Lectio Divina – Fourth Sunday of Advent 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 1:18-24 – things to notice

* Back to the early Chapters of Matthew’s Gospel.
* Today’s text flows immediately after Matthew’s Genealogy. Purpose of Genealogy is to show that Jesus (through Joseph) belongs to the House of David.
* Normal marriage age is twelve and a half for girls and fourteen for boys.
* ‘but before they came to live together…’ - In Judea betrothal included the right of cohabitation, but the text makes clear that the couple was not living together when Mary is found to be pregnant.
* ‘through the Holy Spirit’ – Mary’s pregnancy is the result of divine intervention not Joseph. This is referred to as the ‘virginal conception’.
* ‘Holy Spirit’ is a late Old Testament term for the spirit of God. There is a long history of the spirit of God involved in creation and as the source of human life itself.
* Think about what the discovery of Mary’s pregnancy must have meant for Joseph who has no knowledge at this stage of God’s intervention.
* ‘Joseph, being a man of honour/a just man’ – Joseph’s justice is to act within the Law but also with compassion – he does not exact the full penalty for Mary’s ‘offence’ which would have been stoning to death.
* ‘divorce her secretly’ – in contrast to a public trial (spectacle) by ordeal outlined in Numbers 5:11-31 – a woman had to participate in 2 rituals involving drinking ‘bitter waters’ and a grain offering & curse. If she were affected by either, she was deemed guilty of the offence.
* ‘the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream..’ – the angel explains to Joseph why Mary is not guilty of adultery.
* ‘…name him Jesus … who is to save his people from their sins’ – ‘Jesus’ means ‘saviour’.
* ‘… all this took place to fulfil…’ – a phrase used 10 times in Matthew’s Gospel – Matthew’s emphasis on Jesus as the fulfilment of the scriptures, or God’s plan for salvation for his people.
* ‘a virgin…’ – in Hebrew means ‘young woman’ in Greek it means ‘virgin’. The play on the 2 meanings of the word is deliberate with Matthew emphasising the 2nd meaning.
* ‘Emmanuel .. God with us’ – a classic abbreviation of the covenant formula: I will be your God and you shall be my people, but also means in this context the presence of God among his people. Matthew seems to be the first to identify this ‘presence’ (shekinah) with a person.
* ‘Joseph did’ – Joseph gives the classic response of *hearing and doing the word of God*. In doing so Joseph makes Jesus part of Joseph’s own family – gives him his name – enables him to be recognised as part of the house of David, the royal line. In Jewish culture being a Jew came from the mother. What Jewish family you belonged to came from the father. Thus, even children not born to the father can have his name if he accepts the child – see the many stories about the children of slave girls being ‘adopted’ by fathers in OT. What Joseph does here by ‘taking Mary’ and hence Jesus ‘into his home’ is to adopt him as his son and make him a member of the same family line as Joseph himself.

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

The Advent journey through the readings in a word: Advent 1 – Awake!

Advent 2 – Prepare!

Advent 3 – Rejoice!

**Advent 4 – Receive!**

The Christmas feast grows ever near. As always in Advent, the first reading proclaims the promise, and the Gospel shows its fulfilment.

The great Christmas feast is almost here. As always in Advent, what is promised in the first reading is brought to fulfilment in the Gospel reading. We began Advent with the cry, ‘Come, Lord Jesus’. We will end it with the joyful shout, ‘God is with us!’

Our Advent journey has called us to:

stay awake to the coming of God,

prepare ourselves to receive the Lord,

rejoice that he is not afraid to make his home with us, and to

receive him with faith and love.

At Christmas we will hear the call to give birth to him in word and action so that the saving power of God may be seen and experienced through our every thought, word and action.

The promise of the first reading from Isaiah that, “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, a name which means ‘God-is-with us’,” is fulfilled in the Gospel which tells how Joseph received both Mary and Jesus into his home.

Following Joseph’s example, we joyfully welcome Jesus, and Mary, into our hearts.

The great gift of Jesus to the world cannot be confined only to one moment in history. Through us, the Body of Christ, the Gift is given again and again; born into every moment of human history. The presents we exchange at Christmas are meant to be symbols of our readiness to give and receive Christ, the eternal gift of God’s love.

As, year by year, we travel the liturgical journey of the Church’s feasts and seasons we touch ever more deeply the living presence of Christ in us that we may become ever more deeply the living presence of Christ in the world.