

“Who Jesus Is, According to Matthew”
Matthew 10:1,5-7,14 and 28:16-20
By John Gill

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
Guard the bed that I lie on:
Four corners to my bed
Four angels round my head,
One to watch and one to pray
And two to bear my soul away.¹

So went a nursery rhyme composed sometime in the mid 1600s. Throughout the centuries of the Christian faith, there has always been a fascination with the four Gospels, even to the point of personifying them as “angels” that God has sent to guide us and protect us – to “guard our bed, to watch and pray, and bear our souls away”.

Early on, Christian artists made a connection between the four Gospels and the “four living creatures” that surround the throne of God as we find them described in the writings of the prophet Ezekiel, and again in the Book of Revelation – winged creatures that take the form of a lion, a human being, an ox, and an eagle – each one identified by monks and mystics as representing one of the four Gospels. Last week, we considered Mark’s Gospel. Mark is traditionally depicted as a winged lion. Today we look at Matthew, whose symbol is a winged human, often appearing much like an angel. Artists depict Luke as a flying ox, and John as a soaring eagle – four creatures that together point people to the throne of God.

Why four Gospels. In the Bible, numbers have meanings. Four is the a complete number in scripture – it’s the number of creation: the four points of the compass, the four winds, the four seasons of the year² – so it is fitting that in our New Testament we have four tellings of the Gospel, all alike in many ways, but in other ways unique – every one of them like those four living creatures, a living breathing entity that points people to God – each one, a written text through which the Holy Spirit moves.

Today is the second sermon in a series I am preaching on “Who is Jesus” according to each of the four Gospels. It’s a fascinating subject, because every one of the Gospel-writers answers that question a little differently. Last week we looked at the Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the four to be written. Mark was written in a time when Christians were being persecuted greatly. So, in the way he tells the story of Jesus, Mark emphasizes that Jesus is the Suffering Servant of God, by whose willing sacrifice on the cross, you and I are offered eternal life. Mark was challenging those who first read his Gospel to remain faithful, in spite of the persecution they were facing – that if we suffer as Christ suffered, God will also grant us the victory and eternal life, just as he did for Jesus.

This morning, we turn our attention to the next Gospel to be written, the Gospel of Matthew. If you were in worship last Sunday, you will recall that I said that Matthew and Luke did not start from scratch when they wrote their Gospels. Each of them had in front of them a copy of Mark’s Gospel. We know this is true because they each include nearly all of Mark’s Gospel in their own telling of the story (much of it word-for-word), using Mark as a template in structuring their own books. To Mark’s text, Matthew and Luke added their own unique materials – teachings of Jesus, and stories about Jesus that were known to the Christian community, but had been left out of Mark. It is what Matthew and Luke chose to add to Mark’s version of the Gospel that reveals each one’s own unique perspective on who Jesus is.

So, who is Jesus, according to Matthew?

Before we look at Matthew's Jesus, let me say a word about the author of this Gospel. Church tradition tells us that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew was none other than the Apostle Matthew – one of the 12 Disciples chosen by Jesus. While this is an appealing assumption, many scholars believe that the Disciple Matthew was not the author. Nowhere in the text itself is there any mention that Matthew wrote the Gospel – in fact, there is nothing said about its authorship at all. One reason scholars have concluded that the author wasn't the Disciple has to do with the wholesale way in which he appropriates nearly all of Mark's material as his own. If the Disciple Matthew were the author (these experts ask) why does he rely so totally on Mark's Gospel to tell the story of Jesus? Mark was not an eyewitness to most of the events of Jesus' ministry, but the Disciple Matthew would have been. If Matthew were actually the author, he would have certainly retold those stories Mark tells in his own words. Instead, he differs to Mark as the authority.

Since the disciple Matthew probably wasn't the author, who was? Biblical scholars have to do a little sleuthing to look for clues about when and where this Gospel came into being. We don't have time to go into how they reached their conclusions, but here is what the evidence points to:

This Gospel, which somehow became associated with Matthew, was probably composed sometime after 85 A.D. by a Jewish Christian living in the area of Antioch (the area where Peter had lived and taught, a city that had a strong Christian community). In fact, the Bible tells us that it was in Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first called Christians.

This Gospel was written by a Jewish Christian of that community, intended for a Jewish audience. He would have been very familiar with the gospel Mark wrote some 15 or 20 years before. He accepted Mark's presentation about Jesus' ministry and life, but felt that it was not complete. So he added stories and teachings of Jesus that were known, but omitted by Mark.

