

Matthew: a saint for today

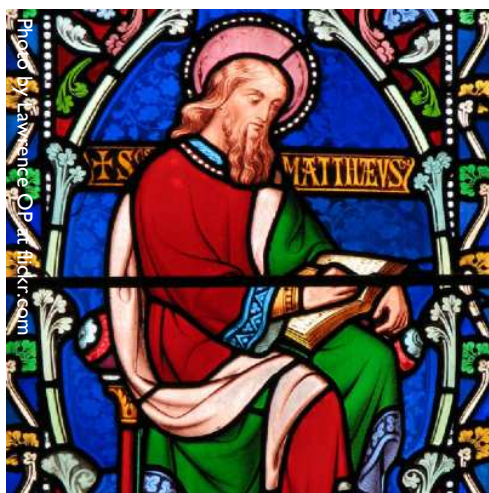
Peter Edmonds SJ

Peter Edmonds SJ explores the final four verses of the gospel according to St Matthew, whose feast we celebrated yesterday. How can our understanding of Matthew's account of Jesus' last words to his disciples – words through which Jesus continues to speak to the Church today – lead us to a renewed appreciation of the rest of the gospel?

The feast day of St Matthew on September 21 is a celebration not only of the apostle Matthew as a disciple and a model for imitation, but also of the gospel that bears his name. It is an invitation to us to take the gospel down from our shelves and read it for ourselves. It is true that there are libraries of books about Matthew and in the last few years several worthy and stimulating commentaries, up to three volumes in length, have become available,¹ so the non-specialist may well feel intimidated. But there is a quick way into this gospel and this is to begin with its ending, by concentrating on its final four verses. These verses tell us about the Risen Jesus, about his disciples, and the mission that he gave them. They have an easy application for today. We may approach them and unpack their meaning by asking simple questions about the context in which they appear, the setting of the scene, the people who take part and the words they speak. A principle to bear in mind is that the best commentary on a gospel is often the gospel itself: one part of it is illuminated by other parts.

Firstly, we must read the text itself:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' (Matthew 28:16-20 - NRSV translation)



The Context

These four verses form a solemn conclusion to the gospel of Matthew. We may contrast them with the conclusions of the other three gospels.

Mark has two conclusions. Its original conclusion was probably the flight and fear of the women who had come to the tomb to anoint Jesus (Mark 16:8). Early readers and copyists of the gospel were uncom-

fortable with this ending, so they provided another, which has been accepted as canonical scripture (Mark 16:9-20). But it tells us practically nothing that we do not know from the other gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Luke ends his gospel with various stories about the appearances of Jesus in Jerusalem and its environs. It was fitting for him that his gospel should end where it began, in Jerusalem (Luke 24:52). John has two endings: in chapter 20, he reports appearances of Jesus in Jerusalem and in chapter 21, he tells of appearances in Galilee. Again, most experts consider that the gospel originally ended with the solemn words that conclude chapter 20. Matthew's ending is therefore unique. It is one of his special contributions to the gospel tradition and particularly to our understanding of the Easter events.

The Setting

This final scene of the gospel is set in Galilee. All the gospels agree that Jesus had a Galilaeen ministry, but only Matthew explains this with a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, which concludes, 'Galilee of the Gentiles, the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow

of death, a light has dawned' (Matthew 4:16). This reference to Gentiles fits in with other references to Gentiles in Matthew: the Gentile Magi were the first to worship Jesus (2:11); after the cure of the servant of the centurion, Jesus exclaimed how many will come from the east and the west and eat with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (8:11); it was the Gentile wife of Pilate who warns her husband to 'have nothing to do with that innocent man' (27:19). It is no a surprise that a gospel which began with a story about Gentiles, also finished with one.

Matthew adds that the scene took place on a mountain, but we are not told its name. The mention of mountains set bells ringing for those who lived in a biblical culture. The great mountain in biblical history was Mount Sinai, the place where God had spoken with Moses and given him the Law as a way of life (Exodus 19). It is no accident that Matthew, as the most Jewish of the gospels, has the most references to mountains in its narrative. In it we read of the mountain of temptation (4:3), the mount of the great Sermon (5:1), the mountain to which Jesus withdrew after the feeding of the 5000 (14:23), the mount where he went to heal and teach the crowds near the Sea of Galilee (15:29), the mount where he was transfigured (17:1) and the Mount of Olives where he went after the final Supper (21:30). Mountains for Jesus are holy places of activity and teaching.

The People

1. The Disciples

The first people mentioned in these verses are the eleven disciples. We know that Jesus chose twelve; we have been given their names (Matthew 10:2-4), but we know that one, Judas, has fallen away – in fact, he is already dead (27:5). But even among the eleven, there is division. Most worshipped, but some doubted. For Matthew, the disciples are a mixed group. A word which he alone of the gospel writers uses of them is *oligopistoi*, which means 'people of little faith'. This is the word Jesus used of Peter when he sank into the waves after he walked on the water (14:31). He applied it to all the disciples when they panicked in the boat during the storm (8:26). When he spoke to them in the Sermon on the Mount about God's care for his creatures, he challenged them as people of little faith (6:30). It is easy to identify the disciples of Jesus in

Matthew with the members of Matthew's community who were the first audience of the gospel. They too were a mixed group. Some were like the wise bridesmaids ready for the coming of the bridegroom (25:10) and some were like the good fish that the fishermen sorted after the catch (13:46). It would only be at harvest time that the crop would be sorted (13:30). Even today, the church does not consist only of saints.

