

THE GOSPELS

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

(Study Notes)

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Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ

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INTRODUCTION

1. The term “Gospel” in English means literally: Good News (Good Spell), corresponding to the NT word “**Euangellion**” which means “Good News” and has remained in the neo-latin languages as such: Italian “Vangelo”; Spanish “Evangelio”; French “Evangile”, Tagalog “Magandang Balita”...

2. **The name “Gospel” is more ancient than the books of the Gospels.** In the NT we find it in the following quotations: 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 “Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the Gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast- unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures...”;

1 Corinthians 9:16 “For if I preach the Gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!”.

Romans 1:16-17 “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first but also to the Greek...”

All these passages belong to NT documents that are chronologically older than the books of the gospels. Remarkable the use of the word within the text of the gospel in Mark; 1:1 “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”; and 1:14 “Now, after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God and saying: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel’.

3. **The term comes from the OT.** Cf. Isaiah 40:9-11 “Get you up to a high mountain, o Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, o Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” Behold the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rule for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather his lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those who are with young”.

Isaiah 52:7 “How beautiful upon the mountain are the feet of him who bring good tidings, who publishes peace and bring good tidings of good, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion: “Our God reigns.”

Isaiah 61:1 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison for those who are bound...”.

These passages refer to **the liberation and the return of the exiles**, their extraordinary charge of elation foreshadows **the messianic era**, when God’s dream will become a reality: see God’s dream in Isaiah 2;1-5 which corresponds almost with the same words in Micah 4:1-4. To take into account that this “second” Isaiah contains also the four songs of the Servant of Yahweh which are fulfilled in Jesus and in his Paschal Mystery.

4. The 4 gospels are not called “Life of Jesus” (biography), but “gospel according...” i.e. **the joyful announcement of salvation that God has fulfilled through Jesus crucified and risen**: the resurrection is the point of view to understand Jesus’ life, death and mission. The content of the gospel is the Christian Mystery as it is spelled clearly in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.

And the **concept of Gospel** is explained very precisely by John in the first conclusion of his gospel, 20:30-31 “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name”. Yet the term “Gospel” doesn’t appear in John.

5. So, we have four accounts of the Christian Mystery, the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, reflecting the different vicissitudes of the proclamation and catechesis as it evolved in the different communities and as filtered through the different personality of the authors, yet the announcement of the life, death and resurrection of Christ is the same, there is **an amazing unanimity** in these so different documents, originated in different distant places, times and approaches.

6. Because the 4 gospels are different from each other. The first three, Matthew, Mark and Luke are traditionally called “**Synoptic**” **from the Greek word “Synopsis” i.e. seen together/ensemble view**, because if placed in three parallel columns, they reveal the several parts that are similar. It appears that Luke and Matthew have made use of much of the material present in Mark, together with other material from a hypothetical source which is called Q (from the German word *Quelle* which means source).
7. All the same **each synoptic gospel is very different** from the other two, with a distinct structure, purpose and individuality: Mark is the shortest, very vivacious in the account of the miracles of Jesus, centered on the identification of Jesus which is its aim since the beginning, but covered by the “messianic secret”, then in the open with the confession of Peter and in the end with the acknowledgement of the centurion who represent the pagans.

Matthew is the longest, more systematic and didactic, with the infancy narrative, the five books, marked each by a discourse or sermon and concluded by the account of the passion, death and resurrection. He gives us the Beatitudes and the longer form of the Our Father, Jesus-Messiah, the fulfillment of the OT prophecies, and concludes by the Trinitarian commission to the apostles, directed to the whole of humanity.

Luke is so unique in his gospel, with the infancy narrative containing the Annunciation and the *Magnificat*, the account of the nativity, the gospel of mercy, with the mercy parables especially that of the Prodigal Son; the emphasis on Jesus going to Jerusalem with determination, the last supper and the Eucharist and the unique resurrection stories, the disciples of Emmaus and the scene of the Ascension with Jesus going up to heaven while blessing us.

The awareness that the three synoptic gospels are so different from each other, makes the difference of the forth gospel, the gospel of John, not so extraordinary: yes, it is so different, it reflects a much deeper level of theological reflection on the data of the Christian Mystery, it is called **the spiritual gospel** and yet the essential “traditional” elements of the faith in Jesus Christ are not only present

but the gospel of John is the witness of some factual details which are not present or clear in the Synoptics themselves.

We can say that the four gospels are such an extraordinary document of the faith in Jesus, of his life and teaching that we can only conclude with the words of Luke's prologue: "so that you, most excellent Theophilus, may **know the truth** concerning the things of which you have been informed".

