

## Preaching Themes In Matthew

### *Chicago Priests*

On this return engagement, I have been asked to look at the Gospel of Matthew in order to assist in preaching the message of Matthew during the coming A Cycle. Following the same principles as last year, I would like to begin with a few comments on the author of the first Gospel, and look at what makes Matthew's Gospel different from the others. Then I would like to examine the text of Matthew in order to surface some themes that might be useful in organizing preaching during the A Cycle. Again, due to time, this must be a most cursory view; yet I hope that it will whet your appetites to delve more deeply into Matthew as we move through the A Cycle.

### *The Gospel of Matthew*

Little is known about the author, date or audience of the Gospel of Matthew. The Gospel text itself gives us little information on those points. What is known is scholarly conjecture and so in the interests of time I will pass over those points.

### *Structure*

Since the early part of the current century, the dominant theory concerning the structure of Matthew's gospel has been that of Benjamin W. Bacon, an American scholar. He noted the repetition of the phrase "When Jesus had finished all these

sayings...” five times in the Gospel text.<sup>1</sup> On the basis of that repetition, Bacon posited five discourses “sayings” which Jesus had finished. These are preceded by material concerning Jesus teaching and healing. This produces the following seven part structure.<sup>2</sup>

This structure provides for five books with a prologue and epilogue. These parallel the five books of the Torah. Thus Bacon sees Jesus as a New Moses providing a new Torah for a New Israel. This has permitted scholars through the century to press the Moses typology in Matthew in many different directions.

However, in the past 25 years, scholars beginning with Werner Georg Kümmel have argued that the Bacon outline relegates two major portions of the Gospel, the infancy and passion/resurrection narratives, to minor positions of prologue and epilogue. Key to Kümmel’s argument is the fact that the Passion and Resurrection narratives are the climax of the entire gospel. Thus, they are integral to the gospel not merely a tacked on epilogue.

American scholar, Jack Dean Kingsbury followed Kümmel’s lead and developed a structure based on another repeated phrase, “After these things, Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Matt 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; and 26:1

<sup>2</sup> A. Prologue – Infancy Narrative Matt 1-2

B. Book I – The Sermon on the Mount Matt 3-7:27

C. Book II – The Discipleship Discourse Matt 7:28-10:??

D. Book III – The Parables Discourse Matt 11:1-13:52

E. Book IV – The Church Order Discourse Matt 13:53-18:??

F. Book V – The Eschatological Discourse Matt 19:1-25:??

G. Epilogue – The Passion and Resurrection Matt 26-28

began to..."<sup>3</sup> This sets up a three part structure for the Gospel of Matthew as follows:

- A. Matthew 1:1-4:16 The origin and birth of Jesus the Messiah
- B. Matthew 4:17-16:20 The teaching and ministry of Jesus the Messiah
- C. Matthew 16:21 – 28:20 The passion, death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.

### ***The Origins of Jesus the Messiah***

The first two chapters of the Gospel are the infancy narrative. These chapters present Jesus as the Son of God and son of Mary and Joseph. He is the fulfillment of the Davidic expectations; yet, as the text is careful to note, Jesus Messiahship is not what the people expect. There is a need to redefine the notion of messiah. That process begins in the infancy narrative and continues through the Gospel text.

### ***The Baptism and Temptation***

The beginning of Jesus public ministry takes place with his baptism by John. John the Baptist is introduced preaching a baptism of repentance. The people who hear him repent seeking forgiveness of sins. Jesus then appears and comes to John "to be baptized". From the infancy narrative, the reader knows that there is no need for forgiveness of sins for Jesus. Rather, his preparation through baptism becomes yet another affirmation of who he is.

The key to this text is the events after the actual baptism—the heavens opening, the Spirit descending, and the voice declaring that his is God's son.

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<sup>3</sup> Matt 4:17; Matt 16:21

Following upon the infancy narrative, this is a final climactic affirmation prior to his ministry.

