

Lectio Divina – 21st 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. 1st: 5-7 Sermon on the Mount
 3. 2nd: 10 Missionary Discourse
 4. 3rd: 13 Parable Discourse
 5. 4th: 18 Community Discourse
 6. 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 16:13-20 - things to notice

- two movements in one episode: first movement is the issue of Jesus' identity, told by asking the same question addressed to two groups – the people and the disciples. The second movement begins with Peter's confession of faith.
- 'Who do the people say the son of Man is?' – Note the responses: John the Baptist (returned from the dead), Elijah (expected to return before the day of the Messiah), Jeremiah (the prophet who predicts the rejection and suffering of the Messiah), or one of the prophets (come back from the dead).
- "Who do you say I am?" – note the two changes in the question – Matthew directly identifies Jesus with 'Son of Man'.
- Son of Man - used 81 times in the New Testament. Comes from a reference to the prophecy of Daniel 7:13-14, "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." It is generally taken to be another way of saying Son of God, but there is much dispute about the exact interpretation and usage of the phrase.
- 'Then Peter spoke up...' – you almost get the impression that silence first greets Jesus' question, and then Peter speaks.
- 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' – note change from Son of *man* to 'Son of the living God'; note also that Peter uses the term 'Christ', meaning the 'anointed one' in Greek and carrying the meaning of the Hebrew, 'Messiah'. Note 'Jesus' was a common first name at the time of Jesus and is commonly understood to mean 'Yahweh is salvation'.
- Peter invokes a direct and personal relationship between Father and Son – a shift by Matthew away from the military imagery associated with Messiah.
- Jesus makes 7 statements concerning Peter and his vocation/role. Seven is a perfect number in biblical numerology:
 1. 'you are a happy (blessed) man'
 2. 'my father has revealed this to you'
 3. 'you are Peter' – note name change – a pun on Peter's name

4. 'on this rock I will build my church' – invokes images of solidity and steadfastness; Jesus' Church (assembly of the People of God) has sure and sound foundations and not even
 5. 'the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it'
 6. 'give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven' – note: Matthew understands the Church to be the incarnation of the kingdom of God. This is about the church, under Peter's leadership, being a means of salvation for the world, the place in which is found the presence of God in the world – not the kingdom of heaven at the end of time.
 7. 'What you bind shall be considered bound, what you loose shall be considered loosed'. Note: this is NOT about sin and forgiveness. Peter is given enormous authority to bind and loose in the name of God. This is about definitive decision-making (a form of teaching through legislation). Matthew chooses Peter for the key role in the life of the early Church, possibly steering a middle course between Paul and James. Note that the other disciples are also given power to bind and loose in 18:18, but Peter's role remains unique.
- Note that for all that is said about Peter here, Jesus will call him 'Satan' in a just few verses time (16:23). Perhaps that represents a Church of people who although entrusted with great responsibility and great authority don't always get it right!
 - '... not to tell anyone he was the Christ' – Matthew ends the episode by restating the identity of Jesus as the Christ.

Liturgical Setting for this Sunday

The first reading is from the Old Testament Book of the Prophet Isaiah about the dismissal of Shebna, master of the royal palace, and the appointment of Eliakim in his place. Notice the attributes of Eliakim: he is entrusted with authority, he is to be father to the people of Jerusalem and Judah, he is given the 'key of the House of David', what he opens no one shall close and vice versa, he will be driven like a peg (anchor point) into place.

Note the similarities to Peter in the Gospel: also given the 'keys of the Kingdom' and the authority to bind and loose, and to be the 'rock'.

Note that there are 7 statements made about Eliakim in the first reading and 7 statements made about Peter in the Gospel.

Reflection

At this point in St Matthew's Gospel, Jesus and his chosen ones have travelled and lived together for some time. He now invites them to explore what they understand about his identity. Even in his question there is explicit hint: Who do people say the Son of Man is?

The disciples tell Jesus what they have heard from others: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Jesus then asks the disciples, "But, who do you say I am?" It is Peter who adds to the title 'Son of Man' by recognising Jesus as 'the Christ, the Son of the living God'.

Jesus names Peter as a happy man. This same Peter whose faith faltered when he was buffeted by the wind and waves in last Sunday's Gospel has now shown his openness to God and recognises Jesus for who he is. But this is not the end of Peter's story. There are ups and downs in his response, as we will see next Sunday when this 'rock' of faith becomes a 'stumbling block' to God's purpose.

In spite of that, Jesus names Peter as the 'rock' on which he will build the church. Peter has a new name and a new vocation. This church will have to battle hostile forces which seek to enslave people in sin. It will be a safe haven of freedom by being the living presence of God.

Peter's job is to use the 'keys of the kingdom' to unlock and release the reign of God's grace into the world. In this work, decisions have to be made for the whole community of the church. Here, Matthew's words about 'binding' and 'loosening' have nothing to do with the forgiveness of sins. They are a kind of pledge that the sincere and honest decisions of faithful people have divine

backing. It does not mean that these decisions are the best or most perfect ones. Discernment and decision-making are part of the job of being disciples finding together the way of the Lord; of being the living presence of God in the world.

Finally, Jesus binds the disciples to silence about his true identity lest his Messiahship get confused with the people's expectation of a messiah who will free them from Roman occupation.

Like last Sunday, Peter is a lot like us. We really want to believe, to become the presence of God, but we don't always seem to be able to do it. We have great moments of faith and moments in which we are deeply in tune with the heart of God. Most of us also have moments when we fall back into narrow and harsh ways that cannot hold the power of God's love. But the Gospel reassures us that, in spite of our weakness and the many ways in which we may be found wanting, God is still close to us, and faith is a journey, not a destination.