

The Gospel of Matthew for an Uncertain Time

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September 2020

We gather to reflect together at a time when isolation in our nation is so prominent, caused by the spread of the Corona Virus. The experience for many is so difficult. But what has emerged is a feeling of uncertainty in dealing with change in a way never envisioned by many of us. It has particularly created a sense of upheaval for those of us who are explicitly religious and nourished by our liturgical assemblies around the Word and Eucharist.

For reflection and conversation:

What has it been for you and for those with whom you live?

We have had to think differently and find ways to have our spirits nurtured especially in those times when we were unable to gather around the Eucharistic table. What emerged was a gradual awareness of the need to reclaim the strong voice of the Second Vatican Council which reminded us that we are nurtured at the table of the Word and the table of the Eucharist (*Dei Verbum*, §26). Both are equally nurturing, though historical liturgical practice since the Reformation has emphasised one—that of the Eucharist. The move to reclaim a biblical spirituality is a “gift” that has come from this time.

For reflection and conversation:

What do you consider the “gift” of this time for you and others?

This leads me to consider two points.

The first is the gift that Matthew's Gospel is for us at this time. The Gospel can enable us to deepen our reflection on the experience of being in social isolation. It can also offer us insights into how we might be as we move into a new virus-free era. Below I touch on three insights from the Gospel pertinent to our time and at the end draw together their relevance.

The second is a consideration of the very crucible from which Matthew's Gospel was fashioned. Scholarship would affirm that the Gospel was penned for Jewish Jesus followers in the late first century CE (around 85 CE) still reeling from the experience of the major religious and theological upheaval caused by the Roman destruction of the Temple a generation earlier. For these faithful Jews—and for all Jews—this cataclysmic event created deep anguish and uncertainty. With the institutional symbol of Jewish faith destroyed, how could they survive and live into the future? A similar question has been posed amongst Catholics deprived of the celebration of the Eucharist. But what emerged from the 70sCE, as for our “Corona” time, has been a renewed expression of faith suitable for new circumstances, that draws on the reservoir of a rich tradition that can nurture an unknown future.

For reflection and conversation:

Why do you think many feel anxiety and uncertainty today?

What has it been like for Catholics you know, even members of your local faith community?

What has been sustaining or nurturing for you in this time?

Matthew's Gospel was that response for those Jewish-Jesus followers. The evangelist sought to bolster the main tenets of Jewish faith through highlighting the Jewishness and Torah-style teaching authority of Jesus. Matthew presents

Jesus as a rabbinic teacher like Moses with an authority to interpret the Torah for new circumstances faced by the Gospel audience in a way that was different from and in tension with the Temple authorities. A key group in the Gospel are Jesus' antagonists, the Pharisees. They malign him and participate in the group of Jewish leaders who will eventually bring about his execution.

It is important, however, for contemporary readers to note that Matthew's portrait of the Pharisees and Jesus' response to them is not a twitter feed or 'live-streaming' of actual events in the life of the Galilean Jesus of the 30s. Rather, the tension is reflective of the post-70 CE era when Matthew is writing the Gospel at a time of inter-religious conflict. This gets retrojected on to the Gospel narrative. At the time of the Gospel writing, the leaders of the Jesus movement regarded the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees, as renegades. They enabled Judaism to survive the Temple debacle, but they did not, as a whole, join the Jesus movement. This disappointment and their failure become central to their characterisation in Matthew. Historically, the agenda of Jesus and the Pharisees would have been closely aligned. Both were concerned with the renewal of the Torah and the ongoing authentic life of the Jewish people, especially in times of suffering and struggle. Unfortunately, none of this is remembered by some contemporary readers/listeners who presume that the Gospels are CCTV recordings of actual events.

For reflection and conversation:

Have there been any disappointments, as well as delights, for you over this time that you would like to share?

While a comprehensive study of Matthew's Gospel is impossible in such a short reflection, *four insights* are worth pondering and pertinent to our pandemic experience.

First, Matthew's style is to reshape the received Gospel tradition inherited from Mark's earlier Gospel. Matthew adds to Mark, builds up Jesus' Jewish portrait, introduces the Gospel with a birth story and infancy narrative (Mt 1-2) that

echoes or parallels Israel's story in its Egyptian sojourn, Exodus and final exile in Babylon. Matthew wants to assure the Gospel audience that this Jesus knows and lives out of the story of Israel. Jesus is a *faithful* Israelite.