Once the Spirit has descended on Jesus, it leads Jesus into the desert for the test. The agent of this test is the devil. The content of the test is just who Jesus. In these temptations, the tempter begins, "If you are the son of God..." Everything in the gospel thus far has been pointing to this fact. Now Jesus is challenged to prove it through satisfying his personal needs, through testing God's promises. In both of these cases, Jesus refuses to succumb.

The third test is a little cleverer. The tempter offers all the riches of the world's kingdoms if only Jesus bow down and worship. To fall for this temptation would ironically be tantamount to denying who he truly is. Thus Jesus bests the tempter on all three occasions. He becomes the antithesis of Adam who failed on occasion. Jesus, thus for Matthew is Son of God, Messiah and Son of David, a new Adam who will reverse the effects of Adam's failure. How this will be accomplished forms the content of the rest of this gospel.

### ***The Ministry of Jesus the Messiah***

After the temptation, Jesus moves to Capernaum which will be his base. Here he begins his preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (4:17). This kingdom, i.e. the inbreaking of God is a most significant way is near. People are to

respond to this through a radical change in their way of life i.e. turning from their old ways to embrace this kingdom.

The first act that Jesus performs is to call followers. Peter, Andrew, James and John, are fisherman from Galilee. While finishing a day's work, Jesus offers them the invitation, "Follow me." Their response is immediate. The kingdom has broken into their lives and they have responded—dropping their current way of life to embrace a totally new one. Jesus continues teaching throughout Galilee

*The Sermon on the Mount*

Many respond to that teaching. Crowds begin to follow setting the scene for the first of Matthew's discourses, the Sermon on the Mount. Ascending a mountain, Jesus sits and begins to teach the people. The words that follow are the groundwork for the kingdom.

The sermon begins with a series of "beatitudes" named from the first word, "Blessed" The invoke an attitude of poverty of Spirit which allows the believer to go to those in need providing comfort, mercy and peace. The final beatitude speaks to the troubled situation of the community. Embracing the kingdom will make people targets of persecutors. The kingdom is counter-cultural and as a result prevailing culture will attempt to stamp it out.

A series of antithetical statements pitting Jesus understanding of the Mosaic law against the contemporary understanding follows. It is preface by an assurance that the ethic Jesus proposes is no substitute for the ethical norms the hearers have come to follow. What Jesus proposes is merely a fine tuning.

Where Moses prohibited murder in the fifth commandment of the decalogue, Jesus suggests that even those things which might remotely lead to murder should be avoided, i.e. anger and envy. Moving to the sixth commandment, Jesus applies a similar caution. Moses prohibits adultery; Jesus suggests that even lustful thoughts be avoided lest they materialize into adultery.

Moving to the eighth command of the decalogue, Jesus suggests one can avoid swearing falsely by simply avoiding swearing altogether. Next, he treats the *lex talionis* of the ancient world. The eye for an eye mentality will not work in the kingdom. Rather, the attitude must be total giving. Return hurt with love. The final antithesis looks at the command to love neighbor from Leviticus. There, neighbor was thought to be you fellow countryman. Jesus removes that restriction and extends the command to love to all human beings. What Jesus in essence does in these antitheses is follow the rabbinical principle of putting a “fence around the law” That is, he expands the legal demand to such a point that it is almost impossible to violate the original law.

The sermon continues with practical advice on penitential practices—prayer, fasting and almsgiving. These practices are to be performed so that only God knows they are being done. Practicing to be seen by others is itself a reward.

The next section of the sermon speaks of anxiety. It is prefaced by a set of sayings on serving two masters which announces that our service should be for God since no one can serve both God and money. As an example one needs only look at the wonders God has provided to those which will be destroyed and burned. How much more will God provide for the crown of creation—humanity. Worry about our needs is futile.

The final section of this sermon uses the example of building as a metaphor for implementing the sermon. One who hears and puts into practice the message in this sermon is like a person who builds on a firm foundation. No matter what comes to buffet the house; it will remain standing. The one who hears and does not put it into practice is like a person who builds on a weak foundation like sand, it will be washed away. It is not enough to hear what Jesus says, it is necessary to act. In essence, this action is the metanoia or repentance, the conversion that is demanded by the announcement of the kingdom. This theme will recur over and over throughout this gospel text.

