

# Introducing Matthew

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT, A, MATTHEW 24:37-44

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“Happy New Year!” is an appropriate opening for this homily. I say this because, as you know, and as you can see from the colors, this is the first Sunday of Advent, which, for Christians, begins a new church, or liturgical, year. We have calendar years, financial years, school years, and so on. So, too, we have our church year. And this less-than-world-shaking fact gives me an opportunity, on this first day of our year, to share with you a rather pedantic classroom lesson as I set you up for what’s coming down the calendar pike. It’s not exactly thrilling but it’s enlightening.

Church years are on a three-year cycle, called, unimaginatively, Years A, B, and C. Each year is devoted to one of the synoptic gospel writers, those three gospel writers whose works are very similar to each other: Year A belongs to Matthew, Year B to Mark, and Year C to Luke. John’s gospel, being a different breed altogether, has at times some of its parts scattered among the other three.

Last year, you may recall, we were on Year C and so all year we read from Luke’s gospel. Today, our churchy New Year’s Day, we begin all over again and start with Year A and that means Matthew’s gospel. We’ll be hearing from him all this year till next Advent when it will be Mark’s turn.

So, our lesson for today: Matthew’s gospel. First, who is this Matthew, the one who wrote this second gospel, even though we always list him before Mark, who really wrote the first gospel? The answer is, we don’t know. We don’t know for sure who any of the gospel writers were, even though tradition has given us the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. None of the gospels themselves claim authorship or identify its author.

But we’re fairly sure our Matthew of the gospel wasn’t the apostle Matthew. Why? Well, because he copied so extensively from Mark’s gospel,

maybe ninety percent of it, supplementing and smoothing it out here and there. The point is, if Matthew had been the apostle Matthew, an eyewitness to Jesus, why would he not tell the story in his own words? Why copy almost entirely from someone who *wasn't* an eyewitness? He copies some 600 of the 660 verses of Mark, which means he simply retells Mark's story for his time and place. No, this Matthew is somebody else.

One thing for sure: it seems that Matthew, whoever he was, was a Jew who had accepted the form of Judaism that Jesus represented. Since he mentions it in his gospel, Matthew evidently wrote after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. Most likely he wrote his gospel around the year 85, some fifty years or more removed from Jesus, outside of Palestine. Antioch in Syria, which had a large Jewish population, is a good guess. And he wrote his revised Mark gospel for his very troubled community. It seems it was made up of Jews for Jesus like himself and Gentile converts to the Judaism of Jesus, consisting of men and women of various civic and ethnic standing. A mixed group.

Matthew's task was a very tough and delicate one: how to reconcile two expressions of Judaism? On the one hand, there were those members of Matthew's community who, like himself, were Jews and proud of it. On the other hand, there were those members of the Pharisees who were Jews and proud of it. But now the situation was different. Formerly many variant strains of Judaism were easily tolerated: the Sadducees, the Zealots, the Essenes, the Pharisees, and so on. They were all part of the mix.

However, after the tragic fall of Jerusalem, when the dust finally settled, the only ones left standing were the Pharisees and the Nazarenes, as the small group of Jesus' followers were called. The Pharisees, regrouping, said that if we're to survive as Jews, we need a united front. Maybe at one time we could tolerate that Jesus group but not now. They've got to go. They're divisive. They are disloyal to the Mosaic tradition. So the Pharisees issued a proclamation saying that the renegades "must be rooted out and the Nazarenes perish and blotted out from the book of life." So, to put it mildly, there was bad blood between the two groups. We see this tension in all those nasty confrontations between the Pharisees and Jesus that Matthew has in his gospel.