8. The gospels are the fruits of a long process which includes first of all **the experience of Jesus by the Apostles**. This is the greatest apostolic charism of which they show to have been aware: the extraordinary fortune of having lived with, seen, heard, touched Jesus and especially the "extraordinary" experience of the resurrection, of the risen Jesus. They are witnesses, official witnesses as we find e.g. in 1 John 1:1-4, 2 Peter 1,16... **Their witness about Jesus happens in the context of the proclamation, this is the Oral Tradition.**

Eventually comes the writing, as it is witnessed by Luke's prologue: "Many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" (Luke 1:1-2). Those who wrote the 27 books of the NT are the Apostles: Matthew, John, Paul, Peter, James, Jude and the 2 disciples: Mark who writes in the name of Peter and Luke who writes in the name of Paul.

9. The characteristic of the Gospels: they are a witness of faith but about a person: Jesus and facts of his life that really happened. **There are no reasons to doubt the sincerity of the eyewitnesses and the truth of the facts.** But it is not history as we would make it today. The interpretation, dependence on the preaching, the influence of the community of believers who wrote them and for whom they were written explain the differences.
10. It is written in the **DEI VERBUM, n.19**: "Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held and continues to hold that the four Gospels, whose historical character the Church inhesitatingly asserts,, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among man, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day He

was taken up into heaven (cf. Acts 1:1). Indeed, after the Ascension of the Lord, the Apostles handed on to their hearers what he had said and done. This they did with that clearer understanding which they enjoyed after they had been instructed by the glorious event of Christ's life and taught by the light of the Spirit of truth. The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some them to a synthesis, explaining some things in view of the situation of their churches and preserving the form of proclamation but always in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus. For their intention in writing was that either from their own memory and recollection, or from the witness of those who "themselves from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word" we might know "the truth" concerning those matters about which we have been instructed (cf. Luke 1:2-4)".

11. From the second century onward, the practice arose of designating each of these four books as a "gospel", understood as a title, and of adding a phrase with a name that identified the traditional author, e.g., "The Gospel according to Matthew." **The arrangement of the canon** that was adopted, with the four gospels grouped together at the beginning followed by Acts, provides a massive focus upon Jesus and allows Acts to serve as a framework for the letters of the New Testament. This order, however, conceals the fact that Luke's two volumes, a gospel and Acts, were intended by their author to go together. It further obscures the point that Paul's letters were written before any of our gospels, though the sayings and deeds of Jesus stand behind all the New Testament writings.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

The position of the Gospel according to **Matthew as the first of the four** gospels in the New Testament reflects both the view that it was the first written, a view that goes back to the late second century A.D., and the esteem in which it was held by the church; no other was so frequently quoted in the non-canonical literature of earliest Christianity. The reasons

for that becomes clear upon study of the way in which Matthew presents his story of Jesus, the demands of Christian discipleship, and the breaking-in of the new and final age through the ministry but particularly through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Infancy Narrative

The gospel begins with a narrative prologue (1:1-2:23), the first part of which is **genealogy of Jesus** starting with Abraham, the father of Israel (1:1-17), Yet at the beginning of that genealogy Jesus is designated as “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1:1). The kingly ancestor who lived about a thousand years after Abraham is named first, for this is the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the royal anointed one (1:16).

In the first of the episodes of the infancy narrative that follow the genealogy, **the mystery of Jesus’ person is declared**. He is conceived of a virgin by the power of the Spirit of God (1:18-25). The first of the gospel’s fulfilment citations, whose purpose it is to show that he was the one to whom the prophecies of Israel were pointing, occurs here (1:23); he shall be named **Emmanuel, for in him God is with us**.

The announcement of the birth of this newborn king of the Jews greatly troubles not only King Herod but all Jerusalem (2:1-3), yet the Gentile magi are overjoyed to find him and offer him their homage and their gifts (2:10-11). Thus his ultimate rejection by the mass of his own people and his **acceptance by the Gentile nations is foreshadowed**.

He must be taken to Egypt to escape the murderous plan of Herod. By his sojourn there and his subsequent return after the king’s death he re-lives the **Exodus experience** of Israel. The words of the Lord spoken through the prophet Hosea, “Out of Egypt I called my son,” are fulfilled in him (2:15); if Israel was God’s son, Jesus is so in a way for surpassing the dignity of that nation, as his marvellous birth and the unfolding his story show (see 3:17; 4:1-11; 14:33; 16:16; 27:54).

Back in the land of Israel, he must be taken to Nazareth in Galilee because of the danger to his life in Judea, where Herod’s son Archelaus is now ruling (2:22-23). **The sufferings of Jesus in the infancy narrative anticipate those of his passion**, and if his life is spared in spite of the dangers, it is because his destiny is finally to give it on the cross as a “ransom for many” (20:28). Thus the word of the angel will be fulfilled, “... he will save his people from their sins” (1:21; cf. 26:28).

