

## Why Matthew's Gospel is best

What, I wonder, do you look for in a good book? What are the most important ingredients in the recipe? A good story, one that keeps you wondering what's going to happen next.

Something that's well written, maybe, that doesn't annoy you by jumping from one idea to the next in a random way – something, perhaps, that's well developed and leads you from A to B. A story – if it's a story – with rounded and believable characters. Or if it's a biography that you're reading, something that gives you a real insight into the central character, not necessarily by telling you things in a clever way, but which shows you the way they thought, how they reacted to those around them, and where they came from.

And perhaps, most importantly of all, if you're going to take the trouble to read a book from cover to cover, you would quite like it to stay with you in some way – to work its magic on your imagination and understanding as much by *how* it tells its story as by *what* it tells you.

Well, for all of those reasons, I believe Matthew's Gospel to be a very good book indeed. Hence my highly subjective but heartfelt statement at the start, that I think Matthew's Gospel is best.

Why I like Matthew so much begins at the beginning – that very long opening section of his Gospel which presents the genealogy of Jesus. This makes it very clear that we, the readers, need to understand where Jesus has come from; that his pedigree is impeccable, and Matthew, with all his skill and logic, can prove it. Matthew, we might say, sets out his stall right from the start: he's going to demonstrate to us that Jesus is the Messiah, the longed for saviour of the Jewish people. And the next thing he needs to do is to show us that Jesus is mighty both in word and in deed. But first, there's the story of Jesus' birth – and Matthew, alone amongst the Gospel writers, is the one who features the arrival of the Kings, the wise men, who demonstrate by their kneeling before Jesus that he is indeed the child "born to be king of the Jews".

And so the story unfolds. Jesus' ministry begins, and Matthew presents us with the first block of Jesus' teaching, in the Sermon on the Mount. And it's here that Matthew's extraordinary craftsmanship begins to reveal itself. Matthew's Gospel is perhaps the most well organised of the three synoptic accounts. Indeed, some have suggested that this could support the idea that the Gospel was written by the disciple Matthew, the tax collector – because tax collectors need, after all, to like order and tidiness. But whatever the origins of the author Matthew, there's no doubting the incredible order in his account. Five blocks of Jesus' teaching are presented – if you like the idea of this sort of structure, you might want to look the sections up:

- Chapters 5 – 7: teaching about Discipleship (including the Sermon on the Mount itself)
- Chapter 10: teaching about Mission and the sending out of the disciples
- Chapter 13: teaching in Parables
- Chapter 18: teaching about living in Community
- Chapters 24-25: teaching about the end times, or Eschatology

So Matthew presents Jesus up a mountain, delivering God's teaching...and he presents that teaching in five blocks. And to Matthew's Jewish readership, those five blocks and the imagery of the mountain will strike a very strong chord indeed: Jesus is being likened to Moses, receiving the law on Mount Sinai. And this authority of Jesus, which Matthew holds in such high regard, and is so keen to convey to his readers, was very important to the community for whom Matthew was writing. As Jewish Christians, they were trying to establish their identity as separate from the synagogue system, but nevertheless to remember their rich heritage. So these sorts of resonances were crucial to them, to encourage them as they sought to work out how to live faithful lives, based on the teaching of Jesus but acknowledging where they've come from.

The call to faithful discipleship is a recurring theme in Matthew's Gospel, but for Matthew discipleship is an enterprise to be undertaken with realism and a recognition that all of us are fallible human beings. This is captured particularly in Matthew's portrayal of Peter, the most fallible of disciples (remember his three denials before the cock crows? See Matthew 26:69-75). Despite his many failings, Matthew consistently treats Peter as the "first among equals" of the disciples. Only Matthew brings us the story of Peter attempting to walk on water like Jesus (Matthew 14:28-31), and his instant failure...until, that is, he asks Jesus for help. At which point the wind drops, the waves subside, and Peter and the other disciples see Jesus for who he really is: "Truly you are the Son of God."

I hope I'm beginning to show you some of the reasons why I find Matthew's Gospel such a compelling read. I may have chance later in this series of journal entries to say some more about the riches that lie within this best of Gospels. But for now, as we prepare to celebrate the joy of Christ's resurrection once again, let's pause on the promise of Jesus with which Matthew closes his Gospel, to encourage us in our attempts to live up to our calling as Jesus' disciples of today: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

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