But you can sense Matthew's trying hard to counter this excommunication, saying in effect, hey, fellow Jews, we're really as Jewish, as loyal, as you

are. Jesus isn't a novelty. No, no, he is an observant Jew fulfilling the law, not abrogating it. Jesus is, in fact, more Jewish than you because he is the authentic interpreter of the Jewish law. Why, more than that, Jesus is another Moses. Look, he too, like Moses, goes down to Egypt. He too escapes a king's wrath, King Herod, who like Pharaoh, kills infants. Jesus also spends forty days in the desert as Moses spent forty years. Like Moses, he even teaches from the mountaintop. You know: those famous beatitudes.

No doubt about it, Matthew is striving to say in his gospel that Jesus stands in an authentic strain of Judaism. Why, he is Son of David, the Jewish Messiah. And accordingly Matthew peoples his gospel with stories of noble and faith-filled Jews. But, for all of this, he still he can't hide the tensions. As the year goes on you'll hear about these hostilities; for example, the famous litany of woes Jesus utters against the Pharisees, which is really Matthew scolding them.

Matthew is also anxious to score another point. He does this by giving us examples of non-Jews who show exemplary faith: the women in Jesus' ancestry, the Magi, the Roman centurion, a Canaanite woman, a Roman soldier. Matthew is saying, Jesus is being faithful to the tradition of Abraham, through whom, God said, all peoples would be blessed. So Jesus, true heir of Abraham, has come for all, Jews and Gentiles alike.

Finally, sensing they're in it for the long haul, Matthew is interested in organization and he is the only evangelist who uses the word church. Peter has a prominent role in this church, this gathering of Nazarenes. He is in fact the rock on which the church is built. Matthew also places heavy emphasis on leadership and discipleship. True disciples are those who hear the words of Jesus and keep them. Matthew's concerns are order, harmony, discipleship, and a Jesus whose parables of invitation and mercy are open to all.

And, interestingly, while in Matthew's gospel and in the other gospels only male disciples are called, entrusted with mission, and play main roles, he preserves a more inclusive tradition where women also play a significant roles in the life of Jesus, starting with the four women in Jesus' genealogy: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. Then there are Mary, Simon Peter's mother in-law, the Canaanite woman, the woman who anoints Jesus' feet, Pilate's wife, the women disciples who witnessed the crucifixion and burial

after the men had betrayed, denied, and deserted Jesus, and the two Marys first to see the risen Jesus.

So, what can you expect from Matthew this year? Four things: lots of references to the Old Testament as he tries to validate Jesus as a true Israelite; lots of conflicts with the Pharisees, reflecting the tensions of his time; lots of calls to discipleship to shore up his beleaguered brethren, and, finally, lots of Jesus' parables to bring home his points. Stay tuned.

Speaking of which, to awaken you and give you a change of pace, let me end with a Matthew-type story:

Once upon a time God and a man are walking down the road. The man asks God, "What is the world like?"

God replies, "I'm thirsty and I can't talk when I'm thirsty. If you could go and get me a drink of cool water, we could discuss what the world is like. There's a village not that far away. Go and get me a drink."

So the man goes to the village and knocks at the first house he sees. A lovely young woman opens the door. He is captivated and stammers but finally manages to say, "I need a glass of cool water."

"Why, of course," she says, smiling a dazzling smile, "but it's noon time and happens to be my lunch time. Would you care to stay for some food first?"

"Well, I *am* hungry," he says, looking over her shoulder at a well-set table. "And your offer is most kind."

He goes in and door closes behind him.

Thirty years go by. The man who wanted to know what the world was like and the woman who offered him food have married and raised five children. He is a respected merchant and she is an honored member of the community. One day a terrible storm comes in off the ocean and threatens their lives. The merchant cries out, "Help me, O God!" A voice from the midst of the storm says, "Where is my cup of cool water?"

That's an updated version of Matthew's chapter twenty-five where Jesus says that if you were too distracted or busy to give drink to the thirsty or food to the starving or comfort to the sick, you didn't give these things to him. Bad news. Bad discipleship. Jesus' ringing comment? "Not every one who calls out 'Lord! Lord!' will be saved, but only those who do the will of my heavenly Father."

Welcome to the year of Matthew.