First Book

In 4:12 Matthew begins his account of the ministry of Jesus, introducing it by the preparatory preaching of John the Baptist (3:1-12), the baptism of Jesus that culminates in God's proclaiming him his "beloved son" (3:13-17), and the temptation in which he proves **his true sonship** by his victory over the devil's attempt to deflect him from the way of obedience to the Father (4:1-11).

The central message of Jesus' preaching is **the coming of the kingdom** of heaven and the need for repentance, a complete change of heart and conduct, on the part of those who are to receive this great gift of God (4:17). **Galilee** is the setting for most of his ministry; he leaves there for Judea only in 19:1, and his ministry in Jerusalem, the goal of his journey, is limited to a few days (21:1-25:46).

In this extensive material there are **five great discourses of Jesus**, each concluding with the formula "When Jesus finished these words" or one closely similar (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). These are an important structure of the gospel. In every case the discourse is preceded by a narrative section, each narrative and discourse together constituting a "book" of the gospel. The discourses are, respectively, the "Sermon on the Mount" (5:3-7:27), the missionary discourse (10:5-42), the parable discourse (13:3-52), the "church order" discourse (18:3-35), and the eschatological discourse (24:4-25:46). In large measure the material of these discourses came to Matthew from his tradition, but his work in modifying and adding to what he had received is abundantly evident. **No other evangelist gives the teaching of Jesus with such elegance and order as he.**

In the "**Sermon on the Mount**" the theme of **righteousness** is prominent, and even at this early stage of the ministry the note of opposition is struck between Jesus and the Pharisees, who are designated as "the hypocrites" (6:2, 5, 16). The righteousness of his disciples must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees; otherwise, in spite of their alleged following of Jesus, they will not enter into the kingdom of heaven (5:20). Righteousness means doing the will of the heavenly Father (7:21), and his will is proclaimed in a manner that is startling to all who have identified it with the law of Moses.

The antitheses of the Sermon (5:21-48) both accept (5:21-30, 43-48) and reject (5:31-42) elements of that law, and in the former case the understanding of the law's demands is deepened and extended. The antitheses are the best commentary on the meaning of Jesus' claim that he

has come not to abolish but to fulfil the law (5:17). What is meant by fulfilment of the law is not the demand to keep it exactly as it stood before the coming of Jesus, but rather his bringing the law to be a lasting expression of the will of God, and in that fulfilment there is much that will pass away. Should this appear contradictory to his saying that “until heaven and earth pass away” not even the smallest part of the law will pass (5:18), that time of fulfilment is not the dissolution of the universe but **the coming of the new age, which will occur with Jesus’ death and resurrection.**

While righteousness in the new age will continue to mean conduct that is in accordance with the law, it will be conduct in accordance with the law as expounded and interpreted by Jesus (cf. 28:20, “... all that I have commanded you”).

Though Jesus speaks harshly about the Pharisees in the Sermon, his judgment is not solely a condemnation of them. The Pharisees are portrayed as **a negative example for his disciples**, and his condemnation of those who claim belong to him while disobeying his word is no less severe (7:21-23, 26-27).

In 4:23 a summary statement of Jesus’ activity speaks not only of his teaching and proclaiming the gospel but of his “curing every disease and illness among the people” “this is repeated almost verbatim in 19:35.

Second Book

The narrative section that follows the Sermon on the Mount (8:1-9:38) is composed principally of accounts of those **merciful deeds of Jesus**, but it is far from being simply a collection of stories about miraculous cures. The nature of the community that Jesus will establish is shown; it will always be under the protection of him whose power can deal with all dangers (8:23-27), but it is only for those who are prepared to follow him at whatever cost (8:16-22), not only believing Israelites but Gentiles who have come to faith in him (8:10-12).

The disciples begin to have some insight, however imperfect, into the **mystery of Jesus’ person**. They wonder about him whom “the winds and the sea obey” (8:27), and they witness his bold declaration of the forgiveness of the paralytic’s sins (9:2). The episode of the narrative moves on two levels. When the crowd sees the cure that testifies to the authority of Jesus, the Son of Man, to forgive sins (9:6), they glorify God “who had given such authority to human beings” (9:8).

The forgiveness of sins is now not the prerogative of Jesus alone but “human beings,” that is, of the disciples who constitute the community of Jesus, the church. The **ecclesial character** of this narrative section could hardly be more plainly indicated.

The end of the section prepares for the **discourse on the church’s mission** (10:5-42). Jesus is moved to pity at the sight of the crowds who are like sheep without a shepherd (9:36), and he sends out the twelve disciples to make the proclamation with which his own ministry began, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand” (10:7; cf. 4:17), and to drive out demons and cure the sick as he has done (10:1). Their mission is limited to Israel (10:5-6) as Jesus’ own was (15:24), yet in 15:16 that perspective broadens and the discourse begins to speak of the mission that the disciples will have after the resurrection and of the severe persecution that will attend it (10:18). Again, the discourse moves on two levels; that of the time of Jesus and that of the time of the church.

