

**A  
FRIENDLY  
GUIDE TO**

# MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

**DOROTHY A LEE**

Published in Australia by  
Garratt Publishing  
32 Glenvale Crescent  
Mulgrave, Vic. 3170

[www.garrattpublishing.com.au](http://www.garrattpublishing.com.au)

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Design and typesetting by Lynne Muir  
Text editing by Geraldine Corridon  
Images: Thinkstock.com  
p. 4. Caravaggio (Merisi, Michelangelo da (1571-1610):  
*Calling of Saint Matthew*, 1598-1601. Rome, Church of San  
Luigi dei Francesi. Oil on canvas. cm 322 x 340.- © 2012.  
Photo Scala, Florence  
Printed in China by Tingleman

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Nihil Obstat: Reverend Gerard Diamond MA (Oxon), LSS,  
D.Theol, Diocesan Censor

Imprimatur: Monsignor Greg Bennet, Vicar General

Date: 4 August 2012

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9781921946332

Cataloguing in Publication information for this title is available from the National Library of Australia.  
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FOR MARGARET



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# PREFACE

I would like to thank John Garratt for placing this challenge before me and for this wonderful project as a whole: an effort to educate the people of God in their faith. I have enjoyed writing it very much, and hope you enjoy reading it and find it accessible. I do hope, too, you'll feel free to disagree: to have the text of Matthew open in front of you, and to form your own opinions. You might also like to have a look at Mark and see how Matthew has edited Mark in so many, fascinating ways. The bible passages quoted in this book are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*.

I want to thank also my colleagues at Trinity College and within MCD University of Divinity for their support of me and of this project.

I also owe much to my extended family, both in Australia and in the UK. One of them, in particular, stands out for me over these past months: my cousin, Margaret Marks, in England. It is to her that I dedicate this *Friendly Guide*.

Dorothy A. Lee

Feast Day of St Alban, first British martyr, second century AD



MATTHEW IS THE  
LONGEST OF ALL  
THE FOUR  
GOSPELS, WITH  
28 CHAPTERS  
AND JUST OVER  
1000 VERSES.

WE DON'T KNOW WHO WROTE MATTHEW'S GOSPEL, THOUGH LATER TRADITION SAYS THAT THIS MATTHEW WAS THE TAX COLLECTOR WHO BECAME AN APOSTLE (9:9; 10:3).



Caravaggio (Merisi, Michelangelo da (1571-1610): *Calling of Saint Matthew*, 1598-1601. Rome, Church of San Luigi dei Francesi. Oil on canvas. cm 322 x 340.- © 2012. Photo Scala, Florence



# WHO, WHEN, WHERE?

**M**atthew's Gospel is the first book of the New Testament. That's not because Matthew was written first. The Letters of Paul were most likely written before any of the Gospels, and Mark was probably written before any of the other Gospels, including Matthew.

The first three Gospels are close to each other and are generally called *Synoptic Gospels*, because they can be viewed side by side ('syn-' means 'together' and 'optic' means 'to see'). The Gospel of John is different in many ways: in the stories, events and even some of the characters. Although it overlaps with the Synoptic Gospels, it represents a different tradition about Jesus.

By viewing the Synoptic Gospels together, we can see the way in which Matthew has made use of Mark — where he has added stories or sayings, what he has left out and how he has reorganised the Markan material. This is very helpful for us. Sometimes we can see at a glance what Matthew is trying to emphasise.

It is likely that Matthew made use of a second source, called 'Q'. This document has never actually been discovered. It's a hypothesis — an intelligent guess — based on the fact that Matthew and Luke share in common a good deal of the sayings of Jesus which are not found in Mark. These shared sayings often occur in different contexts in Matthew and Luke, suggesting they have used a common source independent of each other. Matthew also has material of his own, from the traditions of his community, which he has added to create a unique account of Jesus.

We speak commonly of 'Matthew' doing this and that in his writing, but we don't really know who this Matthew was. Later tradition identifies him with the tax collector in Matt 9:9 (called 'Levi' in Mk 2:14), and with the apostles, named at Matt 10:3. However, nothing in the Gospel tells us that this is the Matthew who wrote the Gospel.

Furthermore, if Mark's Gospel was written between 65 and 75 AD, we would expect Matthew to be later: probably in the 80s. This makes it less likely that the author was an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry.

Where Matthew was written is equally unknown and nothing in the Gospel points to its location. Some think Antioch in Syria is a reasonable guess. Antioch was a Greek-speaking city, largely Gentile, but with a Jewish population. A Christian community was founded there (Acts 13:1). Other places in the New Testament suggest that this Christian group had a strongly Jewish identity, but included Gentiles (Acts 11:19–20; Gal 2:11–14).

This picture of a Jewish-Christian community, within a non-Jewish city, seems to fit Matthew's Gospel and its context. Antioch in Syria is probably as good a guess as any.

MATTHEW  
IS THE ONLY  
GOSPEL TO MENTION  
EXPLICITLY  
THE 'CHURCH'.  
HE IS VERY MUCH  
THE THEOLOGIAN  
OF THE CHURCH,  
WHICH PROBABLY  
EXPLAINS WHY  
HIS GOSPEL IS  
FIRST IN THE NEW  
TESTAMENT.

MATTHEW DEPENDS FOR HIS  
INFORMATION MAINLY ON  
THE GOSPEL OF MARK.  
MOST OF MARK'S CONTENT IS FOUND  
IN MATTHEW.



