

# ascending

## THE MOUNTAIN

Homilies for the year of Matthew

GEOFFREY PLANT

Published 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: JGD Graphic+Web [www.jgd.com.au](http://www.jgd.com.au)

Text editing: Helene Clarke

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Plant, Geoffrey Michael, 1947-

Title: Ascending the mountain : homilies for the year of Matthew / Geoffrey Plant.

ISBN: 9781920682255 (pbk.)

Subjects: Catholic Church--Sermons.

Bible. N.T. Matthews--Sermons.

Sermons, Australian.

Dewey Number: 226.406

*With grateful thanks to Fr William Bausch  
and in memory of Fr John McCrystal OFM,  
mastercraftsmen of the Word.*

## Acknowledgements

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## INTRODUCTION

*Ascending the Mountain* is a collection of homilies for Year A of the liturgical cycle, the year of Matthew. It is a companion to a similar volume for Year C, the year of Luke, *Welcoming the Outsider*. Each of the evangelists offers us a different perspective on the life and ministry of Jesus, portraying him in a way that would meet the spiritual and pastoral needs of the community for which he was writing. We gain an insight into the distinctive perspective of each of the evangelists by looking at the story he places at the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. In Mark's gospel it is an exorcism in the synagogue at Capernaum; for Luke it is Jesus' return to Nazareth and preaching in the synagogue; for John it is the wedding feast of Cana. Matthew's gospel places the Sermon on the Mount at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, thereby presenting Jesus as the new Moses, a note first sounded in the infancy narrative (see the homily for the feast of the Holy Family).

Most scholars would agree that the evangelist was not Matthew, one of the Twelve apostles and an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry, but probably a Jewish convert of the second or third generation.<sup>1</sup> His community consisted of Jews who had accepted Jesus as their Messiah, but also of gentiles. These Jewish Christians were no longer welcome in the local Jewish synagogues and they were struggling to hold in tension their Jewish identity with the revelation of God in Christ, the old with the new. They're going through an identity crisis. In response to this pastoral situation the evangelist is like the "householder who brings out of his treasure new things and old" (Mt 13:52). In Matthew's gospel even the tiniest part of the ancient Jewish Law (jot and tittle) must remain, but only as radically interpreted by Jesus. Jesus, like Moses before him, ascends the mountain. Matthew then organises his teaching into five sermons, beginning with the Sermon on the Mount, thereby suggesting a new Torah, a fulfillment not an abrogation of the old.

In 1949 the American writer Joseph Campbell published a seminal work called *The Hero With a Thousands Faces*. Campbell observed that a central motif in storytelling is that of the journey, and the significance of his book's title lay in the realisation that the heroic figure in many of the great stories of humanity

<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *Christ in the Gospels of the Ordinary Sundays*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MI, 1998, p.18.

embarks upon what is essentially the same journey of discovery. Only the “face” of the hero and the setting of the story change. And ultimately, the story of the hero is our own story writ large! (Homily for the Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time). I have found Campbell’s analysis of the heroic journey a useful lens for viewing the gospel, the greatest story ever told! It is “a recognition of a beautiful design, a set of principles that govern the conduct of life and the world of storytelling the way physics and chemistry govern the physical world.”<sup>2</sup> For that reason I draw upon insights from novels and cinema as a way of entering into the gospel stories from a different perspective.

An earlier version of these homilies appeared in the *Australasian Catholic Record*, and I am grateful to Fr Gerard Kelly for permission to reproduce them here. I would like to express my gratitude to the parishioners of St Luke’s Parish, Revesby, on whom these homilies have been road tested. I dedicate this book to Fr William Bausch and Fr John McCrystal OFM. I have never met Fr Bausch, but his many books have inspired my own preaching. The late Fr John McCrystal was my lecturer for homiletics in the seminary, and he introduced me to the power of story and patiently encouraged me to put flesh on my ideas when I preached.

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey*, Michael Wiese Productions, Studio City, CA, 1998, p. xiii.

# FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

( Y E A R A )

*So stay awake, because you do not know the day  
when your master is coming.*

*(Mt 24:42)*

**Today's gospel directs our attention ahead** – to the Son of Man who is coming at an hour we do not expect. The language describing this coming is dramatic. We're told that of two men in the fields, one will be taken, one left; of two women at the millstone grinding, one will be taken, the other left. What's happening here? Some evangelical Christians interpret today's gospel literally and refer to this scenario as the Rapture. The phenomenal commercial success of the *Left Behind* series by American writers Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins offers a disturbing insight into the fundamentalist fascination with the end time. This fictional series has sold more than 40 million copies since it first appeared in 1995 (plus an additional 10 million with the youth series spin-off). The twelfth and final novel in the series (*Glorious Appearing: The End of Days*) is set seven years after the Rapture and almost exactly seven years since the Antichrist's covenant with Israel. The Antichrist has assembled the armies of the world in the Valley of Megiddo, and this sets the scene for what he believes will be his ultimate triumph of the ages.