Third Book

The narrative section of the third book (11:2-12:50) deals with the growing **opposition to Jesus**. Hostility toward him has already been manifested (8:10; 9:3, 10-13, 34), but here it becomes more intense. The rejection of Jesus comes, as before, from Pharisees, who take “counsel against him to put him to death” (12:14) and repeat their earlier accusation that he drives out demons because he is in league with demonic power (12:22-24).

But they are not alone in their rejection. Jesus complains of the lack of faith of “this generation” of Israelites (11:16-19) and reproaches the towns “where most of his mighty deeds had been done” for not heeding his call to repentance (11:20-24). This dark picture is relieved by Jesus’ praise of the Father who has enabled “the childlike” to accept him (11:25-27), but on the whole the story is one opposition to his word and blindness to the meaning of his deeds. The whole section ends with his declaring that not even the most intimate blood relationship with him counts for anything; **his only true relatives are those who do the will of his heavenly Father (12:48-50)**.

The narrative of rejection leads up to **the parable discourse** (13:3-52). The reason given for Jesus’ speaking to the crowds in parables is that they have hardened themselves against his clear teaching, unlike the disciples to whom knowledge of “the mysteries of the kingdom has been granted” (13:10-16). In 13:36 he dismisses the crowds and continues the discourse to his disciples alone, who claim, at the end, to have understood all that he has said (13:51).

But, lest the impression be given that the church of Jesus is made up only of true disciples, the explanation of the parable of the weeds among the wheat (13:37-43), as well as the parable of the net thrown into the sea “which collects fish of every kind” (13:47-49), shows that it is composed of both the righteous and the wicked, and that separation between the two will be made only at the time of the final judgment.

Fourth Book

In the narrative that constitutes the first part of the fourth book of the gospel (13:54-17:27), Jesus is shown preparing for the establishment of his church with its teaching authority that will supplant the blind guidance of the Pharisees (15:13-14), whose teaching, curiously said to be that of the Sadducees also, is repudiated by Jesus as the norm for his disciples (16:6, 11-12). **The church of Jesus will be built on Peter** (16:18), who will be given authority to bind and loose on earth, an authority whose exercise will be confirmed in heaven (16:19). The metaphor of binding and loosing has a variety of meanings, among them that of giving authoritative teaching. This promise is made to Peter directly after he has confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, the son of the living God (16:16), a confession that he has made as the result of revelation given to him by the heavenly Father (16:17); **Matthew’s ecclesiology is based on his high Christology.**

Directly after that confession Jesus begins to instruct his disciples about how he must go the way of suffering and death (16:21). Peter, who has been praised for his confession, protests against this and receives from Jesus the sharpest of rebukes for attempting to deflect Jesus from his God-appointed destiny. The future rock upon whom the church will be built is still a man of “little faith” (see 14:31). Both he and the other disciples must know not only that Jesus will have to suffer and die but that they too will have to follow him on the way of the cross if they are truly to be his disciples (16:24-25).

The discourse following this narrative (18:1-35) is often called **the “church order” discourse**, although that title is perhaps misleading since the emphasis is not on the structure of the church but on the care that the disciples must have for one another in respect to guarding each other’s faith in Jesus (18:6-7), to seeking out those who have wandered from the fold (18:10-14), and to repeated forgiving of their fellow disciples who have offended them (18:21-35). But there is also the obligation to correct the sinful fellow Christian and, should one refuse to be corrected, separation from the community is demanded (18:15-18).

Fifth Book

The narrative of the fifth book (19:1-23:39) begins with the departure of Jesus and his disciples **from Galilee for Jerusalem**. In the course of their journey Jesus for the third time predicts the passion that awaits him at Jerusalem and also his resurrection (20:17-19). At his entrance into the city he is hailed as the Son of David by the crowds accompanying him (21:9).

He cleanses the temple (21:12-17), and in the few days of his Jerusalem ministry he engages in a series of controversies with the Jewish religious leaders (21:23-27; 22:15-22, 23-33, 34-40, 41-46), meanwhile speaking parables against them (21:28-32, 33-46), against all those Israelites who have rejected God's invitation to the messianic banquet (22:1-10), and against all, Jew and Gentile, who have accepted but have shown themselves unworthy of it (22:11-14).

Once again, the perspective of the evangelist includes not only the time of Jesus' ministry but that of the preaching of the gospel after his resurrection. The narrative culminates in **Jesus' denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees**, reflecting not only his own opposition to them but that of Matthew's church (23:1-36), and in Jesus' lament over Jerusalem (23:37-39).

