Lectio Divina – 3rd 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 4:12 – 23: things to notice

* This Gospel is in 2 parts: first section ends with Jesus’ proclamation: Repent for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand – also the ‘short’ form of today’s Gospel. Second section is the call of two pairs of brothers: Simon (Peter) & Andrew and James & John (sons of Zebedee).
* **Section 1** begins with a bridging sentence which ends John the Baptist’s ministry and heralds the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.
* After hearing of the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus goes back to Nazareth and then leaves Nazareth and settles in Capernaum a relatively large village/town on the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee about 48km from Nazareth. Capernaum became the base for Jesus Galilean ministry (ministry in the Galilee region).
* Matthew frequently (some 14 times) uses quotations from Old Testament scriptures to show Jesus fulfilling everything written in the Old Testament. They have a common beginning: This was (or happened) to fulfil…’ Matthew is drawing a direct link between the God of the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus himself.
* Matthew condenses and rearranges a quote from Isaiah 8:23-9:1. Matthew probably uses it to defend Jesus’ choice of Capernaum as the centre of his ministry rather than (the expected) Jerusalem.
* Caperaum is within the region formally known as Zebulun and Napthali – the names of 2 tribes which inhabited that area. By Matthew’s day at least half the population was Gentile; there were 2 main religions – so half Jewish & half pagan; 2 main languages - Greek & Aramaic. There were differences between Jewish thought & practice here and Jewish thought & practise in Jerusalem. So there appears to be an openness to Gentiles here.
* Matthew gives us a specific time and place for the beginning of Jesus’ ministry: to the people who lived in darkness Jesus is light; to the people who lived in the deepest shadow of death Jesus brings life.
* Not from ‘then’ (faulty translation) but from ‘there’ (ie Capernaum) Jesus begins his teaching with the fundamental message is proclaimed: Repent ….
* Proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom represents the future, final salvation of all humanity, socially, politically and spiritually through God’s sovereign establishment of justice and peace in heaven and on earth. This reign of God is also already near in the very person of Jesus.
* Matthew probably avoids using the phrase: Kingdom of *God*, out of respect for God’s name, and substitutes ‘heaven’ instead.
* **Section 2** – call of 2 sets of brothers as disciples.
* Remember that Matthew is not laying out a series of historical events. He is telling a story about call and response.
* Galilean fishing industry was very prosperous and exported products a considerable distance. We are not dealing with ‘poor fishermen’ but more with industrious, middle-class businessmen.
* ‘Follow me..’ – proper translation is: ‘come after me’ – technical language of *invitation* a teacher to disciples.
* ‘I will make you fishers of men’ – again, using the classical technical language of teacher to disciple it would be more usual for the teacher to be or identify himself as the ‘fisher’. Here Matthew extends the image to make the disciples ‘fishers’.
* ‘And they left their nets at once’ – Matthew casts the response of Peter and Andrew as immediate – but it would not have been quite that fast. Remember that they are out on the lake making a cast with their nets. It would have taken time to haul in the nets and get the boat back to shore, etc. In reality, there may have been even more time for Peter and Andrew to respond given the important and life-changing implications of the decision to follow Jesus. However, it serves Matthews purpose for the disciples to have an immediate, obedient response to Jesus – that is the message Matthew is sending to his readers.
* Call of James & John – they are near the shore, mending the nets. With their father Zebedee they have 2 boats (Luke 5:4) and men working for them (Mark 1:19-20) which would indicate some wealth.
* Again, they respond immediately, leaving their father behind. Following Jesus can sometimes mean rupturing family ties, though Jesus opposes neglect of parents in old age (cf 15:4-6)
* Now the ‘inner circle’ of Jesus’ disciples is complete.
* He went around the whole of Galilee teaching … proclaiming … curing – the kingdom is witnessed to, Good News of salvation is proclaimed, the Kingdom of mercy is seen in action in healing and restoration.

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

Last Sunday’s Gospel served as an introduction to Jesus, the Lamb of God.

The Sunday Gospels between now and the beginning of Lent will use the Sermon on the Mount to help us explore and reflect upon who this Lamb of God is and how we, as disciples, should respond to him. They will unfold for us how Jesus, the Lamb of God, is the source of true peace and how we can find our way to him – that is, how to live faithful to the tradition of Jesus.

This Sunday Jesus begins his ministry in an unexpected place – Capernaum, not Jerusalem, in the countryside not the city. The familiar Gospel demand: Repent for the kingdom is close at hand, is sounded for the first time by Jesus.

To the ministry of proclaimers Jesus adds 4 intimates who will be with him throughout the journey.

The Gospel begs many questions: just what is this Kingdom all about; who is this Jesus who seems to have the power to compel prosperous, ordinary men to follow him; what does it mean to be ‘fishers of men’, why does Jesus begin his ministry in an unexpected place, what is this Good News of the Kingdom that Jesus offers, etc?

In all, the Gospel serves not just to tell us about Jesus and what he did, but also to help us reflect on our own experience of Jesus: what does it mean for us also to be called (not just as followers but also as ‘fishers’)? How immediate and life-changing is our response to him? Can we follow him all the way to the cross? How do we proclaim the Good News of the kingdom? How are we healers of people and situations which are part of our lives, etc?