

“YOU’VE GOT THE TIME 1 – MATTHEW’S GOSPEL”

Matthew 1:1-6; 28:16-20

Last week, you may recall, Liz introduced the programme in which we’re hoping as many as possible of you will participate between now and the beginning of Advent. Entitled *You’ve Got The Time*, it’s a structured way of listening to or reading through the whole New Testament in forty days. If you haven’t yet signed up, it’s not too late, so talk to Liz or myself after the service. If you have signed up, you’ll be aware, I hope, that we’re spending most of this week in Matthew’s Gospel, reading through it in five days. So this morning I just want to say a few words about it that might help you as you make your way through it.

As I’m sure you know, Matthew is the first of four stories of Jesus’ life: it’s not necessarily the first to be written, but it is the first of the four “gospels” to appear in our Bibles. It’s basically a biography of Jesus, including the things that Matthew feels are important and leaving out those things that he obviously feels we can do without (that includes, of course, pretty well all of his childhood and youth). That’s the way with all biographies – indeed, all books, really. Because, like any book, this gospel of Matthew was written at a particular point in history, in a particular context and for a particular audience.

Now, I’m not going to go into all the details this morning, nor go through all the arguments for and against, but the majority of scholars and writers down through the centuries agree that Matthew wrote this book round about 50AD. It was just a couple of decades after Jesus had left this earth to return to heaven, so there were still plenty of people around who remembered him and who could recall what he had said and done. And remember, in those days, when people didn’t rely on writing very much – no newspapers, few books, a largely illiterate population – they set much more store on the accuracy of their oral histories. It draws on his own experience of being a disciple of Jesus (he’s the person Jesus called in 9:9) and also very much on Mark’s written account – much of Mark’s gospel is included in Matthew’s. So that means that Matthew’s account will be pretty accurate, especially as there were still people around who could have disproved it if they’d wanted to.

And knowing that it was written in 50AD means that we can also know what was going on in Palestine when Matthew was writing. He was living in a country that was under foreign occupation, part of the mighty Roman Empire. It was a time when there was a very strong sense of opposition to the Romans and for many people that took the form of increased religious observance, especially amongst the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders. But it was also a time when Christianity was starting to grow. More and more people – although still a very small minority – were deciding to follow the way of Jesus Christ and the fledgling churches in Jerusalem and other towns were seeing increased numbers.

It’s for those people that Matthew is writing this gospel. It’s a way of reminding them of Jesus’ life and teaching and a means of setting down the stories and doctrine at the heart of their new faith. But most of the Christians at this time were still Jewish in background. Things hadn’t really got going quite as fast in the Gentile world, although there were certainly a few Gentile Christians and Gentile churches in the eastern Mediterranean by now. The gospel was originally written in Greek, the *lingua franca* of the time (as Latin was later and English is today), so it was accessible to Jews and Gentiles alike, but there are some very Jewish features to the book.

So we know when and where this book was written and we’ve touched on why Matthew wrote it. There are two main reasons why Matthew wrote as he did. Firstly, as we’ve said, this was aimed mainly at Jewish people who had become Christians and it’s a kind of demonstration of the truth that Jesus was the Messiah. Matthew includes an awful lot of quotations from the Old Testament and frequently draws his readers’ attention to parallels between Old Testament stories and prophecies and their fulfilment in the life of Jesus. He kicks off with that long genealogy – to which we shall return in a few moments – and peppers the story of Jesus’ birth with quotations from and references to the Old Testament, which Jewish reader

would have immediately recognised. And all through the gospel, right up to the time of Jesus' death, Matthew keeps referring to the ways in which Jesus is obviously the promised Messiah or Christ who is so often mentioned in the Jewish Scriptures.

In fact, many scholars think that the gospel is structured in such a way as to parallel parts of the Old Testament itself. The book is written around five great discourses, or sermons, which some see as a deliberate attempt to mirror the five Books of the Law with which the Old Testament begins. Matthew also makes great use of the numbers three, five and seven, which have a lot of significance in the Old Testament. It is a thoroughly Jewish book.

But a second reason behind the writing of the gospel is to help people see that the good news of Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ, is not just for the Jewish people. If you read through Luke's account of the Early Church in *Acts*, you'll be aware that there was a certain amount of tension at one point when the Gentiles started to believe and the Jewish Christians weren't too sure about allowing them into the church. So Matthew helps to pave the way for a truly universal church by his references to non-Jewish people – and, indeed, non-religious Hebrews. The opening story, that of Jesus' birth, sees the new Messiah worshipped by outcast shepherds, and Magi, Wise Men, who came from a very non-Jewish background. And in *13:38*, when Jesus is explaining one of his parables, he tells his disciples that "*the field is the world*" – he is talking about all peoples, not simply the Jewish people.

And that, I believe, is the main thrust of this Gospel. Clearly Jesus is at the very heart of it and it is an account of his life and teaching. There's no doubt that the subject is the promised Messiah and the Saviour of the world. But Matthew is keen to get his readers to see the universality of God's love as expressed in Jesus, not only in terms of peoples and nations, as we've just seen, but also in terms of time. Let me explain.

We read from the beginning and the end of this book just now. The beginning seems rather dry and boring – just a list of names. It's the kind of thing that is very easily parodied when people are wanting to take a humorous swipe at the Bible – in the older versions of the Bible it's the proverbial list of "*begats*". For most of us today these names mean nothing. If you've read through the Old Testament you may recognise a few names. If you've studied the Old Testament, then you'll be able to place the names in some sort of context. But for most of us, it's just a set of difficult to pronounce foreign names. For Matthew's first readers, however, this is a kind of time-line that takes Jesus back through the generations to Abraham, back to the beginning of their nationhood, back to the very beginning of their faith. Jesus is descended from Abraham, so he is a pretty authentic Jew. There can be no doubt about his heritage. And the story of Jesus begins at the very beginning of time as far as the Jewish nation is concerned, a religion that goes back to one man, back to the time when God set out his covenant with humanity, the time when he first declared his decision to renew his relationship with a fallen race.

