

## Lectio Divina – 29th Sunday of the Year A

### 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...."):
  1. Prologue – chapters 1- 4 Genealogy, Nativity & Infancy
  2. 1<sup>st</sup>: 5-7 Sermon on the Mount
  3. 2<sup>nd</sup>: 10 Missionary Discourse
  4. 3<sup>rd</sup>: 13 Parable Discourse
  5. 4<sup>th</sup>: 18 Community Discourse
  6. 5<sup>th</sup>: 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 22:15-21 - things to notice

- This Sunday's Gospel is a continuation of last Sunday's Gospel.
- Chapter 22 begins with the parable about the Wedding Banquet.
- Jesus is again the subject of conflict – this time between himself and the Herodians (thought to be a Jewish sect or political party who supported Herod and possibly the Herodian dynasty).
- Immediately after last week's Gospel encounter, Matthew tells us that the Pharisees went away and began to plot with the Herodians about how to get rid of Jesus.
- They cook up a trick question, hoping to trap Jesus into saying something they can use against him. They are seeking to diminish his popularity among the people.
- They don't confront Jesus themselves, but send their disciples instead. Why?
- The question their disciples pose to Jesus is very clever and was the subject of rabbinical debates at the time – is it permissible for Jews to pay taxes to the Roman authorities (Caesar)?
- Roman taxes at the time included a tax for using roads (toll collectors), the baths, one day's pay per month, salt levy, levies on buying and selling and many other aspects of life.
- If Jesus were to answer: "You must pay!" they would accuse him, together with the people, of being a friend of the Romans. If he were to say: "You must not pay!" they would accuse him, together with the Roman authorities, of being a subversive, a revolutionary (death sentence).
- Jesus is aware of the trap and names these disciples as hypocrites for seeking to trap him, but he does not send them away – he is still prepared to dialogue with them.
- He asks for a Roman coin, and whose image is on it.
- They answer 'Caesars'.
- 'Very well, give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar- and to God what belongs to God.'
- In practice, the people and their leaders were already giving to Caesar what belonged to him by paying the taxes, but it seems, the second part of Jesus' statement had been all but forgotten.

- Rather unfortunately, I think, the text for today omits the last sentence of the story: 'When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.'

#### Liturgical Setting for this Sunday

The first reading is from the prophet, Isaiah. It is about Cyrus, the pagan King of Babylon, which names (rather remarkably) Cyrus as God's chosen, anointed one (messiah!) and instrument. Cyrus is greatly praised in the Jewish scriptures, a hero who released the people from Babylon, returned them to their own lands and restored the Temple. Perhaps this image picks up on Matthew's idea of Jesus as the messiah who restores Israel to its rightful place in God's economy. The reading also contains the phrase: 'There is no other God but me' which may have a connection with the idea of Caesar being considered a quasi-god in Jesus' time.

#### Reflection

What is on display in this story from Matthew's Gospel is not Jesus' clever reply, but the image of God he presents.

Even knowing the plot of the Pharisees and Herodians, Jesus does not refuse to enter into dialogue with them. He is the Word of God always willing to be in conversation with human beings, even those plotting against him.

In not directly answering the question put to him, Jesus leaves the response in the hands of those who ask. Jesus does not come with a list of ready-made solutions to every human difficulty. Deep attention to the word and discernment (the gift of the Spirit) help us to respond, in the tradition of Jesus, when we are trying to figure out what the right thing to do is.

God is not about taking power from us, but about empowering us to live in God's own image and likeness.

Perhaps Jesus' words that the coin which bears Caesar's image belongs to Caesar means also that those things which bear the image of God belong to God – including human beings and creation. Maybe that is why Jesus didn't walk away from his questioners. He recognises them for what they are – the image and likeness of God.

Thinking about the three parables we have heard over recent weeks we can say that the idea of giving back to God what belongs to God can be understood as giving back the love, generosity, justice and goodness we have received from God. Just as God did not lose anything by giving us these gifts, we don't lose anything by making them real in our lives, so that others may also share in God's life through us.