The opening scene of the first *Left Behind* novel introduces Captain Rayford Steele, a commercial pilot unhappily married to a woman who has become a religious zealot from listening to Christian radio. As he flies a Boeing 747 over the Atlantic his mind wanders to one of the female flight attendants he plans to seduce. Steele hands over the controls to his co-pilot and walks back to the cabin, only to find the flight attendant hysterical. Dozens of passengers have disappeared, their clothes left neatly behind on their seats. The reader soon discovers that millions of people worldwide have also disappeared. What has happened? Well, the rapture has just occurred and the seven year reign of the Antichrist is about to begin — a time of global tribulation. The *Left Behind* series chronicles those seven years. Of course not everyone is taken up in the rapture, only small children and true believers. Those who remain have a second chance at salvation.

The Illinois Catholic bishops have condemned the series not only because of

its blatant anti-Catholicism, but also on the grounds that it reinforces an unhealthy and immature belief in a harshly judgmental God. The *Left Behind* series is a perfect example of interpreting apocalyptic writing as if it were intended to be an eyewitness account. In the fundamentalist worldview of *Left Behind* there is but one truth, derived from a literal reading of Scripture, and anyone who disagrees with that truth is deceived or evil.<sup>3</sup>

In 1993 the Pontifical Biblical Commission of the Catholic Church published a document entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, the preface to which was written by Cardinal Ratzinger, then head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, had this to say about fundamentalism: "The fundamentalist approach is dangerous, for it is attractive to people who look to the Bible for ready answers to the problem of life." The Cardinal warns that "the Bible does not necessarily contain an immediate answer to each and every problem", and he adds that "fundamentalism actually invites people to a kind of intellectual suicide. It injects into life a false certitude, for it unwittingly confuses the divine substance of the biblical message with what are in fact its human limitations."<sup>4</sup>

Today's gospel is alerting us to a fundamental truth. Each of us will have to give an account of our life, and we do not know when that moment will be. It may be sudden and unexpected. Today's gospel calls to mind a tragic event that occurred in 1997 at the Thredbo ski resort. Twenty-one-year-old ski instructor Stuart Diver was asleep beside his wife when a landslide destroyed the resort in which they were staying. Stuart survived; his wife died. One taken, one left – quite literally.

What, then, is Advent saying to us? Advent focuses upon the coming of the Lord. But if our gaze is constantly directed backwards to Bethlehem, or obsessed with the Second Coming, we may overlook a fundamental truth: Everyday is Advent. Christ comes into the lives of his disciples every day. Every day must therefore be a day of watching and waiting. But we are not watching and waiting for Christ's coming in spectacular and cataclysmic events, but rather in and through the tedium and mundane rhythm of everyday life. Ideally, of course, we should be ready for the Lord whenever and however he comes.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gershom Gorenberg, "Intolerance: The Best Seller", *The American Prospect*, 13, 17, September 23, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, St Paul Book & Media, Strathfield, 1993, p.75.

A pilgrim once journeyed far and wide to find a certain saintly monk to ask of him just one question: “If you had just one more day to live, how would you spend the day?” The monk stroked his long white beard and answered, “Well, after rising early in the morning I would wash and say my morning prayers. Then I would make a pot of tea, and perhaps potter around in the garden. I would set aside some time for *lectio divina* and study, and then I might go down the road to visit my neighbour. I would return home and prepare a light lunch, and perhaps lie down for an afternoon siesta, and then ...” At this point the pilgrim became impatient and interrupted: “But isn’t that the way you spend every day?” To which the monk replied, “Of course it is. Why should the last day be any different from the rest?”

And therein lays the truth of Advent. Those who wait on the Lord, those awake and on their guard are ready for the Lord whenever he comes, and in whatever guise he is to be found. The weight of eternity is borne by every moment of time.

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## SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

( Y E A R A )

*A voice cries in the wilderness: Prepare a way for the Lord.*

*(Mt 3:3)*

**Christians didn't formally celebrate the birth of Christ** until some time in the fourth century. The earliest record of Christmas being celebrated on December 25 is to be found in a document dated 354, the *Chronograph* or Calendar of Furius Dionysius Philocalus.<sup>5</sup> The reason Christians chose December 25 was almost certainly to coincide with the pagan festival of the birth of the unconquered or invincible sun (*Natalis Solis Invicti*). The cult of *Sol Invictus* was instituted by the emperor Aurelian in 275 and he placed this deity at the head of the pantheon. The emperor Constantine instituted the Day of the Sun, "Sun-day," as a weekly legal holiday in 321.<sup>6</sup> When Christianity came into the ascendancy the Church could have attempted to ban pagan festivals, just as Puritans attempted to abolish Christmas in England during the Cromwellian period (1649-1660). This proved to be an extremely unpopular measure and did little more than alienate the majority of English people from the Puritan experiment.<sup>7</sup> Wisely, then, the Church opted to "baptise" rather than ban the festival of the sun god. It's as though the Church said to the pagan world, "If you want a celebration at this time of the year, fine! Let's continue to celebrate." But instead of celebrating the birth of the sun god, the Church celebrated the birth of the Son of God. Christians identified Christ metaphorically as the sun. A key passage was Malachi 3:20 which speaks of "the Sun of justice (who) will rise with healing in his rays," and Psalm 19 was seen as an allusion to the resurrection when it likens the sun "who comes forth from his pavilion like a bridegroom, (and) delights like a champion in the course to be run." Gospel texts that referred to Christ as "the light of the world" (John 8:12), or Christ as the light shining in the darkness upon a people in the shadow of death (Lk 1:79) strengthened the identification of the birth of Christ with the turn of the

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<sup>5</sup> Susan K. Roll, "Christmas Then and Now: Reflections on Its Origins and Contemporary Pastoral Problems," *Worship* 73,6, November 1999, p. 509.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 510.

