

Lectio Divina – 24th 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 18:21-35 - things to notice

- Follows directly from last week's Gospel about how to deal with those who get lost on the journey, community discernment & decision-making and the presence of Jesus in the believing community.
- Story begins with a question from Peter: How many times must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?
- Only Matthew has this dialogue between Peter and Jesus.
- While it looks like we have shifted from 'community issues' (issues concerning an individual's relationship with the community) in last Sunday's Gospel to issues concerned with personal relationships, that is not the case.
- We need to remember that the context is that Peter *in his leadership role in the community* wants to know how many times he must exercise forgiveness for his brothers in the community. However, we can of course apply the parable to all our relationships.
- Peter has understood the point of last Sunday's Gospel – forgiveness and pastoral care, but wants to know the limits – is 7 times enough? The perfect number (7) suggests perfect forgiveness. So Peter has got it right.
- Jesus' reply 'seventy seven times' gives Peter's statement and 'unlimited/infinite' extension.
- A parable about the Kingdom follows with a big sting in the tail!
- 'Servants' includes slaves, but also includes almost everyone who is not the King. The servant who owes the King a huge amount of money is not likely to be the gardener! Very probably he is one of the King's ministers.
- 'Ten thousand talents' – means 'a vast sum'.
- The King acts in true Oriental fashion ordering the servant to be sold together with his wife and children to meet the debt. Those listening to Jesus would not have been astonished at hearing this – it is what happened in their society.
- The King is moved with compassion when the servant pleads with him and, remarkably, CANCELS the WHOLE DEBT (the vast sum)! Now, those listening to Jesus would have been astonished. It is so hard to imagine that any King would be so generous and compassionate as to forgo such a large amount of money.
- Note that Matthew often uses 'debt' in place of 'sin' – as he does in the Lord's Prayer: 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive those who are in debt to us'.

- The forgiven and reprieved servant meets another who owes him a small sum, physically assaults him (chokes him), rejects the other's pleas and has him thrown into prison which is effectively a life sentence – the man cannot get out until someone pays his debt – perhaps his relatives, friends, wife and children.
- Note that the forgiven servant remains unchanged by the mercy shown him by the King.
- Fellow servants are deeply distressed at what they and report it to the King.
- King summons servant. Note the King's words, "Were you not *bound*, then, to have compassion...."
- The sting: King hands servant over to the torturers, 'and that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from the heart'. This is a warning which underlines the importance of forgiveness with a threat. It is not a theological statement about the limits of God's kindness and mercy.

Liturgical Setting for this Sunday

The first reading comes from the book of Ecclesiasticus (the wisdom of Ben Sirach) and is a call to let go of resentment, anger, vengeance and hatred, and to forgive. Those who forgive will have their sins forgiven by God. That is how to live by the Covenant – that is, this is how to live as God's people – have the same mind and heart that God has.

Reflection

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

Our readings this week focus on resentment and anger, vengeance and compassion, sorrow and forgiveness. Not an easy thing to deal with. These readings can challenge us deeply.

There is no doubt that genuine forgiveness, forgiveness 'from the heart', is a real challenge. The more personally we are hurt by another person the harder it is to forgive them. Forgiveness is often more a *movement* than a *moment*. We usually come to forgiveness step by step over a long period of time.

If we can pray for those who hurt us we have already taken the first step on the road to forgiveness.

Forgiveness does not imply that what a person did was OK.

The biblical idea of forgiveness is built on the awareness of God's extraordinary compassion towards us; God's refusal to hold our past against us - the theme of today's first reading.

But that action of God must find its resonance in how we behave towards each other. It will only have that when we experience personally God's overwhelming love for us. That is what *binds* us into relationship with God and *binds* us into acting towards others as God has acted towards us. Out of that experience comes our awareness that God has forgiven us and we begin to feel grateful to God.

Jesus builds on that theme in his parable reply to Peter's question about forgiveness in the Gospel. For the disciple of Jesus, forgiveness must be real and genuine - from the heart and built on the awareness of God's compassion and mercy towards us. That is why Jesus includes: forgive us our debts as we have forgiven those who are in debt to us in his great prayer. If God has forgiven us, then we must forgive each other.

We don't live our Christian lives in some kind of fantasy-land filled with pious thoughts and lovely dreams. We live it in the often harsh realities and difficult situations that human beings encounter. *How* we live it will depend on the degree to which we have the same mind and heart as God.

Real life is the proving-ground of faith.