

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

MATTHEW

22nd February 2015

Matthew 3:13-4:11

Deuteronomy 18:15-19

I wonder what was the last thing that you sat down to write, to write either by hand or on a keyboard? Maybe it was a letter, or a brief note to yourself or to someone else. Maybe it was an email, formal or informal. Maybe you were struck by the muse and wrote a poem or a song, or maybe a story. Perhaps you are writing an article for a magazine or a journal, or have even embarked upon a book. Stranger things have happened. Whatever it was, you would, very likely without thinking about it, adapt your style of writing and the way you wanted to present your material, depending on who was the intended reader. If you were writing to Danny Alexander about some matter of local importance, you wouldn't begin your letter "Hi, Danny-boy, how's it gaun?" At least not if you wanted him to do something or to reply. MPs have their standards! But if you were sending a text to a friend, you might miss out half the words, or the letters in some words and still expect to be understood and forgiven.

After reading all about Paul and all we have of his letters, this week our Bible study has had us read the Gospel traditionally given the name of Matthew. There is a difference between the literary form of a letter and that of a gospel. There is a lot in Matthew, stories, sayings, parables, so when I thought about what we might read in our service, I was spoiled for choice. However Lent began this week, so that was one reason to choose to read about Jesus' baptism and temptations in the wilderness. Another, stronger reason was because they illustrate one of the major themes of Matthew's Gospel.

Of course Matthew wanted to write an account of Jesus' life when he wrote his gospel, but he wanted to do more than that. All of the gospel writers were more than historians. A historian, ideally, just presents the facts, although actually there are usually so many facts about almost anything, so that your historian has to be selective, and the facts that she selects gives some idea of her commentary on the events she is reporting. It was just the same with the gospel writers. John actually says at the end of his gospel that there was so much else that could be said about Jesus that he didn't think the world itself could contain the books! So with Matthew, he wanted to tell the story of Jesus, but he also had something to say about Jesus, and he chose his stories and pieces of teaching carefully, and then arranged them carefully so that his message about Jesus would be just as clear to his readers as his account of Jesus' life. At least it would be to his first readers, who were not dividing up the text into short chunks called chapters, nor shorter bites called verses, and who were from a Jewish background, with a comprehensive knowledge of Hebrew scripture and its ordering.

What Matthew wanted to tell these Jewish readers was that Jesus was the Messiah, and specifically he was the one promised by Moses to be like him - only better. Moses doesn't say "only better" but Matthew makes it clear that this is what he thinks. Jesus is like Moses, only better. He is also like the people of Israel, only better, indeed perfect.

Think about it. Matthew begins by showing Jesus human connection to the ancient fathers of Israel. And then one of the first things that happens to the infant Jesus is that he is threatened by a wicked ruler, who wants to wipe out the baby boys, just as the Pharaoh sought the lives of the boys in Moses' time; but just like Moses, Jesus escapes. Indeed he escapes to Egypt, so that he has that connection to the story of Moses and of the people of Israel as well.

The order of events is not identical: after all, Matthew is writing a life story, and some things have to be told in the proper order. For instance he really can't put Jesus in the wilderness before he has mentioned his baptism, because it didn't happen that way and it would make any sense. But Jesus does spend time in the wilderness, forty days, to echo Moses' forty years.

He goes there after his baptism. This is full of significance in terms of the parallel story. First of all, the baptism is like the covenant made with the people of Israel. God names them as his own and says that he is pleased with them. And he does just the same for Jesus at his baptism, as we saw a few weeks ago. In the story of the Exodus, what happens next is that the people are tested and fail. They become impatient with Moses and make the golden calf to worship it. What happens next in the story of Jesus is that he is tested and succeeds. He is tempted in the wilderness, tempted to be impatient, to take a quick and easy, painless route to glory and power, but he does not give in. And then think where the baptism takes place - in the river Jordan. The Jordan is the river the people of Israel had to cross, following Joshua, Moses' successor, to enter the promised land. Jesus has crossed it too. Jesus who is Moses' ultimate successor, and he too will lead people into a new promised land.

Matthew makes other parallels in his gospel with the life and inheritance of Moses. For instance, Moses is said to have given the people the books of the Law, which is known as the Torah and divided into five books - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Matthew divides his gospel into five main sections about the life and teaching of Jesus, followed by the narrative of his death and resurrection. If there is a parallel with the life of Moses that Matthew can draw without distorting the facts, it seems that he will draw it. Except that when we come to the story of Jesus' transfiguration, (and Moses too was transfigured when he met with God, his face used to shine) because then Jesus and Moses meet face to face and it is clear who is the more important. Not Moses.

Matthew could just have begun his gospel by saying, "I am going to tell you the story of Jesus and he is far more important than Moses," but that would probably have lost him some of the audience he hoped to gain. Sometimes an argument is more persuasive if it is not laid out in words of one syllable, but left for people to discover or sense for themselves. It is most powerful when it has got under your skin, into your way of thinking without you even realising it. Matthew wanted to persuade Jews and Christians from a Jewish background that Jesus was not

just an important prophet, but that he was more than that. He wanted them to see that Jesus was the one who re-made all of Israel's flawed history.

Matthew, you see, was not just writing history, he was writing a gospel. A gospel is good news. A gospel is history to tell God's good news, and try to convince people that it is for them, and that it is worth not only hearing, but believing and taking to heart. And in what Matthew says, in the parallels and improvements on the Moses story, which fill his thoughts and his writings, he is pointing us to something new. This is the part of the new covenant with God. This is not just a continuation of the old, old story, but a whole new departure in the story of God's dealings with his people. This is good news for the world, not just for the Jews.

If our readings in Paul's letters and the book of Acts has taught us anything, it is that there were many Jews who wanted to follow Jesus but did not want to give up their Jewish heritage, especially their Jewish superiority as *the* chosen people. Matthew wants to tell them the good news, the good news that God is bigger than what they had thought in the past. He has the good news that Jesus does not come only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He has the good news that a whole new covenant has been forged, better in every way than that forged with Moses and the people of Israel in the wilderness. Knowing your history is not enough. Keeping the law is not enough and is not possible anyway. Jesus has come to fulfil the law in his own person, to become in himself the way, the narrow way, which leads to God.

It is that wonder, that excitement, that joy which so many of the early Christians whose writings we have give out. Excitement. Is that how you understand our faith? Does it get you excited? Do you discover new things often in your life lived with God? I know that no one can live life on tiptoe with excitement every moment of every day, but do you have times when you are filled with wonder as you reflect on the love of God for his world and for you; when you think about what it means that Jesus is the Saviour of the world and your Saviour; when you are motivated to respond to God in glad service? That was what Matthew thought the response to the gospel would be and should be. The tragedy is that some of us so rarely think about our faith and the wonder of the good news about Jesus, that when we do, it's all old hat. I think that those of us who are following our Bible study programme of reading and reflecting have discovered that the more we think about our faith, our gospel, the more time we spend on it, the more we find and the greater our excitement.

So I hope that if you haven't been doing it already, you will go and read Matthew's gospel. He wrote it for you to read. Read it and see if you don't find things you haven't seen before, see if you don't find things that make you wonder if you agree with that, see if you don't get Matthews message that Jesus is better. And read it to discover if there is not excitement in your faith that you have yet to know. Amen.

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