Who was the audience this Gospel is addressed to? You'll recall that Mark had been written to give encouragement to followers of Jesus who were being persecuted, to bolster the faith of the church. Matthew seems to have been composed as an evangelistic tool Jewish Christians could use to try to convince Jewish skeptics that Jesus was indeed the Messiah foretold in Jewish scripture. If you read Matthew this week you couldn't miss it – over and over we read, "all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet," usually followed by the Old Testament prophecy, itself. The writer does this just to make sure the reader can't miss his point. Matthew goes out of his way to show the reader that Jesus fulfilled ancient prophecy.

So, who is Jesus, according the Gospel of Matthew? Matthew's Jesus is a very Jewish Jesus, whose life and ministry echoes the greatest figures of Jewish history. For instance:

Matthew presents Jesus as a **Son of Abraham** firmly rooted in the soil of Judaism. You may have noticed that both Matthew and Luke give the genealogy of Jesus – but in different ways. Luke waits until the third chapter of his Gospel to give the ancestry of Jesus, and traces his genealogy all the way back to Adam. But Matthew opens his Gospel with his version of the family-tree of Jesus, beginning with Abraham and proceeding forward through time in three cycles of 14 names each: From Abraham to Moses, from Moses to the Exile in Babylon, and from the Exile to Jesus – as if to drive home the point

that Jesus is the fulfillment of all that has come before – he is the culmination of salvation history. Yes, Matthew’s Jesus is a true Son of Abraham.

According to Matthew, Jesus is also **the New Moses**. It may not be by accident that the Gospel of Matthew falls into five sections or “discourses.” Some scholars think that the author did that deliberately to correspond to the five books of Moses – the Pentateuch or Torah of Jewish scripture. Moses was the great teacher and spoke with the authority of God – and the same can be said about Jesus.

Another clue that Matthew sees Jesus as the new Moses is that the stories he chooses to relate concerning the birth of Jesus that seem to echo the life of Moses – the slaughter of innocent baby boys by a paranoid king, a sojourn in Egypt, and a return to the Promised Land. We also have the words of Jesus himself, who often offers his own interpretation of the Law of Moses, when he says, “You have heard it said of old...(and eye for an eye)... but I say to you...(turn the other cheek)...” Jesus also insists that he didn’t come to abolish the Law of Moses but to fulfill it. Matthew wants us to see that Jesus came as the New Moses fulfilling the intent of the Law, not to demand the observance of rules, but that the Law might be written on our hearts.

Another point Matthew wants us to understand is that Jesus is also the **Son of David**. He is the heir to the throne of David, with whom God had made an everlasting covenant. Do you recall the question the Wise Men asked Herod? “Where is the one born King of the Jews?” And, of course, the charge against Jesus that led to his crucifixion was that he claimed to be a king. So, since Jesus is the King of the Jews, he has a right to command the allegiance of Israel. Therefore, in Matthew’s Gospel, there is an emphasis on the importance of accepting Jesus as Lord and King – it is a major theme of many of the parables Jesus tells in Matthew. In these parables, those who refuse to acknowledge Jesus as King are often dealt with harshly, being “cast into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords to whom we owe our loyalty and allegiance. And this King will hold us accountable, Matthew warns us.

Related to this is Matthew’s insistence that Jesus is the **Jewish Messiah**, the Anointed One of God, sent by God to save his people. In fact, in Matthew, Jesus flat-out says that his mission is first-and-foremost to the Jews, not the Gentiles. In Matthew 15, we have the story of a Canaanite woman who begs Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus hesitates to do so, until she insists. Jesus is so impressed with this non-Jew’s faith, that he goes ahead and heals her daughter, anyway. Now, Mark also tells this story. But Matthew inserts one line that Mark does not have; “He (Jesus) answered (her), ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.’” And as we heard in the first of the two readings, when Jesus commissioned his disciples to fan out across the countryside to spread the good news, he specifically instructed them to go only to Jewish villages, bypassing the Gentiles altogether. It is clear that, for Matthew, Jesus’ first priority was for the salvation of his own people.

But, there is good news in Matthew for Gentiles, as well. While it is very clear that Matthew’s Jesus saw himself as sent primarily to the chosen people, his mission (and thereby, the mission of his church) isn’t limited to Jews. It’s fascinating that, in Matthew’s Gospel written to the Jews, the first people to recognize Jesus as the Messiah were not Jews at all – they were those Wise Men who came from Persia. And while Jesus focused his ministry on the Jews, Matthew’s Gospel also recounts several stories, like the story of the Canaanite woman I just mentioned, where Gentiles recognized who Jesus was, and exhibited so much faith, that Jesus extended grace to them, as well. And in his instructions to his followers who he sent out into the Jewish community to preach and heal, he tells them that when they

are rejected by the Jewish villages, they are to shake the dust from their feet and move on to others who might respond.

