behold a virgin shall conceive...*
- 2 To point us to a particular text in order to find out more about who Jesus is in the surrounding verses. *All of the associations that are made with Jesus by reading Micah 5.*
- 3 To make associations between Jesus and other Scriptural characters, *Moses in particular, but also the prophets, and others*

- 4 To place particular teachings or deeds of Jesus within the larger framework of God's saving work in Israel, *in particular the large themes of Exodus and Exile*, as well as *the Law, righteousness, salvation*.

And it works in reverse as well. That is, Matthew doesn't just have us look back to the Old Testament in order to learn about Jesus.

When we see how Matthew uses Scripture, we are enabled to read the OT with Jesus in mind. For example, when we read in Exodus that God provides water from the Rock at Horeb, Christians who have encountered Matthew's use of Scripture, will automatically read the Rock to represent Christ the fount of living waters who quenches every thirst. And we will read the passages about Moses, and see him as a type of Christ.

The first two chapters are preparatory for Matthew's account of Jesus' ministry. In them Matthew presents all of the major themes we will encounter later in the Gospel, and we are attuned to how Matthew uses the Scriptures throughout.

Read Chapter 3:1-12

Location is important – it is in the wilderness, which immediately brings to mind the Exodus. Israel is formed into a nation in the wilderness. Jesus' mission is to re-form the nation, and John the Baptist is the herald of the reformation. He begins with the call to

repentance, to turn around.

And then we have another fulfilment prophecy, of a type: *The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.*

If we hear only this verse then we hear a very direct call to us, with what might be experienced as a threatening edge to it. *You turn or you burn*, because the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

But when we refer back to Isaiah 40:3-5 we find something quite different in addition to the call to repentance.

A voice cries in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it. 40:3-5

John the Baptist calls us personally, to repent, to turn around. The passage from Isaiah tells us what God will do in response to our repentance:

God will act quickly to bring His people back from Exile. God will straighten and level the road, so that nothing will slow or hinder the return of His people. You repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and God will act quickly to bring you to Himself in His kingdom.

Moreover, by placing this personal call to repent alongside the reference of God's action bringing back His people from Exile, Matthew is saying that Christ's mission is both to the individual and to the nation.

There are a number of memorable phrases in this passage: *You brood of vipers!* We can readily hear these words on the lips of John the Baptist. The surprising thing is that we shall hear them again on Jesus' lips on two further occasions: (3:7, 12:34; 23:33) Similarly, the image of the tree being cut down, good fruit / bad fruit, are images Jesus will use with equally strong language.

Read 3:13-end

In chapter 3 we encounter for the first time the confrontation between the Pharisees and the Sadducees with Jesus. We are reminded of King Herod's opposition to Jesus. In that passage we saw that Christ's birth gave rise to three reactions: Herod's violent opposition; the courtiers' indifference; the Magi's worship. The Sadducees and Pharisees are likened to Herod. The crowd – all Jerusalem and Judea – is likened to the Magi, or at least, aligned with them.

Jesus submits to John's baptism, which surprises John and us. Jesus answers: *Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.* Matthew alone among the gospel writers gives voice to John's objection. Jesus submits to baptism, He says, *to fulfil all*

righteousness.

We encountered righteousness in Chapter 1 in relation to Joseph. It is a vitally important concept for Matthew. He uses the term in different ways, but perhaps most frequently in terms of being *the goal of discipleship, faithfulness to the Law, and the fulfilling of God's will.* Perhaps you will recall that the key question raised in chapter 1 about righteousness consisted in determining whether Joseph was righteous because he wanted to uphold the Law and so decided to divorce Mary; or whether he was righteous because he wanted to divorce her quietly.

This passage about Jesus submitting to baptism *to fulfil all righteousness,* similarly, is ambiguous. What is clear, is that Jesus is aligning Himself fully with individuals and with the nation (both as King and as Servant) in need of God's forgiveness and grace to bring them back home. *This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,* God says. His beloved Son is both Jesus and Israel. This divine affirmation of sonship will be heard again in Matthew's gospel at the Transfiguration.

Matthew is connecting baptism with the return home to God. Baptism, to mix metaphors, is the way Jesus comes to straighten and level the road. Perhaps the image Matthew really wants to have come to mind is Moses in the ark in the Nile. Remember, Pharaoh ordered all baby Hebrew boys to be thrown into the Nile. In a sense his law was followed and Moses was put into the Nile, but with the all-important addition of having first been placed in an ark. Jesus is the ark of

salvation carrying us home through baptism.

Read Chapter 4:1-11

Again, the location is the wilderness, and so evokes the themes of Exodus and Exile. This is underscored by the reference to forty days and forty nights. The daily readings in Holy Week are all about the Israelites in the wilderness demanding food from God. God provided manna from heaven, quails to a nauseating extent, and water from the rock at Horeb. *The day of Temptation in the wilderness*, is how that episode is referred to in Luke's gospel.

Jesus in the wilderness forty days is afterward tempted to turn stones into bread. Well, what's the problem with that? God provided food in the wilderness, why shouldn't Jesus?

The answer is two-fold. First, as the personification of Israel, Jesus responds faithfully to the time of trial in the wilderness. He does not put God to the test.

Second, Jesus' mission is not identical with the Father's mission of old: He is bringing God's people to the true Promised Land, to the very Kingdom of God. The citizens of that Kingdom are nourished only by the Word of God and un-deflected by earthly wants and concerns.

There is another allusion Matthew is making: Before receiving the Ten Commandments Moses fasted forty days and forty nights, and was

hungry. The wording Matthew uses is identical to Exodus 34:28. Not only is Matthew strengthening the connection between Moses and Jesus, as divinely chosen leaders of God's people, and the conduit for God's self-revelation to them. He is also building upon an interpretation of Scripture well established in Judaism, that the Law of God is the Bread of Heaven. Hence Jesus' response: *Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God* Mt4:4

This is a quote from Deuteronomy 8:3. It forms part of God's promise to Israel, as He is bringing them into a rich land in which the Israelites will *eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land He has given you* 8:10

So, Deuteronomy is saying that there is a connection between physical and spiritual needs. God provides both. But for Jesus, the temptation is to be distracted by the desire to provide earthly needs, when His unique mission is to bring a new salvation.

Finally, Matthew makes an interesting parallel between Jesus speaking to the devil, and John the Baptist speaking with the Pharisees. The Baptist says: *God can raise up from these stones children of Abraham.* The devil says: *turn these stones into bread.*

Why the focus on stones? I think Matthew is using them to connect both episodes with Jesus' baptism, and especially to the question of what constitutes righteousness.

The Pharisees do not submit to John's baptism, and their inability to make a decision about whether it is from God or not remains a question throughout the gospel. The Pharisees are concerned with righteousness, and particularly as it is worked out in the oral traditions of Israel. Baptism was a rite of initiation for Jewish converts. The Pharisees believed they didn't have to be baptized because they were righteous before God because they kept the Law as Children of Abraham. The Baptist scorns this understanding of righteousness: *God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones.*

Turn these stones into bread, the devil says. Bread is connected with the Law and with righteousness. These are good things for Matthew, and as we have seen, Jesus submits to baptism to *fulfil all righteousness*. By using the imagery of stones to connect the devil's temptations and the Pharisee's objection to John's baptism, I think Matthew is challenging the baptized to not fall into the same error in thinking of what constitutes righteousness. Righteousness does not come from being baptized, any more than it does come from being children of Abraham. Righteousness is connected with the Holy Spirit, with sonship, with fulfilling God's will for us personally, and as citizens together of God's kingdom.