Lectio Divina – 4th 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 5:1-12: things to notice

* The Gospel for this Sunday, commonly known as ‘The Beatitudes’ or ‘blessings’, is only part of the wider Sermon on the Mount which will be our text for the next 4 Sundays.
* Last week Jesus begins his ministry in Capernaum with the same words used by John the Baptist: Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is close at hand; then he gathers disciples and, finally, his fame begins to spread.
* This week: Crowds gather and Jesus ‘goes up the mountain’ (OT: mountains are significant places of encounter with God – cf. Moses), sits down (traditional for Oriental teachers) and begins to teach about the kingdom. Both crowds and disciples seem to be present to hear his teaching.
* In context, ‘Blessed’ is a better translation than ‘happy’. Traditionally, a beatitude is a cry of joyful congratulation that recognises an existing state of happiness.
* So Jesus’ teaching begins with a cry of joyful recognition of the nearness of the kingdom of God unfolded in this text.
* ‘… poor in spirit’ – Matthew changes Luke’s text perhaps because his audience is not so economically poor, but also to include notions of humility, recognising need for God & neighbour, whose interest is not in economic advancement but in true justice & service.
* ‘… gentle – means those who are ‘slow to anger’, ‘gentle with others’.
* ‘… mourn’ – is not limited to those who mourn over death (but can include them). Real meaning is those who are aghast at ‘the reign of evil in the world’, those who cannot tolerate the mistreatment or destruction of human beings.
* ‘… hunger & thirst for what is right’ – the seekers after true justice who ‘do’ justice for those in need. Idea also of ‘right relationship’ with God & neighbour.
* ‘… merciful’ – those who pardon, love, forgive, refuse to seek or take vengeance – who ‘do’ mercy
* ‘… pure in heart’ – sole focus is God & neighbour, not narrow self-interest.
* ‘… peacemakers’ – closely related to love of neighbour. To be a means of reconciliation; to be ‘at pace’ with God & others.
* ‘… persecuted in the cause of right’ – holding firm to the virtues, being true to the end, whatever the cost.
* ‘…abuse and persecute…’ – a kind of summary of the virtuous paths mentioned above. Note that it is ‘you’ (the disciples) who are addressed.
* These beatitudes are the characteristics disciples strive to live by on their journey of living the Way of Jesus.
* The ‘rewards’ are a strong contrast to the rewards of wealth, position and power (the rewards of this world). Note that all rewards find their realization in kingdom of God, but that does not necessarily mean at the end of time.

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

The Sunday Gospels up to Lent: 15 January – 26 February

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|  |  | First Reading | Second Reading | Gospel |
| 2nd Sunday | John the Baptist | Isaiah 49:3,5-6 | 1 Cor 1:1-3 | John 1:29-34 |
| 3rd Sunday | Call of disciples | Isaiah 8:23-9:3 | 1 Cor 1:10-13, 17 | Matthew 4:12-23 |
| **4th Sunday** | **Sermon on Mount 1** | **Zephaniah**  **2:3, 3:12-13** | **1 Cor 1:26-31** | **Matthew 5:1-12**  **Beatitudes: nearness of the Kingdom** |
| 5th Sunday | Sermon on Mount 2 | Isaiah 58:7-10 | 1 Cor2:1-5 | Matthew 5:13-16  Salt & Light: discipleship |
| 6th Sunday | Sermon on Mount 3 | Sirach 15:15-20 | 1 Cor 2:6-10 | Matthew 5:17-37  The true meaning of the Law and virtue (righteousness) I |
| 7th Sunday | Sermon on Mount 4 | Leviticus  19:1-2, 17-18 | 1 Cor 3:16-23 | Matthew 5:38-48  The true meaning of the Law and virtue (righteousness) II |
| 8th Sunday | Sermon on Mount 5 | Isaiah 49:14-15 | 1 Cor 4:1-5 | Matthew 6 24-34  Trust in God & set your heart on the kingdom |

Last Sunday’s Gospel introduced the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, his call to repentance, the choice of some disciples and the spread of his fame.

Now, over the next four Sundays, the church will take us on a journey through Jesus’ teaching in Chapters 5-7 of Matthew’s Gospel. These chapters form the Sermon on the Mount. Each Sunday’s Gospel builds on the one before – they are part of this first discourse in Matthew’s Gospel and need to be understood in a connected sense, not as a series of isolated sayings.

The text we know as the ‘Beatitudes’ introduces Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom, discipleship, the true meaning of the Law and true righteousness (virtue), interior disposition of the heart against external fulfilment of Law, trust in God and keeping the Kingdom as the focus of the disciple’s life.

Matthew’s beatitudes have been understood as a pattern of life for the follower of Jesus. Put in the context of Jesus’ call to conversion (the idea of radical change and transformation), those willing to be transformed will enjoy the blessings of the kingdom as their reward.

To be ‘poor in spirit’, to experience sadness (‘mourn’) because of the present state of affairs, to be gentle and unselfish rather than on the make, to have a passionate commitment to justice, to exercise mercy instead of taking advantage, to be ‘pure in heart’, to be ‘peacemakers’, to endure persecution and calumny for the sake of the right way of life (‘righteousness’) and allegiance to Christ: all these things make one vulnerable here and now, entailing much loss. The vulnerable make the world safe for humanity.\*

For those who live according to the heart of God as Jesus reveals it, the blessings of the Kingdom will be theirs, their place in the household of God will be assured and they will be making the world a safe place for their brothers and sisters.

\*Byrne, Brendan, Lifting the Burden: reading Matthew’s Gospel in the

Church Today. St Pauls, 2004, pp55-57