

Lectio Divina – 22nd 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 16:21-27 - things to notice

- Note that the text is a continuation of last week's Gospel which when read with the first sentence of this week's Gospel reads: "Then he gave his disciples strict orders not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. Jesus began to make it clear to his disciples that he was destined to go up to Jerusalem and suffer grievously at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, to be put to death and to be raised up on the third day."
- This is the first of three predictions about his passion that Jesus gives.
- Jesus proclaims he is not the warrior Messiah, leading the armed revolt against the Romans, but one who gives himself up to death and resurrection.
- Jerusalem: the place where the prophets die (23:37).
- Matthew names the members of the Sanhedrin (elders, chief priests & scribes) – that is why the Pharisees are not mentioned as such.
- NOTE: These are probably not the actual words of Jesus. Matthew has arranged a post-resurrection reflection about Jesus into very precise terms. No doubt, Jesus did speak about his impending suffering and death – just not in these exact words.
- Peter reverts to type: "This must not happen to you". Last week, Jesus proclaimed Peter 'blessed' because of his God-given insight into who Jesus is. Now Peter is 'Satan' because it is not God-given insight, but human thinking he now shows.
- Peter may seem very much on the 'outer' with Jesus, but in the verses immediately following the end of this Gospel Peter is the one to whom the vision of the Transfiguration is given.
- Verses about the call to discipleship:
 - 'let him' – it is the disciple's choice
 - 'renounce himself' – submission to God's will – to 'do the word'.
 - 'take up his cross' – does not mean crucifixion, but is a proverbial term for suffering.
 - 'save his life' – by avoiding martyrdom – 'will lose it'.
 - 'loses his life for my sake' – by martyrdom (for me), but also 'loses his life in me/or mine (my life)'. Real life is found only in Jesus.
 - 'wins the whole world..' – amasses great wealth which is useless at the end of the day; does not guarantee salvation, perishes.

- o 'the Son of Man will reward...' – rewards of discipleship are not of this world (power, wealth, status). They will be given when the Son of Man comes in glory (in the kingdom).
- By handing our lives over to God we gain a real, human life – one not exempt from difficulties and suffering involved in real human life and in the act of pouring out your life in service of others, rather than in service of self.

Liturgical Setting for this Sunday

The first reading comes from the prophet Jeremiah who is having a bit of a rant against God. He bemoans the fact that God has seduced him into becoming a prophet, taking on a life of suffering, rejection and attempts to kill him. But, at the end of the day, no matter how hard Jeremiah tried to ignore his call, there was a 'fire burning in my heart' and he found he had no choice but to continue his mission as a prophet.

For Matthew, Jesus stands firmly in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, many of whom were rejected and put to death.

Reflection

Finding real life

What a contrast there is between last Sunday's Gospel, when Peter was proclaimed the 'rock' on which the church would be built, and this Sunday when Jesus rebukes him for being a difference kind of rock - a 'stumbling block'!

When Jesus starts to talk about his suffering, death and resurrection, it's more than Peter can cope with - "This must not happen to you." This is exactly what Jesus was afraid of when he bound the disciples to silence about his true identity in last Sunday's Gospel. He was afraid that they would think of him as a warrior leading a victorious uprising against the Roman occupation of Israel - the popular image of the Messiah in Jesus' day.

Last week, Jesus proclaimed Peter 'blessed' because of his God-given insight into who Jesus is. Now Peter is 'Satan' because it is not God-given insight, but human thinking, he now shows.

Can we cope with having a shepherd-king rather than a warrior-king as our God and Saviour?

Jesus then starts talking about the call of discipleship. First of all, it has to be freely chosen. Discipleship is not something which can be forced on people. Second, the disciple must learn to put God and others at the centre of his/her life. This is not some pious idea. People in true, loving relationships, especially parents, know exactly what it means to 'take up your cross' and follow Jesus by doing loving acts of service everyday - to put another's needs ahead of your own. Such people save their lives by living human life as Jesus taught and as God intended.

Those who set about trying to 'save' their lives through power, wealth and a comfortable life eventually lose the little life they have. Nothing can prevent the moment of death when all that is stripped away and becomes meaningless. That's what the lines about gaining the whole world and ruining your life mean.

At the end of the day, the faithfulness of the disciple, shown in loving deeds, will be rewarded. What Jesus says about discipleship is a very different way to live and seems totally opposite to the values of modern society where we think we are in control of our destiny; where life is about amassing wealth and living comfortably for ourselves rather than for others.