Lectio Divina – 12th Sunday of the Year A

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
  + 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
* 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 10:26-33: things to notice

* The Gospel of the 11th Sunday began the reading of this section of Matthew’s Gospel about the spread of God’s Kingdom and the role of ‘the twelve’ (notice: not ALL the disciples).
* Note the contrasting/parallel imagery throughout the passage: covered/uncovered; hidden/made clear (or make known); darkness/light; body/soul; declares himself for me/I will declare myself for him; in the presence of men/in the presence of my father; disowns me/I will disown him.
* Passage opens with: “Do not be afraid (of them” – the persecutors spoken of immediately before this passage – I am sending you out like sheep among wolves….). Note that the Lectionary omits the words: ‘of them’ so that we don’t become fixed on the historical circumstances which may have given rise to this sermon, but see this teaching in a broader way which might apply to us.
* Not the contrast between the more hidden ministry of Jesus (“what I say to you in the dark/in secret/ in whispers”) and the more public ministry of the Twelve (“proclaim openly/in the daylight/from the house-tops”)
* Note repetition of: “Do not be afraid” – who to really fear: not those who can kill the body but those who can destroy the soul as well. Presupposes that the soul is immortal. This is commonly understood to mean the Devil, but in fact this remark may be about God. The only one the Twelve should fear is God who has the power to destroy (possible ‘trouble’ or ‘torment’ – the exact meaning of the verb is uncertain) both body and soul. We need to remember that, if this way of reading the text is correct, we are talking about biblical fear of God understood as awe, respect, obedience to God’s word and so on, not the emotion of being afraid. The following sentences make this clear.
* An alternative reading would say that the only one to fear is not God, but the one (presumably the devil) who can destroy us totally (body and soul) – which would mean that fear has won.
* Reassurance of God’s abiding care using the image of the sparrow – the cheapest life in the market and yet God’s providential care extends to it. So how much more will God’s providential care extend to faithful emissaries of God’s word spoken in Jesus, who are worth more than ‘hundreds of sparrows’?
* Note the 3rd repetition of ‘do not be afraid’ rendered as: ‘So there is no need to be afraid; you are worth more than hundreds of sparrows’ in our text.
* Final section is about confessing Jesus before people: again, two parallel verses which speak about ‘confessing or denying Jesus before people and the respective results before God’ – ‘how you react to Jesus will determine your future destiny regarding salvation.’ (JBC). It presents an image of Jesus as the advocate for the Twelve before God.

The Liturgical Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on this Sunday?

The Sunday Gospels Sundays 11-13: The Spread of God’s Kingdom

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|  |  | First Reading | Second Reading | Gospel |
| 11th Sunday | Mission Sermon 1 | Exodus 19:2-6 | Romans 5:6-11 1:1-3 | Matthew 9:36-10:8 |
| **12th Sunday** | **Mission Sermon 2** | **Jeremiah 20:10-13** | **Romans 5:12-15** | **Matthew 10:26-33** |
| 13th Sunday | Mission Sermon 3 | 2 Kings 4:8-11, 14-16 | Romans 6:3-4, 8-11 | Matthew 10:37-42 |

Liturgical Setting for this Sunday

First Reading – Jeremiah’s lament over his experience of fear, rejection and persecution for preaching the word of God begins the reading. Then Jeremiah goes on to affirm his faith and trust in God, in spite of the difficulties he faces, he has committed his cause to God and anticipates God’s favourable response to his prayer. The reading ends with Jeremiah praising God for hearing his prayer even though the result is not yet evident.

The faith and hope which dominate Jeremiah’s prayerful cry are very much to be seen in the Gospel when the Twelve must hold firm to Jesus, the Word and place their hope and trust in God as they go about their mission of spreading that word in a hostile environment.

Reflection

The second part of Jesus’ instruction to the disciples as they set out for their mission is the text of the Gospel today.

The opening sentence sets the tone for the disciples’ mission: Do not be afraid.

The first reading from the Old Testament book of the prophet Jeremiah reflects Jeremiah’s experience of rejection - no one wants to hear the message God has called him to give. In fact, they want to kill him. Jeremiah sounds desperate and afraid. But then the reading turns into a prayer of confidence and trust in God’s companionship and spiritual protection - God and

Jeremiah will win out.

Preaching in the name of God is a risky and frightening business, as Jesus knows. So he urges the disciples not to be afraid of small beginnings, of those who can kill only the body, or that God would abandon them. He reminds them that God is always mindful of them and accompanies

them on their mission. He urges them to be brave and bold in proclaiming the truth about God and in confessing their belief in Jesus before others.

Matthew’s audience, like Jesus, Jeremiah and the disciples knew all about persecution and rejection. Their question is also ours: if we allow fear to silence us how will the Good News of Jesus Christ ever be heard in the world?

Recall what Pope Francis said about Jesus knocking on the doors of our hearts. We usually have an image of Jesus knocking to come into our hearts. But Francis says, perhaps he is knocking on the inside of our hearts, wanting to get out!