

Lectio Divina – 23rd Sunday of the Year A

Matthew's Gospel (in brief)

- Composed between 80-90 CE
- Author is anonymous, but named as 'Matthew the tax collector' by later tradition.
- Written in scholarly 'synagogue' Greek.
- Incorporates almost the entire Gospel of Mark, plus material from Q and material unique to Matthew.
- Structured around 5 major discourses (each ends with the phrase: "When Jesus had finished...."):
 1. Prologue – chapters 1- 4 Genealogy, Nativity & Infancy
 2. 1st: 5-7 Sermon on the Mount
 3. 2nd: 10 Missionary Discourse
 4. 3rd: 13 Parable Discourse
 5. **4th: 18 Community Discourse**
 6. 5th: 23-25 Apocalyptic Judgement Discourses
- May be a parallel for the 5 books of the Pentateuch - Jesus the new Moses.
- Jesus first words are 'to fulfil all righteousness'.
- A handbook for Church leaders to assist them in teaching and preaching, worship, mission and polemic.
- 2 broad categories: discourse & narrative.
- The only Gospel to explicitly mention the 'Church' – Matthew is theologian of the church.
- Initially addressed to a Jewish-Christian audience – only late in the Gospel is there openness to Gentiles.
- Names Jesus as 'Messiah' at the very beginning and throughout the Gospel.

Matthew 18:15-20 - things to notice

- Last week's Gospel came from the end of Chapter 16 of Matthew. The Lectionary omits all of chapter 17 and takes up the story again in the middle of chapter 18.
- We are still in the section, "God's Kingdom on Earth – the Church of Christ" and this Sunday's and next Sunday's Gospel are about the Church as community.
- The first 3 parts of Chapter 18 deal with the humility and attitude of service required of leaders in the community (1-5); Leaders who, by bad example, cause followers (little ones) to sin (6-9) and the need to seek out (rather than despise) those who have lost their way (the Parable of the Lost Sheep 10-14).
- Our Gospel this Sunday is headed: 'Trial Procedures' and contains a 3-step procedure for disciplining a recalcitrant brother.
- "If your brother..." – brother here means a fellow member of the Church (Christian community) and implies equality of membership in the community, not a hierarchy of 'leaders' vs 'followers'.
- Step 1: 'go and have it out with him alone' - private confrontation and dialogue which can lead to reconciliation ('you have won back your brother') or
- Step 2: 'If he refuses to listen, take two or three witnesses' – The aim of adding more witnesses is to convince the brother of the wrongness of his behaviour in the hope that then he will listen.
- Step 3: 'If he refuses to listen to these, report it to the community' – again in the hope that community discernment will help win back the brother. Notice that the aim is to 'win back' not to punish.
- Result if all 3 steps fail: 'treat him like a pagan or a tax collector'.
- There are 2 ways of interpreting this passage:
 - Classical: - let him be excommunicated, excluded from the community
 - More recent: - how did Jesus treat pagans and tax collectors? Matthew was a tax collector – Jesus called him to discipleship. At the end of the Gospel Jesus instructs the disciples not to reject the pagans but to invite them to become children of God. The parable of the Lost Sheep earlier in this Chapter seems to indicate that the church, following Jesus' example, should never give up on any of the sheep, especially the lost ones. Notice that next Sunday's Gospel, which is a continuation of this section, is the parable of the unforgiving servant.

- Binding and loosening: NOT about forgiveness of sins but about authoritative decision-making by the community. In Jewish circles binding and loosing referred to the authority to give moral and spiritual guidance about the Law. Notice that what was given to Peter two Sundays ago is now extended to the 'disciples' (not the 12 but the whole community). Community discernment is regarded as an expression of God's will. This is the theological basis of the biblical discernment model often employed in church matters.
- Similarly, if even 2 agree (are in harmony) to ask (pray for/about?) anything it will be 'granted' – but 'ratified' probably better expresses the sentiment here – Not talking about asking to win Lotto! Rather we are still dealing with serious things to do with the community and its members.
- 'For where two or three...' note the 'for' ('because') – Jesus is present among his disciples whenever they gather (for prayer, study, decision-making, discussion of community matters/concerns, etc). Such gatherings are therefore 'sacred'. The community and its members need to recognise the presence of Christ with them and among them.

Liturgical Setting for this Sunday

The first reading comes from the prophet Ezekiel and is about Ezekiel's responsibilities as a prophet in calling wicked people to repentance. If Ezekiel fails to call the wicked to repentance he will be held responsible for the man's death. If he does call to the wicked man and the wicked man does not repent then the man himself (not Ezekiel) shall die.

For Matthew, Jesus stands firmly in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, calling people to conversion through repentance – that is, through change of heart – away from sin and towards the love of God and neighbour.

The prophet's responsibility in this reading prepares us to reflect on the community's responsibility in the Gospel.

Reflection

Chapter 18 of St Matthew's Gospel is often referred to as the Sermon on the Church. It contains the teaching of Jesus about the life of the Christian community.

Today's readings detail a procedure for dealing with differences and disputes. It follows the Parable of the Lost Sheep which is concerned with seeking out and bringing back the one who gets lost.

In the same way, resolving disputes is not about being right but about conversion, reconciliation and the health of the whole community.

The three-stage process moves from individual dialogue to a small group trying to sort things out, to the whole community being involved in discernment and decision. In extreme cases the community may have to expel someone who will not listen, but it still has a responsibility towards that person to try to win them back. The ideas of forgiveness, mercy and compassion will be explored in the Gospel next Sunday.

The next verse about 'binding and loosing' extends the power of authoritative decision-making, given to Peter and the disciple-leaders in the Gospel of two Sundays ago, to the community. This decision-making follows community discussion and discernment about what is to be done.

If members of the community pray/ask/discern together, their prayer will be heard, even if only two pray. Wherever members of the community gather in the name of Jesus, he promises to be present with them.

Every Sunday we gather as the family of Jesus. We share a common responsibility for the lives and faith of one another and for our community as a whole. Our presence, example and prayer encourage and confirm the faith and life of Jesus among us.