

Contexts

Matthew's Gospel (in brief)

- Composed between 80-90 CE
- Author is anonymous, but named as 'Matthew the tax collector' by later tradition.
- Written in scholarly 'synagogue' Greek.
- Incorporates almost the entire Gospel of Mark, plus material from Q and material unique to Matthew.
- Structured around 5 major discourses (each ends with the phrase: "When Jesus had finished...."):
 - Prologue – chapters 1- 4 Genealogy, Nativity & Infancy, Baptism, Temptation
 - 1st: 5-7 Sermon on the Mount
 - 2nd: 10 Missionary Discourse
 - 3rd: 13 Parable Discourse
 - 4th: 18 Community Discourse
 - 5th: 23-25 Apocalyptic Judgement Discourses
- **26-28: Jesus' Passion, Death & Resurrection**
- May be a parallel for the 5 books of the Pentateuch - Jesus the new Moses.
- Jesus first words are 'to fulfil all righteousness'.
- A handbook for Church leaders to assist them in teaching and preaching, worship, mission and polemic.
- 2 broad categories: discourse & narrative.
- The only Gospel to explicitly mention the 'Church' – Matthew is theologian of the church.
- Initially addressed to a Jewish-Christian audience – only late in the Gospel is there openness to Gentiles.
- Names Jesus as 'Messiah' at the very beginning and throughout the Gospel.

Matthew 26:11-54 (short form): things to notice

- The Passion Narrative in Matthew (26:1-27:66)
 - Passion prediction
 - Woman anoints Jesus' head
 - Judas' Agreement to Betray Jesus
 - Passover Meal, Betrayal, Eucharist
 - Mount of Olives, Arrest, Jesus forbids violence on his behalf, Disciples flee
 - High Priest's Residence, Accusation, False Testimony, Jesus' silence
 - Peter's Denial
 - Judas' Regret & Suicide (only told in Matthew)
 - Jesus Before Pilate (pagan governor)
- This short form begins when Jesus is brought before Pontius Pilate.
- Pilate questions Jesus about his identity as 'King of the Jews'. Jesus: You have answered your own question.
- Religious leaders are all there, too – a rowdy scene with accusations flying, but Jesus does not respond to them.
- Pilate addresses the crowd about releasing Barabbas – contrast between 'Jesus Barabbas' & 'Jesus, the Christ'.
- Message from Pilate's wife. Dream – divine guidance in Matthew – Jesus is just and should be released
- Crowd demands release of Barabbas and condemnation of Jesus
- Pilate continues to ask 'Why?, What harm has he done?' but gives in to the crowd
- Pilate washes his hands – NOT a Roman gesture but an OT one.

- Pilate orders Jesus to be scourged and crucified.
- Soldiers mock Jesus as a pretend king.
- Simon of Cyrene (not the disciples) helps Jesus carry his cross.
- Golgotha – small hill outside the city gates
- Wine & gall – NOT the pain-killing drug in Mark – Jesus refuses to drink.
- Sharing out of his clothes – usual Roman practice
- Watchfulness of the soldiers
- 'King of the Jews' – a Roman custom to write the charge against the condemned man
- 2 robbers also crucified
- Everyone jeers Jesus: crowds, passers-by, religious leaders & the robbers.
- Jesus dies calling out to God in desolation
- Confusion between 'Eli' – God & 'Eliyya' – Elijah
- Jesus dies, yielding up his spirit – note the voluntary, self-giving tone
- Temple veil tears – symbol of new era – the presence of God is no longer a building but a people.
- Earthquake, rocks split, dead people rise – Matthew's answer to the mocking earlier in the story – showing divine vindication of Jesus.
- The centurion's statement of faith (note contrast with absent disciples) and affirmation of Jesus as 'God's Son'.
- Long form continues:
 - the women disciples who, unlike the men, did not run away
 - Joseph of Arimathea buries Jesus – the 2 Marys keep vigil at the tomb
 - Religious leaders have the tomb guarded and sealed – Matthew sets the scene for the resurrection.

Liturgical Context

First reading: Isaiah 50:4-7 – the silent, suffering servant who hears and does the Word of God.

Responsorial Psalm: response echoes the cry of Jesus: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

Second Reading: Philippians 2:6-11 – Paul's hymn-like meditation on the mystery of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection

All set the scene for listening to the Passion story – not as a gruesome act, but as a means of salvation – this is the liturgical point of today's celebration. The blessing of palms, the reading of the Gospel of Jesus' joyful entry into Jerusalem, the procession, the joyful acclamations all serve to convey this context which is very different to the reading of the Passion on Good Friday.

For Matthew, 'the cross is part of God's plan, not a tragic mistake. It means that God acts in and through the apparent disaster. Far from thwarting the kingdom, the crucifixion in God's hands is transformed to become the means of salvation'.
(Dorothy Lee)