

Sundays Under the Southern Cross

Gospel Reflections for Years A, B & C



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garratt
PUBLISHING



Published in Australia by
Garratt Publishing, 32 Glenvale Crescent, Mulgrave, VIC 3170
www.garrattpublishing.com.au

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Cover Design by Guy Holt Design
Text Design by Garratt Publishing
Edited by Juliette Hughes
Cover image iStock

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ISBN 9781922484635

Cataloguing in Publication information for this title is available from the National Library of Australia, www.nla.gov.au

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Nihil Obstat: Reverend Monsignor Peter J Kenny STD
Diocesan Censor
Archdiocese of Melbourne
Imprimatur: Very Reverend Joseph Caddy AM Lic. Soc. Sci VG
Vicar General
Archdiocese of Melbourne
Date: 23 November 2023

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Gospel Reflections for
 *Year A*
Matthew



God is with us

Each of the four Gospels provides us with a portrait of Jesus, and a glimpse into the life and concerns of one very early Christian community. In Year A we listen to Matthew's account of Jesus. To really hear the 'good news' Matthew offers it will be helpful to step inside Matthew's community, to get a sense of the colours and textures used in his portrait.

The first thing to note is that it is a Jewish world, where believers in Jesus are just one particular form of Judaism in the first century alongside other Jewish parties – the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes, and the ordinary 'people of the land'. What is remarkable about this particular group of Jews is their belief that the long-awaited hopes of their people have begun to be realised in Jesus of Nazareth. For this group, Jesus is the one the prophets promised, God's anointed one (in Hebrew this is the *Messiah*, in Greek it is the *Christos*). In the year 70CE a cataclysmic event happened for the Jewish world. Following a four-year revolt, the Roman legions laid siege to Jerusalem, eventually capturing it and destroying the Temple. This event was the end of the Jewish sacrificial system and also the end of some forms of Judaism. Two groups survived – the Pharisees, who put more emphasis on the Jewish Law (Torah) than Temple sacrifices, and the followers of Jesus. This is the Jewish world in the final decades of the first century when Matthew's Gospel takes its written form – possibly around the years 80–85CE.

As you might expect, these two groups within Judaism now needed to redefine their identity without the Temple and both groups claimed to be the true Israel. This struggle between the heirs of the Pharisees – the Rabbis who focused on Torah as a way of life, and the third generation of Jesus' followers – gives Matthew's gospel its particular focus. From a common origin in Judaism, two groups were now emerging at the end of the first century – what we now call Rabbinic Judaism, and Christianity. Both groups cherished their heritage in the Scriptures of Israel and the Torah, but conflict emerged around the issue of who had the right to interpret the Law

of Moses. The Jews looked to the Rabbis and their traditions, while Christians believed that Jesus, God's anointed one and Son, had an authority even greater than Moses. Another aspect of Matthew's world is that this community was opening out to the non-Jews, the Gentiles. Again, this was seen as the fulfilment of the prophecies that in the last days all nations would come to worship God. For Matthew, the last days had arrived in the person of Jesus.

So how could Matthew portray Jesus in a way that reflected and cherished his community's Jewish origins, while at the same time argue against the Synagogue leaders of his time? One way was to project back into the time of Jesus the type of conflict about the teachings of Moses that Matthew's community was currently facing. The struggles taking place in the 80s give this gospel its sharp sense of conflict and hostility between Jesus and the Pharisees, reflecting the struggles between later Christians and the Rabbis.

Even in the struggles with emerging Rabbinic Judaism, and within the Roman Empire, Matthew's 'good news' is that Jesus is 'God with us' – Emmanuel. This is the name announced at his birth, and the final promise Jesus leaves his disciples, 'I am with you always'.

At the dawn of this twenty-first century our struggles are different to Matthew's community: climate change, terrorism, global economic rationalism and its consequences, continuing wars, drought, genocide, and the personal daily struggles in families, relationships, work. While our world is vastly different, we still need to hear the good news that God is with us.

1ST SUNDAY OF ADVENT MATTHEW 24:37–44

Are you ready?

The liturgical year has turned full circle and we begin the new year with the first Sunday of Advent. This year we will read from the Gospel of Matthew, which was written sometime in the 80s, approximately fifty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Matthew's community has strong roots in Judaism. They believe that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah who brings their past Scriptures and traditions to fulfilment. For this reason, Matthew will emphasise the connections between Jesus' life and the Scriptures of Israel. When listening to or reading the Gospel it is important to listen/ read with two timeframes in mind. There is the time of Jesus and the later time of Matthew's community, who are beginning to experience a separation from Judaism. Two people are referred to in today's gospel, Noah and the Son of Man. Both are meant to urge Christians to live with an alertness to God's reign. People were not ready for the flood in the time of Noah¹. According to the book of Daniel, at the end of time when all the powers of evil have been overcome one 'like a Son of Man' will be given all authority in God's new world. The early Christian communities related this image to Jesus. Matthew is therefore urging his community to be alert and ready for the day when Jesus will return.

Amidst the signs of Christmas and toys, we too need to be reminded that the focus of this time is Jesus. He can be lost among the glitter and excitement if we are not attentive. As the psalm says, 'Come let us walk in the light of the Lord'.

1. The Noah story is in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the time of 'origins' and is not to be read literally as an historical event. Other Middle Eastern nations had similar 'flood' stories, and these were incorporated into Israel's considering 'where did we begin?' And 'Why did God choose us?'

2ND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

MATTHEW 3:1–12

A heart transplant

If John the Baptist appeared in our churches today, what would we make of him? Smile at his delusion? Be embarrassed by his challenge? Be angered by the upset to our normal religious routines? If these questions cause discomfort, John caused discomfort in his time, so much so that he was thrown into prison and executed.

John preaches the coming of God. Nothing about him is attractive – the environment is the harsh Judaeian wilderness, his clothes and food are bizarre, and his message ‘Repent’ is hardly an advertising slogan. And yet people come to him. Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole Jordan district go to him for baptism. People can recognise truth. It may not be attractive, some may prefer to avoid it, but we cannot fully hide from the truth. John speaks to the truth of God. God is near. God is coming. Is your life open to receive God or not?

The word translated as ‘repent’ means something like ‘change your way of being, change your heart’ – *metanoia*. John doesn’t go into details of how to do this. Exactly what ‘metanoia’ means is left to each individual. All John demands is a true change of heart. This is why he is critical of the Jewish leaders who are presented here as just going through the motions. They want the ritual of immersion in water, without doing the hard work of seeking the truth in their lives. Rituals are easy. Truth-seeking costs. As we prepare yet again for the celebration of God’s coming, may we approach it at the level of our hearts, even if that calls for some changes.