*The Ministry Continues*

The gospel narrative continues with a number of miracles which have become possible because of the faith of those requesting them. Those requesting have felt the in-breaking of the kingdom in their lives.

The mission extends beyond the bounds of Israel into Gentile territory. As Jesus sleeps in the boat crossing the Sea of Galilee, a great storm arises. The disciples (seemingly lacking faith) wake Jesus to do something. He calms the storm, but rebukes the disciples. As this gospel unfolds, we see the disciples who should be most aware of the kingdom in Jesus contrasted with many other characters in the narrative who have a much greater awareness of the kingdom.

In the Gentile territory of the Gadarenes, Jesus performs an exorcism driving a legion of demons from two men into a herd of swine who hurl themselves into the sea. As the ministry continues, opposition begins to mount as the authorities see segments of Jesus ministry as opposing the law.

Jesus then calls another follower—Matthew. He is a tax collector who, like the fishermen earlier, readily leaves his tax station to follow. This outreach to the tax collectors further incites the opposition of the authorities toward Jesus. As Jesus tries to explain his mission to the opposition, he employs an ingenious metaphor. He takes the example of a torn coat. One cannot merely put a patch on it. Just as

one cannot put new wine in old wineskins. In each case, the end result will be destruction of the coat or the wineskin. What is necessary then is a new coat or a new wineskin. The message of Jesus is not a patch for ills of one's old way of life. A totally new way of life is demanded.

*Jesus Constitutes Ministers to Broaden the Mission*

As Jesus continues his ministry of teaching and healing, people continue to embrace the kingdom. The need for more ministers is apparent. As a result, Jesus calls twelve of his disciples and gives them authority to cast out demons, and to heal. These twelve are then sent out on mission to the House of Israel. The exact nature of their mission is laid down in the second Matthean discourse—  
Discipleship.

They preach the kingdom of God. They travel light. They find sustenance from the people to whom they minister. If rejected in a town, they are to shake the dust from their feet. The discourse makes clear that they also will experience opposition. They must in such case persevere in the ministry in the hope that God will provide. This is a succinct lesson for the early Matthean community facing trials in preaching the Gospel. The key is endurance and trust, themes we saw earlier in the Sermon on the Mount.

We see in this discourse and the ministry of Jesus that the message of the kingdom is not readily accepted. It causes division. Even family members will turn on those who have accepted the kingdom. This division is a manifestation of the cross in the life of Jesus' followers. The theology of the cross will become even clearer in the second part of the Gospel.

*An Invitation to bear Jesus' burden*

The Kingdom will cause division, but again trust is necessary. In a text that has a significantly different tone to the rest of Matthew, Jesus invites his followers to come to him and he will give them rest. Despite the difficulties that acceptance of the kingdom may bring, the yoke of the kingdom is easy and its burden is light. This will provide necessary hope in times of difficulty.

*The Kingdom of Heaven is Like...*

After more cures, Jesus again addresses the crowds in the third discourse of this gospel—The Parables discourse. In explaining the use of parables, he cites a text of the prophet Isaiah which essentially says that the parables are meant to confuse. Some will hear the parable and see only the external sense. Other will have eyes that see and understanding that will penetrate to a deeper level where the parable speaks to the realities of the kingdom.

Through the images of sowing, mustard seeds, and leaven, Jesus shows that the kingdom begins small and ends up strong. It contains all sorts, it demands

separation in the end. It is a message that begins with a few but soon will permeate the whole world.