And Matthew's Jesus moves on, as well. Sent by God to his own people, for the most part they rejected him. And so the door is swung open to others who will respond - to all the world – even to you and me. This becomes clear as Matthew closes his Gospel with Jesus ascending into heaven. His parting words to his followers: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." Matthew may begin his Gospel making the case that Jesus is the King of the Jews. But in the end, Matthew's Jesus is not just the King of the Jews – He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Savior of the whole world.

So, now that we know who Matthew says that Jesus is, what is his message for you and me? Quickly, let me mention five themes of Matthew's Gospel that can inform our faith:

First of all, in Matthew, there is a call to Radical Discipleship. Like Mark, Matthew emphasizes the cost of following Jesus. Jesus made an absolute demand. When he said, "Follow me," he meant leaving something or someone or someplace behind. To obey meant to walk into an unknown future – ready to listen, to learn, to witness, to serve – no matter what the cost. The Twelve Disciples were called and they followed, at great personal cost. In Matthew's Gospel, there are also stories of other "would be" disciple Jesus also called, but they were not willing to pay the price – they would not break loose from the things that held them back. Matthew's Jesus is telling us that "the Christian must have a singular eye, seeking first God's kingdom and God's righteousness – all else is secondary."³

So, first is Radical Discipleship. Second, there is a call to a New Righteousness. One of the motivations of the author of Matthew was to help us know how to live as authentic disciples of Jesus Christ. He devotes three entire chapters to a collection of teachings we call "The Sermon on the Mount," unquestionably the greatest sermon ever preached. Near the beginning of his sermon, Jesus tells us, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Mat. 5:20) Our faithfulness must surpass what the Jewish Law requires. But Jesus isn't adding to us a new burden – he isn't looking for the keeping of rules and regulations, the way the Pharisees taught. He is challenging us to write the Law on our hearts – that, if we have an authentic personal relationship with God, we will automatically be in right relationship with others. When the Law is written on our hearts (Matthew's Jesus tells us), then we will keep the spirit of the Law without even trying. So, we are to have a New Righteousness.

Third, Matthew's Jesus calls us to Kingdom Living. Throughout his Gospel, Matthew records what have been called "Kingdom" parables – parables that usually begin with the words "The Kingdom of Heaven is like . . ." These little sayings offer us metaphors that give us a glimpse into God's ideal and intention for his creation – the Reign of God, that grows from small beginnings, but which will one day come to pass "on earth as it is in heaven." By living Kingdom lives in relating to others, the Kingdom of Heaven is advanced. We are to be Kingdom People, shining the light of God in a dark world, so that others might come to the truth of Christ.

The fourth theme: because we live Kingdom lives, we are called to Mission. We are commissioned by Christ to do what we can to advance the Kingdom of Heaven through the way we live in relationship with others, and through acts of charity and mercy. We are not simply to be content to "be," we are expected to "do." You and I are to live as citizens of this Kingdom of Heaven, not sitting around waiting for God to call us home, or for Jesus to return. We are to make the Kingdom a reality in our lives and in

our world, to the best of our ability. In other words, you and I are to live “as if” the Kingdom of Heaven had already come, trusting that in God’s time, it will come in all its fullness.

And finally, we will be held accountable. This is an unmistakable – and often uncomfortable – aspect of the Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel.

Jesus the King, will one day come as Judge. There will be a time when Christ will come and pass judgment on each of us individually. He will, in the words of one of the most famous parables in Matthew, sit in judgment to separate the “Sheep and the Goats.” The sheep will be those who not only believed, but who put their faith into practice in tangible acts of mercy. They not only saw the need, they did something about it. The Jesus of Matthew has a two-fold criteria for finding us faithful when he comes: It’s not enough to have faith. We must also put our faith into practice.

So, who is Jesus, according to Matthew? He is a true Son of Abraham and the Son of David, the heir to David’s throne. He is the New Moses who writes the Law on our hearts. He is the Messiah of the Jews and the Savior of the World. He is our Judge – and our King. And because he is our Lord and King, we owe him our full allegiance, and our devotion.

That is “who Jesus is,” – according to Matthew.

So, the challenging question The Gospel of Matthew leaves with us is this: When the King comes as Judge to take account of your life, what will his verdict be?

¹ <http://www.rhymes.org.uk/a58-matthew-mark-luke-and-john.htm>

² <http://www.carm.org/questions/numbers.htm>

³ Disciple: Becoming Disciples through Bible Study. Abingdon Press. p. 130

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