The little detail that Matthew has that, on the return of Mary, Joseph and Jesus from Egypt, they cannot go back to their hometown of Bethlehem because of the diabolical and threatening presence of Herod's son. They must live out their time in Nazareth (Mt 2.19-23). Nazareth, then, in Matthew's Gospel is the symbol of exile from which the rest of Gospel narrative unfolds. To the Gospel audience, this is their experience—exiled from the securities of their religious heritage. Matthew's Jesus, though tempted to deny his fidelity to the God of Israel (Mt 4.1-11) will offer them assurance and direction as they reflect on how they might engage their unknown future. Further, Matthew inserts into Mark's outline five blocks of Jesus-teaching, reminiscent of the Torah with its five books (Mt 5.1-7.27; 10.5-42; 13.1-52; 18.1-35; 24.3-25.46). In a time of upheaval and uncertainty Matthew brings the Gospel's audience back to their faith tradition and story. Through this the evangelist reminds them that God's covenantal fidelity is unwavering.

For reflection and conversation:

Where and amongst whom have you found fidelity being lived out?

Second, in the birth narrative, Joseph learns that his betrothed is pregnant and that he is not the father (Mt 1.18). He has several choices open to him and struggles with how he should act. Finally he decides—against the usually Torah-prescribed option of publicly shaming her (Deut 22.20)—to divorce her privately (Mt 1.19). This would free her to marry the father of the child. His conflict of conscience is eased by the angelic direction given him “in a dream” to take Mary as his wife (Mt 1.20). He is told that the child is from the Holy Spirit. He is to name the child “Jeshuah” – a play on the words “God saves” (Mt 1.21). This naming indicates the future role which the child will play in the rest of the Gospel as Jesus reveals God's saving action through what he will say and do.

The episode concludes with a quote from Isaiah 7.14: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel” (Mt 1.23). The quote acknowledges the link which the child’s birth will have the prophetic tradition of the First Testament and that his presence is a reminder of “Emmanuel”, “God with us”. In the final verses of the Gospel, as the Risen Jesus gathers the “eleven” at the mountain—Matthew’s preferred location of divine revelation and teaching—he commissions them “to make disciples of all nations...And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28.20). This promise of divine presence frames the Gospel, of God being “with us” in the person of Jesus. No matter what cataclysm is experienced, God remains faithful and ever present.

For reflection and conversation:

What would it mean for you to know and believe that, in this time and with what the local faith community is going through, that God is with you and all those you love, that God remains faithful and is ever present?

Third, as Matthew reflects on the future and seeks to offer a realistic picture of leadership, two stories come to mind. The first is the story in which Jesus feeds a hungry crowd (Mt 14.13-21). The disciples (symbolic representatives of the leaders of Matthew’s Gospel household) notice that a large crowd has gathered in a desert place and the day is getting late. They suggest Jesus dismiss them so that they go to villages to purchase food. They see an economic solution to the problem. Instead, Jesus turns the tables back to the disciples—they are to feed the crowd instead. What emerges is the need for the disciples to gather the crowd in small households around the eucharistic action of Jesus. The second story follows immediately, as Jesus walks on water towards his anguished and struggling disciples in a boat alone and far from land (Mt 14.22-33). As Jesus draws close to the disciples and assures them of God’s presence (“Courage! I am! Do not be afraid” Mt 14.27), Peter seeks to join Jesus on the water. The results of his bravado are quite telling and remind Matthew’s audience that leadership (symbolised in the figure of Peter) needs always to be focused on Jesus—otherwise it will sink into the waters.

For reflection and conversation:

What kind of leadership and leaders would you like to see in the local faith community? What formation would such leaders need?