*The Ministry Culminates.*

The time comes for some rest; Jesus takes his disciples apart; yet he cannot get away. On one occasion when the hour was late, Jesus realizes the need to provide for the crowd. The disciples see dismissal of the crowd as the only alternative. Jesus prefers that the crowd stay and the disciples provide for them. They are dumbfounded as to how they can do so; they have five loaves and two fish. In this moment Jesus shows that through him, even the most meager provisions can be made sufficient. This is a wondrous lesson to those who feel they do not have what it takes. Faith in Jesus will make what seems totally insufficient into superabundance.

Following this, the disciples cross the Sea of Galilee again, and again a storm arises. Jesus is not on the boat, and so they really panic. But they must come to realize that if Jesus is not physically present, he is also not absent. He comes walking on the water. Peter recognizes him and jumps out and walks toward Jesus “on the water”. Realizing what he is doing, he becomes afraid and sinks. Jesus takes his hand, they reach the boat, embark, and the storm ceases. For one brief

moment, Peter did what was necessary to become a part of the kingdom, he forsook all. When he realized it, he became afraid.

Upon return there is a controversy with the Pharisees over the law after which Jesus moves to the region of Tyre and Sidon up north. A Canaanite woman requests Jesus to help her daughter. Jesus ultimate response is quite out of character. He seems to put her down; but in the context of Palestinian peasant wit and humor, it is merely a response to one pointed statement with another. Jesus' response does not put off the woman. When Jesus says it is not right to take the food of children and throw it to dogs (yet another seeming insult), the woman retorts that even the dogs eat from the scraps of the table.

The woman will not be put off. She knows that Jesus can help her, and he ultimately does curing her daughter. Jesus could not dissuade this Gentile woman. She was adamantly set on having him grant her request. What a contrast to the authorities who constantly pick at everything Jesus does. The authorities refuse to see the reality of Jesus; while this woman in her dialogue with Jesus never doubts who she is debating with. The theme of official Judaism's rejection and Gentile acceptance emerges yet again.

### *Confession of Peter*

The section on the ministry of Jesus the Messiah in Matthew's Gospel ends with a discussion between Jesus and his disciples concerning Jesus' identity. Jesus initiates the discussion and the disciples reply basically saying that people see Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish expectations, Elijah or a prophet.

Jesus then turns the question on the disciples. Peter unequivocally answers for the disciples. Jesus is the expected one, the Messiah. However, Peter does not realize the implications of his answer. In Matthew's text, Jesus pronounces a blessing upon Peter which is a foundation of the church as we know it. Here Peter is given the power of the keys. The text ends with an admonition of Jesus to the disciples to be silent. This could be due to the fact that (as we have seen) Jesus' messiahship is not what people are expecting. This needs to be clarified.

### *The Passion Death and Resurrection of Jesus the Messiah*

The focus of the Gospel shifts both geographically and thematically after Peter's confession. Geographically the focus is now Jerusalem, the place of opposition, suffering and eventual death. The reader of Matthew might suspect that this shift is somehow joined to Matthew's portrayal of Jesus' messiahship.

### *Passion Predictions*

The shift is abrupt, "from that time on..." Jesus shows his disciples he "must" go to Jerusalem. Then the first of three predictions of the events in Jerusalem

follows. Jesus will suffer, die, and rise. Peter quickly catches what Jesus is saying and immediately steps in to dissuade him. Thus Peter's understanding in his climactic statement and Jesus' understanding are different. Jesus rebukes Peter for judging according to human standards not God's.

Turning to the crowd, it becomes clear that Jesus understanding of Messiahship has implications for discipleship. Being a disciple means accepting the cross, accepting the cross means denying oneself. Thus we see that what seems key in this life falls to the background in favor of what is key in terms of the Kingdom.

#### *Order in the Church*

Matthew's fourth discourse follows addressing the order of the Christian community. Since this text will be the basis for your group discussion, I will only make a few comments here. From the discourse, it is clear that membership in this community makes demands on an individual—acceptance of beliefs and a certain moral code. The concluding section of the discourse on prayer shows the necessity of prayer in the life of the Church. Prayer in the church is efficacious because Jesus is present in the community that prays.