# JESUS AND THE DISCIPLES

In telling the story of Jesus, Matthew tells us the meaning of his life, death, and resurrection. What emerges from this portrait is a Jesus whose birth is divine, whose ministry is acclaimed by God and whose death and resurrection are the result of God's will. At the same time, Jesus is undeniably human. He has a mother, brothers and sisters; he has friends; and he struggles to obey the will of God.

Jesus also identifies with human suffering, with our temptations, with our distress. He shows compassion for those who suffer and are rejected. He allows himself to endure the same things. He lives our life and dies our death, forging for us and our humanity a new path, a new capacity to be who and what we were created to be.

ALTHOUGH MATTHEW IS INTERPRETING AND EDITING THE STORY OF JESUS, THE CONTENT ITSELF GOES BACK TO JESUS HIMSELF AND THE THINGS HE SAID AND DID.

Behind Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel, with his love of the Law of Moses and his desire to fulfil God's will, stands the figure of God. In Matthew, God is gracious and, above all, good. He shows mercy to all, regardless of how they respond, irrespective of who they are. He is a God of forgiveness, whose generosity is sometimes crazy and illogical by human standards.

At the same time, Matthew's God is demanding. He calls for the perfection of love, seen especially in love of our enemies. God summons people to obedience, to fulfil their part in the covenant. God also calls for authenticity of life: a consistency of word and deed, inner and outer, the heart and the life. God calls for poverty of spirit, generosity and the forgiveness of others. In other words, God calls for an authentic living out of the Law, the Law as interpreted and lived by Jesus himself.

Matthew is also concerned with discipleship. This is the only Gospel which explicitly uses the word 'church' (*ekklesia*). Jesus calls the twelve apostles, and particularly Peter, as the founding members of the church — those leaders on whose testimony later generations will build. Yet the church is not a hierarchy in Matthew. The authority given to Peter (16:19) is later given to the whole community in shared leadership (18:18). The church is not just the gathered apostles, but also the coming together of 'two or three' (18:20), the ordinary people whose well-being is paramount with God.

The disciples are presented in a more kindly light than they are in Mark. While they fail, and fail often, Jesus is gentle in response to their failures. They are treated as those of 'little faith' rather than of no faith. They are a mix of good and bad, understanding and misunderstanding, courage and cowardice. They follow Jesus faithfully throughout the Gospel, striving —

CHAPTER AND VERSE DIVISIONS ARE NOT PART OF THE ORIGINAL TEXT OF MATTHEW'S GOSPEL (OR OF ANY OTHER BOOK IN THE BIBLE). CHAPTERS WERE INTRODUCED IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY, AND VERSES IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY.



THE WORD 'KINGDOM' REFERS PRIMARILY TO GOD'S SOVEREIGN, RULING ACTIVITY: GOD AS KING. ONLY IN A SECONDARY SENSE DOES IT REFER TO A DOMAIN, A PLACE, FOR WHICH DISCIPLES WORK. OFTEN WE USE THE TRANSLATION 'REIGN' INSTEAD OF 'KINGDOM' TO EMPHASISE THIS POINT.



often enough against their own instincts — to understand him. In the end, however, they fail him. Judas betrays him, Peter denies him, and the others flee. None of the apostles are with Jesus in his final agony and death.

Of all characters in Matthew, Peter shows most clearly this strange combination. He is spontaneous and courageous enough to ask Jesus to call him from the boat onto the water. But, as soon as he does, he loses sight of Jesus and begins to sink in terror at the wind and the waves (14:28–30). At one moment, he is the 'rock of the church', commended for his insight into Jesus' identity (16:16–17). The next moment, he is trying to turn Jesus from the path of suffering, and Jesus names him 'Satan', because he is blocking the path to the kingdom (16:22–23).

Yet the disciples' failure, especially at the cross, is not the last word. At the Last Supper, knowing that they will fail him, Jesus gives them the gift of his body and blood, the sign of the covenant to be sealed in his blood (26:26–29). This covenant is for 'the forgiveness of sins' (26:28). Jesus understands that, with the Shepherd struck down, the sheep will scatter (26:31).

In the end, the apostles are restored and, in all their doubts, are commissioned by the risen Christ and sent out on mission (28:16–20). Despite their sinking in the stormy seas, the hand of Jesus stretches out to clasp them and restore them. They are renewed and empowered by his sustaining grasp.

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." (Matthew 28:16–20)

The Twelve are not the only disciples in this Gospel. There are also women disciples, first hinted at in Matthew's genealogy, with the unexpected presence of four women, and Mary of Nazareth (1:1–18). Women emerge positively from the

Gospel of Matthew, even if they are few in number. Most conspicuous are the Galilean women who, we learn at the end of the Passion narrative, have followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem.

These women do not desert or deny him, but remain faithful — near the cross and at the tomb, witnesses to Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. The two Marys, Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary', come to the tomb on Easter morning and believe the message of the angel. As they run to proclaim the good news, they are met by Jesus himself and, without question, worship him. They faithfully carry out their commission.

In the end, the disciples do not entirely fail in this Gospel. Their success is the result partly of their faith, but more importantly the presence and power of Jesus, who calls them, forgives them, and strengthens them to be his witnesses and to proclaim the gospel to 'all nations'.



THE GOSPEL WAS WRITTEN PROBABLY ABOUT 50 YEARS AFTER JESUS' DEATH AND RESURRECTION, AND IT REFLECTS A LATER SITUATION IN THE LIFE OF THE EARLY CHURCH.