<sup>7</sup> Reginald H. Fuller, "Sunday Scripture Readings: December 25 to January 16," *Worship* 45,10, December 1971, p. 599.

sun's course at the winter solstice.<sup>8</sup>

The Bible doesn't tell us when Jesus was born, but the symbolism of December 25 makes it an appropriate date to celebrate his birth. The pagan festival celebrated the winter solstice – that point in the calendar when nights are the longest.<sup>9</sup> The progressive lengthening of the day from then onwards mirrored the gradual growth of the sun god. Christians (living in the northern hemisphere) were able to say, “When nights are longest, when the world is darkest, there is born unto us Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world.”

The Advent wreath is another example of the Church's adaptation of a pagan custom. Originally, the wreath was associated with the practice of placing candles around a wheel during the time of the winter solstice. When nights were the longest, it was a prayer that the sun might return in all its vigour. The wreath was usually surrounded or covered with evergreens, a symbol of the new life of spring.

Once the feast of Christmas took its place in the Christian calendar sometime in the fourth century, it was considered appropriate – and symmetrical – to have a period of preparation beforehand, just as Easter was preceded by the forty days of Lent. The first mention of a season called Advent can be traced back to Spain and Gaul in the fourth and fifth centuries. The Council of Saragossa in Spain (380 AD) referred to a three-week period of preparation for the celebration of Christmas. In the sixth century St Gregory of Tours (in France) mention a penitential period that lasted from the feast of St Martin (November 11) until Christmas. During this period the faithful fasted for three days during the week, and it was eventually called “St Martin's Lent.” There is no mention of Advent in Rome until the middle of the sixth century, and the season lasted for six weeks.<sup>10</sup>

Advent, coming from the Latin word *adventus* meaning “coming”, is a time of waiting – waiting for the coming of the Lord. Last week's gospel warned us: “Stay awake” because we do not know the day when our master is coming. Lent and Advent, the two great seasons of preparation in the Church's liturgical calendar, begin in the wilderness. Lent begins with Jesus being led by the Spirit into the desert, and in today's liturgy we encounter John the Baptist emerging from the Judean desert with the message, “Prepare a way for the Lord.” The desert is a

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<sup>8</sup> Roll, *op. cit.* p. 515.

<sup>9</sup> December 25 was the date of the winter solstice according to the Julian calendar. Today the northern hemisphere marks the solstice on December 21.

<sup>10</sup> Adrian Nocent, *The Liturgical Year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1977, p. 66.

great teacher, but it is not primarily a place; it is an experience. The desert is not a setting; it is a state of soul. It is the *arena* (which is the Latin word for “sandy place”) where God chooses to meet us. Alan Jones, the dean of Grace (Episcopal) Cathedral in San Francisco, describes the desert as “a place of silence, waiting, and temptation. It is also a place of revelation, conversion, and transformation.” That can be confronting. “A true revelation is a very disturbing event because it demands a response; and to respond to it means some kind of inner revolution. It involves being ‘made over,’ being made new, being ‘born again.’ The desert, then, is a place of revelation and revolution.”<sup>11</sup>

Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* is, on one level, about a journey into the heart of Africa, the so-called Dark Continent. On another level, it is a journey into the heart of an ivory hunter, Mr Kurtz. As Mr Kurtz ventured into the heart of the Dark Continent, he was also confronted by his own inner darkness. The narrator of the story makes this observation about Kurtz: “... the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude.”<sup>12</sup>

Ronan Kilgannon, an Australian priest living as a hermit, was interviewed for an ABC television program about Australian hermits called *Freedom or Madness?* During the course of the interview Fr Ronan had this to say: “Part of any serious prayer is to confront the false self, the false image that we have of ourselves. So there is a painful process of confronting the shadowy areas in our life — the sinfulness, the ingratitude, the ineptitude, the failures of the past, the long held resentments about things — being honest about those things. And for this to happen, one has to travel down into one’s interior. But unless we do it, then we will always be alienated from our true selves. We will never be completely at peace.” Pope John Paul II once said “No movement in religious life has any value unless it is also a movement inwards to the ‘still centre’ of your existence, where Christ is.”<sup>13</sup> Today’s liturgy summons us into the desert to prepare a way for the Lord.

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<sup>11</sup> Alan Jones, *Soul Making*, HarperSan Francisco, 1989, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> Adrian B. Smith, “The Spiritual Value of Transcendental Meditation”, in *Spirituality*, Vol 3, Sept-Oct, 1977, p. 306.