In the discourse of the fifth book (24:1-25:46), the last of the great structural discourse of the gospel, **Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple and his own final coming**. The time of the latter is unknown (24:36, 44), and the disciples are exhorted in various parables to live in readiness for it, a readiness that entails faithful attention to the duties of the interim period (24:45-25:30). The coming of Jesus will bring with it **the great judgment** by which the everlasting destiny of all will be determined (25:31-46).

Conclusion

The story of Jesus' passion and resurrection (26:1-28:20), the climax of the gospel, throws light on all that has preceded. **In Matthew "righteousness" means both the faithful response to the will of God demanded of all to whom that will is announced and also the saving activity of God for his people** (see 3:15; 5:6; 6:33). The passion supremely exemplifies both meanings of that central word that we find in Matthew. **In Jesus' absolute faithfulness to the Father's will that he drink the cup of suffering** (26:39), the incomparable model for

Christian obedience is given; in his death “for the forgiveness of sins” (26:28) the saving power of God is manifested as never before.

Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus in his passion combines both the majestic serenity of the obedient Son who goes his destined way in fulfillment of the scriptures (26:52-54) confident of his ultimate vindication by God, and the depths of fear and abandonment that he feels in face of death (26:38-39; 27:46). These two aspects are expressed by an Old Testament theme that occurs often in the narrative, i.e., **the portrait of the suffering Righteous One** who complains to God in his misery, but is certain of eventual deliverance from his terrible ordeal.

The passion-resurrection of God’s Son means nothing less than **the turn of the ages, a new stage of history, the coming of the Son of Man in his kingdom (28:18; cf. 16:28)**. That is the sense of the apocalyptic signs that accompany Jesus’ death (27:51-53) and resurrection (28:2). Although the old age continues, as it will until the manifestation of Jesus’ triumph at his *parousia*, the final age has now begun. This is known only to those who have seen the Risen One and to those, both Jews and Gentiles, who have believed in their announcement of Jesus’ triumph and have themselves become his disciples (cf. 28:19). To them he is constantly, though invisibly, present (28:20), verifying the name Emmanuel, “God is with us” (cf. 1:23).

The principal divisions of the Gospel according to Matthew are the following:

Prologue: The Infancy Narrative (1:1-2:23)

Book 1: The Proclamation of the Kingdom (3:1-7:29)

Book 2: Ministry and Mission in Galilee (8:1-11:1)

Book 3: Opposition from Israel (11:2-13:53)

Book 4: Jesus, the Kingdom and the Church (13:54-18:35)

Book 5: Ministry in Judea and Jerusalem (19:1-25:46)

Epilogue: The Passion and Resurrection (26:1-28:20)

THE MESSAGE OF SAINT MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

We can gather St. Matthew's theology around two great nuclei: the comprehension of Christ and the articulation of the Church.

a. The figure of Jesus according to Matthew

With Jesus, God in a definitive way intervenes in history, show his face as Father and the intention of saving all humanity. We human beings, in order to own salvation, are called to a radical change of life, to live as children of the kingdom. This is why the announcement of the kingdom is linked to the call to conversion *to change life* (4:17). Salvation is God's gift but at the same time is also *vocation*. To God's *gift* (grace) must correspond man's *commitment*; **to God's initiative the human response must follow**.

The first 2 chapters of the Gospel, attribute to Jesus a divine, supernatural origin, then **the sermon of the mountain shows him as *master of justice***; the bunch of 10 miracles (cc. 8-9) as a powerful and extraordinary *thaumaturge*. Jesus is at the origin of the mission of the Twelve (c. 10), he is the *revealer* of the mysteries of the kingdom (c. 13), the *organizer* of community life (c. 18), the *winner* against Scribes and Pharisees (c. 23), the *revealer* of the last events (cc. 24-25). The resurrection, at the end of the Gospel, lifts him up to the divine life (c.28). This is picture of Jesus that Matthew paints in his Gospel. By his actions and his word Jesus shows that he fulfills the announcement in the beginning of the Gospel: **He is *God-with-us*, the presence of God in the midst of his people** (1:23).

○ Master, Teacher

Since the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus assumes a particular aspect: he is the *teacher/master* (5:1), it is demonstrated by the 5 sermons which emphasize the account of Matthew. Jesus is the *teacher/master* not so much because he uses explicitly that title but rather because of the overall image that emerges. His adversaries approach him in order to put him on to difficulties, but Jesus with his answers takes the weapons from their hand **showing in such a way an extraordinary wisdom**.

