Lectio Divina – Feast of the Ascension 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 28: 16-20 – things to notice

* We return to Matthew’s Gospel for this Sunday (see above).
* 28:16-20 are the final verses of Matthew’s Gospel.
* The disciples go to Galilee (where Jesus began his mission and called them) to meet Jesus on the mountain. In Matthew’s Gospel important moments in Jesus’ life take place on mountain tops: his temptation, transfiguration, Sermon on the Mount and now, his final instruction to and commissioning of, the disciples.
* Jesus has called this ragged, scattered, fragile group of disciples, dispersed after his death, back to himself to form them (weak and doubtful as they are) into a community for mission in the name of God.
* There being specific mention of only 11 disciples is a reference to Judas’ final end and that the vision is a revelation only to the 11 apostles, not the wider group of believing disciples.
* Notice that there is no mention or description of Jesus’ ascension in this text or anywhere in Matthew’s Gospel where, it seems, Jesus’ ascension coincided with his resurrection. A description appears only in Acts 1:9-11.
* What the disciples see here is a vision or an appearance of the risen Jesus. Little wonder they fell down (worshipped) before him.
* ‘some hesitated’ – the Greek text reads: ‘some doubted’. So their acknowledgement and worship of Jesus shows their faith yet this is mingled with doubt – not an unusual experience for human beings. Perhaps the disciples were wondering if their vision was real or they were just imagining something. Faith and doubt are often mixed in Gospels episodes.
* Jesus ‘came up and spoke to them’ – implies that Jesus draws nearer to the disciples, a gesture of immediacy and intimacy. He is not put off by their doubts.
* ‘All authority has been…’ – note past tense. God has given divine authority to Jesus. This is not understood as ‘authority over’ but as ‘authorisation to’. In this passing of authority from Jesus to the disciples they are not being given authority over anyone. They are being authorised for their mission to the nations, of spreading the Good News and baptising in the name of God: Father, Son & Holy Spirit.
* Note the extension of the disciples’ earlier mission in Matthew (which was only to ‘the lost sheep of the house of Israel’) to all nations (including Israel).
* The Trinitarian formula (Father, Son & Holy Spirit) is found only in Matthew. It may be from an early baptism rite used in Matthew’s community.
* The baptising of the nations is to be accompanied by the teaching mission of the disciples. They are to teach what Jesus has taught them (not some doctrine of their own making).
* They are to form the new community of Jesus, not in their own image and likeness, but in the image and likeness of God as Jesus has revealed God to be.
* ‘And know that I am with you…’ – an echo from the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel (1:23) about Jesus being ‘God with us’. Jesus is an abiding presence with all the baptised and all those sharing in the ministry of the disciples. But note that the gift of the Spirit is not explicitly mentioned here as it is in John’s Gospel.

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

The feast of the Ascension commemorates the return of Jesus to the Father. Jesus leaves in the body but remains with us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. We will celebrate the gift and presence of the Holy Spirit in next Sunday’s feast of Pentecost.

The true meaning of our feast today is not found in Jesus’ leaving, but in the way he calls his disciples back together, to re-form them as a new community entrusted with the spread of the Gospel. That is what the Gospel reading is about today. Jesus sends the disciples out to make disciples of all nations, to baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and to teach them his way. But the disciples are not left to do all that on their own. Jesus promises that he is with them always.

Jesus has called the ragged, scattered group of disciples back to himself to form them, fragile and doubtful as they are, into a community for mission in the name of God. It is comforting to recognise that Jesus doesn’t insist on perfection before he calls us and entrusts us with his mission.

In Matthew’s Gospel, many of the important moments of Jesus’ life are located on mountaintops - his temptation, his transfiguration, the great teaching of the ‘sermon on the mount’, and now this final instruction to his disciples. In this way, Matthew draws parallels with Moses the great leader and lawgiver.

Matthew shows Jesus as fulfilling and extending the teaching of Moses. Whereas the Law had been for the people of Israel, Jesus sends his disciples to all nations; whereas the Jewish people had faith in the name of God, YHWH, Jesus sends his disciples to baptise in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit.

This mission is authorised by God (ie, God’s work) and passed on to us through Jesus. It is not about authority over others. It is actually a call to act as God would act, true to God’s heart as Jesus has shown us.

Ever since Easter, we have been proclaiming that Jesus is alive. The feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost help us to realise that we are part of a long tradition of faithful disciples. We have our faults and failings, but our call is to witness to and teach the way of Jesus by the kind of people we are, the values and attitudes we hold, in thought, word and action - to be the living presence of God in the world today.