But, despite the Jewish thread which runs through the genealogy, you'll notice a few names that maybe you wouldn't expect to be there. There are several non-Jewish people in the list – and several women! There's Rahab, the woman who came from Jericho, a Canaanite and, very probably, a prostitute. There's Ruth, a woman from Moab, way outside the usual boundaries of the Jewish people. Even here, where Matthew is stressing Jesus' Jewish roots, he is also showing that God's love is for all people and includes those of every nation.

But we also read from the end of the book, the last few sentences of the final chapter. Jesus, the thoroughbred Jew, the promised Jewish Messiah, whose story begins at the beginning of God's covenant with humanity through Abraham, is saying his final farewell to his followers, to those who have recognised his authority and divinity and who are to continue his mission in the world. And what does Jesus say to them? He commissions them to go off and spread the word, share the gospel, make disciples "*of all nations*". Jesus himself is telling them that this isn't just a Jewish thing. This isn't something to be confined to one small nation and its religious fanatics. This is a message for all peoples. Without that we

wouldn't be here today. Without that Christianity would be very much a minority religion rather than the faith which is followed by more people in the world today than any other.

And this same Jesus who brought fulfilment to a story which began with one man in one nation, whose words and deeds are to be proclaimed to everyone on earth, this Jesus whose story began at the beginning, will go on making his presence felt until the very end of time. He promises his followers that he will be with them "*always, until the very end of the age*". The story which is universal in scope as far as people are concerned, is also universal in terms of time. Jesus is the embodiment of the eternal God, whose love has been demonstrated to humanity from the very beginning and who will go on being active until the very end.

You see, Matthew's gospel, which was written to encourage and teach the fledgling church of Jewish Christians in first century Palestine, is also a huge encouragement to Gentile Christians in twenty-first century Lichfield. This Jesus, foretold from the very beginning is still active in our lives today – and will go on being active as long as time continues. This isn't some esoteric biography of a wandering Palestinian preacher from twenty centuries ago. This is the powerful and empowering gospel of a divinely appointed Messiah who is still able to transform lives and fill us with awe and wonder today.

As you listen to Matthew's gospel this week, hear the amazing story of this amazing Messiah. Wonder at his birth, his teaching, his miracles, his sacrifice, his resurrection. But also believe that he can make a difference in your life. Hear his teaching and put it into practice. And praise God that you follow a Christ who is for all people for all time, who, just as surely as he helped those Palestinian people so many years ago, can help you in your situation here and now.

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Matthew is the first of the four "gospels" to appear in our Bibles. It's a biography of Jesus, written at a particular point in history, in a particular context and for a particular audience.

Most people agree that Matthew wrote this book round about 50AD, a couple of decades after Jesus had left this earth to return to heaven. It draws on his own experience of being a disciple of Jesus (he's the person Jesus called in 9:9) and also very much on Mark's written account – and there were still people around who could have disproved it if they'd wanted to, so it's pretty accurate. Matthew was living in a country that was under foreign occupation, but at a time when Christianity was starting to grow. It's for those new Christians that Matthew is writing this gospel – a way of reminding them of Jesus' life and teaching and a means of setting down the stories and doctrine at the heart of their new faith. The gospel was aimed mainly at Jewish people who had become Christians and it's a kind of demonstration of the truth that Jesus was the Messiah. The book draws very heavily on the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament – it is a thoroughly Jewish book.

But Matthew shows that the good news of Jesus is not just for the Jewish people. He helps to pave the way for a truly universal church by his references to non-Jewish people and non-religious Hebrews. The story of Jesus' birth sees the new Messiah worshipped by outcast shepherds, and Magi, who came from a very non-Jewish background. And in 13:38, when Jesus is explaining one of his parables, he tells his disciples that *"the field is the world"* – he is talking about all peoples, not simply the Jewish people.

Clearly Jesus is at the very heart of the book but Matthew is keen to get his readers to see the universality of God's love as expressed in Jesus, not only in terms of peoples and nations, as we've just seen, but also in terms of time. The book begins with a genealogy that takes Jesus back through the generations to Abraham, back to the beginning of their nationhood, back to the very beginning of their faith. Jesus is descended from Abraham, so he is a pretty authentic Jew. But there are several non-Jewish people in the list, too. Even here, where Matthew is stressing Jesus' Jewish roots, he is also showing that God's love is for all people and includes those of every nation.

At the end of the book, Jesus, the thoroughbred Jew, commissions his followers to go off and spread the word and make disciples *"of all nations"*. This isn't something to be confined to one small nation and its religious fanatics. This is a message for all peoples. And this same Jesus who brought fulfilment to a story which began with one man in one nation, whose words and deeds are to be proclaimed to everyone on earth, will go on making his presence felt until the very end of time. He promises his followers that he will be with them *"always, until the very end of the age"*. The story which is universal in scope as far as people are concerned, is also universal in terms of time.

Questions for discussion

1. Are you aware of the differences between the four gospels? How would you distinguish them from each other? Do you have a favourite? If so, why do you like that one?
2. What is your reaction to the opening section of the gospel (the genealogy)? Have you ever read it? Does it mean anything to you?
3. Why is it important for Matthew to demonstrate that Jesus is Jewish?
4. Why is it important for Matthew to show that Jesus did not come only for the Jewish people?
5. Do you have a favourite story or section from Matthew's gospel? What is it and why do you like it?

6. Why do you think it is important to read through the New Testament as a whole? If you don't think it's important, why not?