Jesus is the carrier of God's definitive and ultimate word, he is the new Moses, superior to the old one, he is the supreme teacher of life for men: **"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them"** (5:17). Jesus has completed the law in the sense that he has interiorized it: they are not the acts of

worship that count, but *the intention* which animates them. **And the intention has a name: love.** God asks to those who want to belong to his kingdom a concrete orientation towards love. Twice Matthew repeats in his Gospel a meaningful passage of prophet Hosea: “*It is mercy I want, not sacrifice*” (9:13; 12:7; cf. Hosea 6:6). Therefore, love which shows itself with gestures of mercy, of effective and cordial opening to the others.

About the observance of the minute and numerous prescriptions of the law: the Father demands from those called to his kingdom something more, He asks that they imitate his indiscriminate love for humankind: “*So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust*” (5:45). **The comparison is with the divine perfection:** “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (5:48).

More important even than the content **is the authority of Jesus’ teaching.** Jesus doesn’t refer to a tradition, doesn’t invoke exterior supports to his word. **First of all there is his person:** *I tell you*, this formula occurs six times in the antitheses (5:21-48). The same is the meaning of the expression: “*In truth I tell you*” (5:18; 6:2).

- **Messiah, son of David**

Matthew is particularly interested in the title Messiah (Christ), familiar to his community composed of Jewish-Christians. According to the author of the first Gospel, the Jewish Messianic expectations find their fulfillment in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The title Messiah recurs 17 times in the Gospel, sometime it appears coupled with the title son of David and king of Israel.

Jesus is the Messiah preannounced by the prophets. He is a descendant of David (1:1-17). Bethlehem is the place of his origin (2:4-6). But contrary to the Jewish expectations, his is not a Messianism of power and glory. His Messianic power has nothing of politics or military quality. Jesus is a Messiah who loves, frees and saves. He wants God’s mercy in preference to sacrifices (cf. 9:13; 12:7). This makes him heal the sick, forgive sinners (8:13). Matthew is the only one among the evangelists to point out the meaning of the name of Jesus: “*You will call him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins*” (1:21).

He has pity of the crowd that follow him and provides to feed them in the desert (14:14; 15:32). The leper (8:2), the centurion (8:6), the head of the synagogue of Capernaum (9:18), two blind people (9:27), the Canaanite

woman (15:22), and the father of the epileptic (17:15-16) they plead with him and not for nothing to be helped. The forces of evil which enchain human beings see him enter the field as a powerful and effective fighter. The force of God's Spirit operates in him and because of him the *kingdom* becomes happening in history.

Jesus is Messiah of death and resurrection. Matthew multiplies in the passion account the references to the Old Testament, and underlines that the crucified Jesus fulfills fully the figure of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh sung by Isaiah (26:67). Even the most burning humiliation is part of the divine plan preannounced by the prophets and Jesus shows that he is aware of it (26:11-13.50.56).

Also the title *son of David* is strictly link to the Messianism. Matthew when applying this title to Jesus means to affirm that in him the hopes, the expectations and the prophecies about the Messiah are fulfilled. The title *son of David* underlines Jesus' role as David's Messiah and at the same time it puts in relief Israel's fault because it has not recognized him. Matthew points out this introducing persons who appear no so important (blind, lame, foreigners) who proclaim Jesus as son of David (9:2; 15:22) **whereas the guides of Israel reject him.**

To Jesus being the Messiah we must link the particular presentation of the miracles. The blind persons and the Canaanite woman cry insistently: *son of David, have mercy on us!* (9:27; 15:22; 20:30-31). After the healing of a man possessed by the devil, people, out of themselves by surprise, ask themselves: *Isn't this the son of David?* (12:23). These expressions put into people's mouth who invoke Jesus' help remind us of 11:2-6, where John the Baptist, through his messenger had asked Jesus whether He was the expected Messiah. Jesus' concrete answer are the miracles in as much as they are signs which qualify and show that he is the Messiah as well as manifesting his quality and nature as such. That **in Jesus, son of David, the promises and expectations of the people of Israel are fulfilled** is confirmed by the numerous "accomplishment quotations", by which the evangelist stresses the most important stages of Jesus' life.

○ **Lord**

The Easter experience marks an important turning point as far as Christology is concern. This experience is expressed by the two titles: **Lord and Son of God.**

In Matthew the term *Lord* (*Kyrios*) recurs 44 times (only 6 times in Mark and 23 times in Luke). *Lord* is used only on the lips of those who accept Jesus, believe in him and recognize his close relationship with God; it never used instead by the adversaries.

The title Lord is not a simple expression of courtesy, it instead lets us see the transference of the Risen Christ. By means of this title, the glory which is hidden in the earthly Jesus is intended to shine through. **Matthew makes a superimposition between the glorious Lord and Jesus of Nazareth.** In front of Jesus bend in adoration the leper, the Canaanite woman, the mother of James and John, etc; with the title Lord plead to him the centurion, the disciples, the father of the epileptic, etc.; They approach him with respect; the disciples, and Peter in particular, don't know other titles to address Jesus but the one of Lord.

