

Why Matthew's Gospel is still best

Back in April I explained some of the reasons why Matthew's Gospel is my favourite of the four. You may recall that I said things about the structure of the Gospel and why it works as a book that can be read from end to end. I highlighted some of the main building blocks that Matthew includes; and his interest in structuring his book in five main sections to resemble the Torah, the book of the Law, so that his Jewish audience might gain a greater sense of Jesus' authority. And I talked a little about one of the most compelling biblical characters, Peter; that most fallible of disciples, whom Jesus nevertheless singles out for a particular role in taking his work forwards.

As I reflect on why I find Matthew's Gospel such a fine work, rejoicing in its structure, its organisation, the way the themes are skilfully handled and developed, I can't help feeling that maybe my response has as much to do with the sort of person that I am and the background I bring with me, as it has to do with the Gospel itself. As you may know, I'm a consulting engineer by day, and I spend a lot of my life trying to take complex ideas, breaking them down into their constituent parts and presenting them in ways that are logical, consistent and lead to a clear conclusion. And as I say that, you can perhaps see why it is that I'm likely to be drawn to Matthew's craftsmanship in the way he has handled his material.

But even I find I need more than Matthew if I am going to get a fuller, more rounded picture of Jesus and his message for all God's people. There are times when I find I need to move beyond organisation and structure, to read poetry and big ideas. We're nearing the time of year when another of my favourite Gospel passages, John's Prologue, will be read in our churches. And I find myself turning to John whenever I want to engage with the mysteries that lie at the heart of our faith, to read Jesus' words interpreted with immense scholarship and insight, and to hear a Gospel account that puts Jesus firmly in control from start to finish.

One of my favourite New Testament scholars is Tom Wright, the author of numerous commentaries and introductions to the Gospels. In a tremendous book that first got me interested in delving into the Gospels and their background, "The Original Jesus", Wright gives a brief introduction to each of the four Gospels and draws out some of their distinctions. He highlights the "Jewishness" of Matthew's Gospel, the transforming power of John's words...and then offers a stunning description of the shorter, darker Gospel of Mark. "Mark is the shortest, the darkest, the strangest of the Gospels. It's the Gospel for the cynic-in-a-hurry... Mark tells you, breathlessly, that this is urgent and important and you'd better listen carefully." Which is a far cry from the big, organised Gospel of Matthew, or the poetic and mysterious Gospel of John. But Mark's Gospel is powerful in unpacking in compressed form the truth of Jesus' identity; it has also been referred to as the story of Christ's passion, with an introduction. Such is the emphasis it places on the last days of Jesus' earthly life and the nature of his sacrifice. And then there's the Gospel of Luke; rich in its humanity, written principally for an educated Graeco-Roman audience, but pulling no punches in explaining the impact that Christ's message will have in the world.

Tom Wright gives a wonderful summary of the differences between the four Gospels, when he says “John’s Gospel is designed to bring you to your knees in wonder, love and praise. Luke’s is meant to make you sit up and think hard about Jesus as Lord of the whole world. Matthew’s is like a beautifully bound book which the Christian must study and ponder at leisure. Mark’s is like a hastily printed revolutionary tract, read by torchlight, and whispered to one’s co-conspirators.”

When you put it like that, reading and engaging with the Gospels and their writers is one of the most exciting aspects of our faith and one which is made possible by the wealth of scholarship that has gone into interpreting and reinterpreting the texts down the ages. We can marvel at all the Gospel writers’ artistry, their skills in arranging their material for the specific audiences they have in mind, and we can ponder what we learn from the similarities, but also the differences, between them.

But we also do well to remember that what we bring to the Gospels is ourselves. We bring our own passions and personalities, and in the richness of what’s on offer we will never fail to find words to encourage, to challenge and to inspire us.

For me, though, it’s the combination of the big story, the clear structure, and the message of Christ sending us out into the world that will always draw me back to Matthew. And that’s why Matthew’s Gospel is *still* best!

Revd Jonathan Hedgecock
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