Fourth, the story of Jesus' death and resurrection (Mt 26.1-28.20) is the narrative lens through which everything in the Gospel is heard and read. Everything in Matthew leads to this event. After Jesus' death, Joseph of Arimathea requests his body from Pilate, wraps it in cloth and places it in a rock-hewn tomb (Mt 27.57-60). This is observed by Mary Magdalene and the "other Mary" (Mt 27.61). Later, Pilate posts guards at the tomb to ensure that the body is not stolen with deception from his disciples (Mt 27.62-66). At dawn on the day after the Sabbath the two women come simply "to see" the tomb (Mt 28.1). An earthquake occurs as an angel descends from the heavens, rolls back the stone and sits upon (Mt 28.2). The very object that has guarded the body of Jesus is overcome by the presence of this heavenly clothed angelic being whose action is cosmically effective through Matthew's narrative symbol of the "earthquake". Matthew then notes the reaction of the guards, the human symbols of royal power and military control: "And for fear of him the guards *quaked* and became like the death" (Mt 28.4).

The linguistic connection that Matthew makes between the earthquake which heralds the angelic presence, the classic biblical representative of God, and the "quaking" of the guards is clear. They become like the very being they are supposed to be guarding in an act of divine reversal. Their powerlessness leads to the announcement of Jesus' resurrection and the Gospel's highpoint: "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised" (Mt 28.5-6). Matthew's alteration of the Markan source for the story of the resurrection is noticeable. The proclamation of resurrection and the attestation of God's witness to the suffering and crucified Jesus surprisingly reverses and disarms military might. In other words, for Matthew's audience no upheaval or oppressive circumstance can prevent the

action of God. The resurrection story is Matthew's theological affirmation of this.

For reflection and conversation:

What would you like to see happen within the local faith community that would help deepen your spirit of joy and communion with each other?

Let me summarise how these four insights—drawn from the opening and closing chapters of the Gospel—might be relevant for us today. No matter what circumstances we face as a local faith community or globally, either in terms of military oppression, pandemic, environmental abuse or church scandal, Matthew's Gospel offers important and ever relevant wisdom. We don't know what awaits. No one predicted the pandemic. However, three insights clearly emerge from Matthew's Gospel, even granting the very limited observations offered above.

The first is the importance of returning to our faith tradition and sources. The quest for theological education and biblical literacy becomes ever more pressing in "uncertain times". We need to move more vigorously into public faith education in all our different ecclesial contexts and affirm the "sensus fidelium", the common faith-sense of God's people. The faith tradition of the Catholic community that has enlivened and sustained so many over decades (a century?) is a rich source to which it is important to return.

Second, we need to be reminded of the ongoing presence of God amid what we experience. Matthew's conviction of "God with us" that frames the Gospel's narrative is one theological insight that the evangelist offers to an audience disoriented by the historical and theological realities at the time the Gospel was written. The same holds true today. God is with you as you discern your future.

Third, Matthew's redaction of Mark's original story of Jesus' resurrection emphasises that God's presence and power to subvert and surprise is not determined or controlled by those with power and might—no matter how esteemed that power might appear to be. The "quaking" of the tomb's guards is

a small but pertinent narrative reminder of the overwhelming nature of our God who can roll back blocking stones and resurrect the dead. God can still surprise you and the local faith community.

These are only three contributions which Matthew's Gospel can offer us. But its ability to speak across the centuries into different social and cultural contexts of our world affirm the eternal validity of the Word of God revealed through the Gospel to nurture and reassure. This is Matthew's gift to us as we continue to proclaim, ponder and reflect upon it in these "uncertain" times.

For reflection and conversation:

As you look back over this reflection and study of Matthew what gives you hope, what sustains you, what do you look forward to?

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September 2020

Texts to Ponder from Matthew's Gospel

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Matthew 2:19-23

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰ "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." ²¹ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

Matthew 4:1-11

¹ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

⁴ But he answered, "It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ”

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,

⁶ saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,’

and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,

so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ ”

⁷ Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹ and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,

and serve only him.’ ”

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Matthew 14:13-21

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” ¹⁷ They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” ¹⁸ And he said, “Bring them here to me.” ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Matthew 14:22-33

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

²⁸ Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Matthew 27:45-54

⁴⁵ From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁶ And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ⁴⁷ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “This man is calling for Elijah.” ⁴⁸ At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹ But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” ⁵⁰ Then Jesus crying again with a loud voice breathed his last. ⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵² The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³ After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴ Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

Matthew 27:57-61

⁵⁷ When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ He went to Pilate and asked for the body of

Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him.⁵⁹ So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth⁶⁰ and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away.⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb

Matthew 28:1-10

¹ After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”