During the Passion, although humiliated, Jesus moves about with great self-possession so as to **dominate what is happening and allow his divine majesty to shine through.** The Father with the resurrection gives him the universal fullness of his power (28:18). The Church sent by him in mission will experience his lively and effective presence as the Risen One (28:19-20). Although tossed like a boat in the middle of the stormy sea, she should not fear because the Risen Jesus will be with her to save her (8:23-27).

○ Son of God

The title *Son of God* shine through already in the account of Jesus' birth and it is the one which **more than any other defines the mystery of Jesus' person.** Mary's virginal conception witness Jesus' divine origin (1:18-20); he is the *Emmanuel, the God-with-us* (1:23), *the savior* (1:21), all indications of his status as Son of God. The expressions the *son* and the *son and his mother* (2:11.13-14.20-21) hint at Jesus' divine son-ship. The title doesn't apply to Jesus until 3:17, because the identity of Jesus as *Son of God* will be a *revelation by the Father*.

Jesus' divine son-ship appears in the first and second temptation (4:3-7), and it is mentioned as a provocation by the devil (*"If you are the son of God"*). The text doesn't speak of Jesus' divine son-ship only but also of the way to live it out: Jesus entrusts himself totally to the Father and chooses to be instrument in order to reveal God's paternity to people, without imposing himself by extraordinary features, but taking us to a free and conscientious choice for God. **The theme of Jesus' divine son-ship is developed throughout the whole Gospel.** In 22:41.46 the title *Messiah* and *son of*

David are said to be insufficient in order to define Jesus' being. It is the title **Son of God** the one which more than any other can define who Jesus really is.

- **Son of Man**

Jesus fills of himself even the future, in fact he will be the *universal judge*. His second coming will mark the time of the last judgment (24:30-31). Then the good wheat will be separated from the weeds (13:40-43). Like the fisherman, once pulled the net to the shore, makes the choice of the fish, such will be the last judgment (13:47-49). With a sovereign act he will separate the peoples gathered in front of his throne (25:31). **He will be the Son of Man of whom prophet Daniel spoke** (16:27). To his judgment also the believers will appear and they will not be able to rely on their belonging or charismatic gifts since he will give his sentence only on the basis of their faithfulness to his law: the law of love.

b. The Church according to Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew is also the Gospel of the Church. The theme of ecclesiology is perhaps the most important of the first Gospel, the only one that mentions the term *ekklesia* (16:17; 18:17).

The ecclesiology is seen in the light of God's judgment impending first of all on the church that has replaced Israel so that she may give those fruits that the master expects from his vineyard (21:43). From the church a justice even more radical than the one of the Pharisees is requested (5:20), a perfection which reflect the very perfection of the Father (5:48). Belonging to the church doesn't guarantee salvation (22:1-14). Christians should feel of themselves as *called* nor *chosen* (20:16; 22:14), and **belonging to the church appears more as responsibility that warranty of salvation.**

- **Founded by Christ**

The Gospel of Matthew shows the church as a reality wanted by Christ and founded by him: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church (16:17-19). Jesus is the true building constructor of this new building. The verb is in the future "I will build" (16:18) and announces the future action of Jesus who will act on the foundation of Peter's ministry. The Resurrection and the Acts of the Apostles will show truly that the church is first of all fruit of the divine will and action and then of the apostolic ministry. Even if

the church has a modest beginning (13:31-32), an extraordinary development is in wait for her. It is destined to grow and spread out thanks to God's hidden interior action (13:33).

○ People of God

According to Matthew, the community of the disciples of Jesus is the true people of God, the messianic community of the last times, visible sign of salvation for all people. The historical Israel has refused to enter and belong to his community, has closed itself in incredulity in the face of his message and of his person, therefore **it is replaced by the true Israel, the Christian community.**

In the church, good and bad, goodness and evil live together. The parable of the wedding feast is meaningful in this regard (22:1-10). Matthew, if compared with Luke, says that. *"And those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found; so the wedding hall was filled with guests"* (10). To the first evangelist we owe also the addition of the table-companion without the *wedding dress* who is thrown out by order of the king (11-14). **The wedding hall represents the church** that doesn't differentiate itself from the world, a field where wheat and weeds grow together (13:24-30.36-43), net which gathers a bit of everything (13:47-50). Only in the end, in the judgment, there will be the separation.

The church doesn't identify with the kingdom, it goes towards it and partially anticipated the salvific reality. It is not a community of people who have already arrived, but of people who are walking towards a definite future which is hoped for and waited for.