The disciples, mixed group though they were, are given a commission. They had been given a commission before in this gospel when they were sent out with the instructions, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (10:6). Now their commission is extended to all the nations. Their task is threefold. First, they were to make disciples. A disciple is one who learns and accompanies the teacher; understanding is part of discipleship. In the explanation of the parable of the sower, the first item is a warning for those who do not understand, because then the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart (13:19). Secondly, they were to baptise in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These new disciples were to be inserted into the family of the Trinity. God in this gospel is often portrayed by Jesus as 'Father': he prays to God as his Father (11:25); he expects his followers also to address God as their Father (6:9). Those who belong to the church belong to the family of God. They have only 'one father, the one in heaven' (23:9). Thirdly, they were to teach all that Jesus had taught them. For the first time in this gospel, the disciples are commissioned as teachers. This is a formidable task, because this gospel is loaded with the teaching of Jesus which is systematically treated in five great discourses. We can imagine a member of Matthew's community, ambitious to become one of its teachers, being examined on the contents of these five discourses. Only when they could repeat the Sermon on the Mount (5:3-7:27), the mission discourse (10:5-42), the parables (13:3-52), the community discourse (18:2-35) and the discourse on the last days (24:4-25:46), would they qualify for their task.

2. Jesus

The most important character in these four verses is obviously Jesus himself. Jesus rarely speaks of himself in this gospel. Earlier he had disclosed his close relationship with his Father. 'No one knows the Son

except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.' (11:27). But now he makes the most dramatic claim of all to all authority in heaven and on earth. His words echo a passage from the book of Daniel about the son of man, a heavenly figure who came on the clouds to receive all dominion and authority from the Ancient of Days (Daniel 7:13). All those passages in the gospel in which Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man now come to their climax. At times he had referred to his earthly ministry (12:8), elsewhere to his time of suffering (17:12) and at other points to his final role as judge (24:37). Now Jesus speaks directly of himself, no longer using the coded language of the Son of Man.

One way in which the authority of Jesus is exercised comes across in the instructions he gives to his disciples, which we have already considered. They were to teach not what Moses had taught in the Law but what he himself has commanded. In the Sermon on the Mount, we learnt what this meant. Again and again, he referred to 'what was said to those of ancient times. . . But I say to you' (5:21-22). He was not abrogating this Law but bringing it to fulfilment: 'Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil' (5:17).

Jesus promises to be with his disciples 'always, until the end of the age'. Such a presence has been a theme of this gospel. It is only in Matthew that the name Emmanuel is given to Jesus. This was explained as meaning, 'God with us' (1:23). Jesus also referred to his continuing presence in his discourse on the church, where he promised that wherever two or three were gathered in his name, he would be in their midst (23:20). The point of his presence he has previously explained: 'Come to me, all you who are weary and have heavy burdens, and I will give you rest' (11:28). But this presence might manifest itself in surprising ways. In the final parable of his final discourse, about the sheep and the goats, he tells those who have cared for the hungry and the thirsty, the sick and the imprisoned, that they have in fact cared for him, because it was in the needy that his presence was to be found.(25:40)

'The end of the age' reminds us that for Matthew, the resurrection of Jesus was not the end of the story of Jesus but a beginning. Christian life would go on for

an undefined period until the 'second coming' or the 'parousia' of the Son of Man (25:31). Unlike Luke, Matthew wrote no 'Acts of the Apostles' but he does give hints in his gospel of what would happen in this earliest period of the church. The second part of the 'mission discourse' anticipates persecution from both Jew and Gentile (10:17-18) and divisions in families because of the gospel (10:21). The explanation of the parable of the sower warns of failure to understand, of faith that lacks roots, of the cares of the world and lure of wealth choking the gospel message (13:18-23). The parables of the final discourse give vivid pictures of foolish and wise bridesmaids, of talents used and talents neglected, lessons all designed to encourage faith and perseverance in the life of the church that would last from the resurrection to the second coming (25:1-30).

Conclusion

It is easy to place oneself on this final mountain of Matthew's gospel with the exalted Jesus and the excited disciples. Through these words, Jesus continues to speak to the church of today and reminds her of her mission. On this feast day of Matthew, we can be grateful for this gospel, which is truly the work of one who was a scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven who brought out of his treasure what is new and what is old (13:52). And having read the end of the gospel, it is now time to read it from the beginning. It could be a fruitful experience. 'This is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty' (13:23).

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¹ For example:

- W.D. Davies and Dale C.Allison, *Matthew*. (International Critical Commentary), 3 Volumes, T & T Clark, 1998, 1991, 1997 (Also available in an abridged one volume edition, *Matthew, A Shorter Commentary*, T & T Clark, 2004).
- Translated from the German: Ulrich Luz, *Matthew*, 3 volumes, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989, 2001, 2005.
- A very helpful one volume work, described as 'A contemporary interpretation for students and preachers, a resource for reflection and spiritual reading', is Brendan Byrne, S.J., *Lifting the Burden, Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press 2004