The parable of the unjust steward illustrates a key principle of Church order. A steward owed his master 10,000 talents.<sup>4</sup> This furthers the irony of the stewards

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<sup>4</sup> A talent is approximately a 4 year wage, thus the amount owed was 40,000 years wages—a enormous sum impossible to pay.

plea to the master “be patient with me, and I will pay back in full.” Deeply moved the master writes off the debt—an amazing action.

Now the steward meets a servant who owes him about ½ a years wages or 1/80,000 of what he owed his master. He demands payment and the servant begs using the exact same words he did with his master. The steward will have nothing of this and has him jailed. Fellow servants bring the matter to the master who becomes furious. He had received mercy, and he should have been merciful.

Moral” God will treat us in the same way, if we fail to forgive. Our debt to God is immense; yet God forgives us. Should we not, then, be forgiving of others?

Remember the Lord’s prayer. This is yet another Matthaean theme, act toward others as God has acted toward you.

#### *Some Matthaean Parables*

The parable of the workers in the vineyard illustrates the distinction between justice and generosity. An owner needs work done in his vineyard. He hires labors at various times of the day. At the end of the day, they expect to be paid according to the amount of work they have done. When the first are paid as much as the last, they complain because they should be paid more. The owner points out that they agreed to a days wage and that is what they have been paid. This is what the owner

has given them in “justice”; what he decides to give the others in “generosity” is his own business.

We have a tendency to expect justice in our dealings with others, generosity is something that comes hard. Yet this generosity is characteristic of being a follower of Jesus, of being a part of the Kingdom.

*Jesus ministers in Jerusalem*

With the parable of the vineyard, we see a mounting opposition toward Jesus. The Jewish leaders are portrayed in a negative light. What they feel has been theirs by right is now being taken and given to others who will provide a harvest, the nascent Christian community. Jesus arrives in Jerusalem to begin a ½ week of preaching and teaching. The teaching takes on an increasingly negative tone. Opposition between Jesus and the authorities deepens.

An example would be the parable of the wedding feast. A king provides a feast for his son’s wedding. Guests have been invited. When the time for the feast arrives, the invited guests make excuses for not being able to attend. The guests go so far as to treat shamefully or even kill the servants who have been dispatched to escort them to the feast.

This angers the king who sends out to the surrounding region to invite all whom they might come upon. This fills the banquet hall. The parable seems to be

complete; yet it continues. The king enters and notes one guest is not properly attired for the feast. He is ejected from the feast. And the final line of the text informs us that “many are called; but few are chosen.” The many who are called include the original guests invited—the Jewish nation. It includes those who have been brought from all corners of the earth—the Gentiles. But few are chosen.

The parable tells us that acceptance of the invitation is not enough to constitute being “chosen”. As the Gospel has shown, there is a need to do something, to reform. This is symbolized by the wedding banquet. The guest who has accepted the invitation, came to the banquet; but refuses to “dress properly” i.e. change his disposition is not among the chosen. Entrance into the kingdom demands two things—accepting the invitation by coming to the banquet, and being properly dressed. Once again we see the need for hearing and acting.

The intent of the Pharisees to “trap” Jesus that began in Galilee becomes more apparent in Jerusalem. The question of payment of taxes illustrates this. After some flattery, they pose a “trick question” concerning the lawfulness of taxes to the emperor. To speak in favor of taxes would offend those who felt Roman taxes were oppressive. To speak against the taxes would be revolutionary. Either way he was in trouble. Jesus asks for a coin and questions concerning the image. He is told “Caesar’s”. This permits his didactic statement to “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s

and to God what is God's". There is no contradiction between laws of state and laws of religion.

Seeking again to trip Jesus, the Pharisees question him about a summary of the law. Rabbis had specified 12, 6 or even three principles that would sum up the entire law of Israel. Others, felt that such summaries served only to water down the law. When asked about the "first" commandment, Jesus responds with the Shema. The command to love God above all else is the first commandment; yet, there is a second, love of neighbor. Love is the first commandment—love of God and love of God's image, fellow human beings. Doing this will insure that the commands of the decalogue will be followed as well as the 613 dictates of the mishnaic code.