○ Inner Life

Matthew is not very much interested of the structural aspect of the church. What matters to him is the genuine character and the correct display of the ministries present in the church. For all the criterion used to verify the goodness of their charism is acting: *"Not those who say Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the heavenly Father's will"* (7:21).

Matthew recalls those who have guiding functions in the church so that they may avoid the proud ostentation of honor titles: *"But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren...Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ"* (23:8-10). The task of

all in leadership position is that of being the servants of the brothers (23:11) and the model to draw inspiration from is Jesus himself: *“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave”* (20:25-28).

The Church is seen by Matthew as community of brothers. In front of the brother who misbehaves, each single believer must take friendly steps, brotherly concern capable of creating around the culprit a favorable climate inductive to his conversion (18:15-17). Prayer should not be neglected about the brother who sins (18:19-20).

Even more insistent is the Matthew’s invitation to the forgiveness of offences. He recognizes that there is a very strict relationship between the forgiveness given to a brother and the forgiveness God will grant us in the last day: *“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses”* (6:14-15).

- **Community of the Disciples of Christ**

The Christian community is marked by a strict union with Christ. The church is born and lives by the union with Jesus’ person. In the Gospel of Matthew everything which is stated of the historical disciples of Jesus of Nazareth is valid for the whole church, for all the Jesus’ disciples.

The account of the call of the two couples of brothers, Simon and Andrew, James and John, (4:18-22) is an example of the *radical demand* which imposes itself to whoever wants to become Jesus’ disciple. Not even filial piety can be a valid reason of putting off the commitment of the disciple (8:21-22). Even the dearest peoples cannot count more than Jesus in the heart of the one who wants to follow Jesus: *“Whoever loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me”* (10:37). The **route of the master takes to the cross** (16:21) and no renunciation accepted on his behalf will be excessive.

The community of the Christians must not constitute a self-centered group, close within itself and isolated from the other people. The church has a precise mission to accomplish in the world. It is a community sent by its Lord along the path-ways of the world. Its mission is to make disciples of all peoples because salvation passes through our adhesion to the person of Christ and our obedience to his teaching (28:19-20).

○ **Waiting for the Last Judgment**

Matthew underlines with great insistence the theme of the last judgment. It will be the day of the definitive separation of the good from the evil, as it is explained in the parables of the wheat and weeds (13:39-40) and of the net thrown into the sea (13:49). Like the shepherd in the evening separates the sheep from the goats, in the same way Christ will separate people, putting the first on the right and the others on the left (25:31ff).

Important for Matthew the criterion of the last judgment. The discriminating factor will be the love towards the brethren (16:27; 25:31ff). The Christian community therefore is always under the threatening sign of verification which will be decided **on the basis of a praxis of love**. Consequently, at present what is commanded is the need of a careful preparation for the meeting with the Son of Man. His delay (25:5.19) cannot justify carelessness or negligence.

CONCLUSION: Matthew the theologian

Writing his Gospel, Matthew has done the work of a theologian. The concept of Christian faith upheld by his narrative is original and is based on the **three choices** that give the first Gospel its characteristic and unique profile:

1. The first choice is Matthew's **passionate attachment to the *earthly Jesus***. For the evangelist, the story of God with humanity is concentrated and accomplished in the story and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. In order to know God and his salvation plan the only possible way is to listen to and follow the historical Jesus.
2. **The second choice consists in the *ethical accent*** which is found in his account. Jesus presents himself as the authentic interpreter of the Law of God, the one who frees the Law of the bushy traditions which choke it. Jesus proposes a new relationship with God whom he reveals as Father, and the way to accomplish his will. He frames the whole ancient law in terms of love, declaring that in that being sons of God consists. His whole insistence is about doing, accomplishing God's will. This necessary ethical dimension contains a warning for the church of all times. She herself is on a journey towards the last judgment and the only dignity she may boast about in the moment of the final judgment is the concrete, day-to-day faithfulness to the message of her Lord.

3. The third choice of Matthew is **his constant reference to *the Old Testament***. Israel's lack of faith and its punishment don't erase the story of God with his people and the book which witnesses it. On the contrary. The earthly vicissitude and the teaching of Jesus cannot be understood but on the background of the O.T. as its fulfillment and its full realization in the history of humanity. Jesus doesn't eliminate the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but offers the ultimate and universal access to him. **Outlining in such a definitive way this link, Matthew makes of the Jewish Scriptures the Old Testament of the church.**

With these three choices, Matthew has given the church all the themes and instruments of her existence. He has therefore fully accomplished his vocation as a theologian that is that of, as the etymology of the word goes, *speaking of God*. Moreover, speaking of Jesus of Nazareth, has given a face to a God who enlightens the life of people and frees it in view of a final commitment.

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