The topic now moves to the authority structure of Judaism. The authorities, Scribes and Pharisees have succeeded the teaching position of Moses. They are to be heeded in word, not in action. They act for show. When their piety is public, they are most pious. But when it is not, they lack all piety. They are the antithesis of the true follower of Christ who was described in the Sermon on the Mount.

They are people of word and not action. Jesus notes that this is not true greatness. True greatness is service. Placing oneself at the service of others. Seeking glory, honor and exaltation are not significant in the kingdom. What matters is honest service, giving oneself for the sake of others.

*The Eschatological Discourse*

The fifth and final discourse of Matthew is the eschatological discourse which describes the final days. Another series of parables, focused on the return of the Lord, appears. The parable of the Ten Virgins emphasizes preparedness. Ten maidens wait to welcome the groom as he brings his new bride to his home. He is delayed, and they run into the night. The maidens become drowsy and ultimately fall asleep.

Upon announcement of the arrival of the groom, they prepare their lamps. But some did not bring enough oil; it has been depleted in the wait. They ask for oil, but they are refused lest they run out and there be no one to light the groom's way. They are forced to go to the merchants. Meanwhile the groom arrives and the celebration begins. They finally arrive and are not allowed to partake because they were not there to perform their task. The moral—be prepared. Do not count on others to supply what is necessary when the time comes. The stance of the Christian awaiting the return of the Lord is constant preparedness

The parable of the talents challenges how we are stewards of the goods that God has given to us. Again a master is away and returning. This time he apportions his goods among servants to use wisely. He makes them stewards. Two of the three

in the parable take risks and increase the goods that the master has entrusted to them. The third, scared to risk, buries the property so he can return it as received.

The master returns and asks for an accounting. Those with profit are rewarded; the third returns the property as he received. This angers the master. His unwillingness to take even the slightest risk to increase the property is seen as an affront. It is taken from him and he is expelled. This parable challenges us to realize that we are stewards of goods entrusted by God. We have an obligation to care for those goods; but we also have an obligation to make them grow. We cannot bury what God has given us. We must use it in order to make the Kingdom grow. We must be willing to take risks to show what we stand for.

The final scene of the discourse carries this thought a little further. The final judgement is portrayed as an accounting of stewardship. All will be divided into two groups, one at the right and one at the left. One group will receive the reward of their labors while the other will receive punishment. What determines which group one is in?

The determination is how a person has acted. Have they taken care of the needs of their fellow human beings, or merely spoke about it? Have they been people who are givers rather than receivers? Have they been willing to take risks for the

sake of the Kingdom? Those who have will be rewarded; those who have not will be punished.

The section of the gospel shows us that it is not who we are that matters, it is not what we say that matters. It is what we do. Matthew's gospel is a gospel of doing. Our actions must be in line with our words. And our words must elicit themselves into action. It is ultimately not how much we say that will be significant, it will be what we have done.

#### *The Passion Narrative*

The final texts of this Gospel to be used in the liturgy is the Passion narrative and the Resurrection narratives. It is unfortunate that the passion is so long and involved, and it is read on a single Sunday. The passion contains several points that can be picked up for preaching. Most of them are contrasts—the contrast of Judas and Peter, the contrast of the women who follow to the end and the disciples. In its simplest form, the passion shows that the way of life Jesus advocates, the life of the Kingdom leads to opposition, and that opposition will ultimately lead to Jesus' death. But this “seeming” victory for Jesus enemies will be transformed into defeat because “on the third day” God will raise Jesus from the dead, vindication his message of the Kingdom of God

Matthew's gospel presents the kingdom of God as demanding—demanding that we not merely say but do, demanding that we endure, demanding that we be prepared. It demands that we be willing to take risks. It tells us that when we do all this, there will be persecution and trial. You we must continue on with the belief that our God will be beside us to vindicate us. This belief gives us the courage and strength to continue.