

Conversations with Scripture

This is an ongoing newsletter dedicated to the interpretation of Scripture and the Sunday readings from the Roman lectionary.

Breaking Open the Word of God

- Each week there will be a reflection on the Sunday readings along with some interesting biblical facts and a visual presentation of a Bible passage with commentary
- **21st Sunday in Ordinary Time August 25, 2024**

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Adoration of the Magi – Andrea Mantegna c. 1465

The Gospel of Matthew states that the Magi came from the East. By the Middle Ages, they are represented as coming from Africa, Asia, and Europe, signifying that Jesus Christ is king of the world. Sometimes there are more than three (in the Syriac tradition 12), and they often are of differing ages. They also acquire names – Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior – although there is no historical basis for them. Magi are Persian sages and astrologers. The Magi and the star are only mentioned in Matthew.

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

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(Year B) Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17,18b; Psalm 34; Ephesians 4:32-5:1-2, 21-32; John 6:53, 60-69

Each day, billions of people on this planet make choices. Some of them are quite mundane – what to have for dinner, or what to wear. For far too many, these are not choices – it is a matter of having something – anything – to eat or wear. But there are far more serious choices that confront us all. We decide whether to tell the truth or be dishonest; to be generous or selfish; positive or negative; kind or unloving. Often these choices are not obvious, and we might not be aware that we are even making them. So many human words and deeds are done without awareness or reflection. In its original context, Joshua presented the Israelites with a fundamental choice before they entered the promised land. He called on them to serve faithfully the God who had rescued them from bondage and protected them during their long journey. They were entering the territory of the people of Canaan, whose gods would tempt the Israelites. Joshua was aware that he could not control fickle human hearts. They were free to serve these gods but would have to experience the negative consequences of their choices. He declared that regardless of what other people decided, he and his household would serve the Lord. Each day we are challenged in many ways, some small and others large, to decide whom we will serve. We cannot force others to accept our faith or see things our way, but we can commit ourselves to serving our God faithfully. Filled with fervor, the assembled Israelites declared with one voice that they would serve the Lord and would have nothing to do with other gods. For a while, all went well, but as time passed, so did the fervor and commitment of many. So it is with humanity, and for that reason, being faithful to the Lord requires daily renewal and commitment.

Ephesians gives us a glimpse of what some of those positive choices might be. The faithful are exhorted to be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving. But the bar is raised even higher: they are to imitate God, and since God is love, they must live in love, just as Jesus did. The letter goes on to apply some of these principles to the running of a community and household. The faithful are urged to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. We rightly have serious questions today about the hierarchical and male-centered nature of the family and community portrayed in the letter. But reading the letter carefully, we can also note the strong insistence on mutuality and the Christ-centered nature of human relationships.

We have heard these words of Jesus too many times, so their shock value has worn off. The crowd around Jesus was horrified – understandably so – at his insistence that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have life. In John's gospel, Jesus often uses shock language, symbols, and metaphors to express higher spiritual realities. In order to have life, believers must be fed and nourished by Jesus, and they must become what he is. This is where the first defections occurred. Those who were put off by the words and made no effort to penetrate their inner meaning walked away. Jesus assured them that they hadn't seen anything yet – the Son of Man would ascend to where he was before – with the Father. He also knew that not everyone would respond. Faith was a calling and gift from God and for many reasons could be refused. Jesus then asked if the apostles would leave him too. Peter was perplexed, for he didn't really understand the words of Jesus either. But he knew one thing: Jesus had the words of eternal life and was the holy one of God. And if this were true, to whom else could he and the others possibly go? So, Peter would continue, knowing that in the course of time and experience he would come to a deeper understanding and more would be revealed to him. Likewise, our own

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faith does not mean that we have answered all the questions, but that in our hearts we are sure we are on the right path and we are open to whatever may come.

What is Midrash?

Many have heard the word ‘midrash’ used in conjunction with the Bible but are not sure what it means. Others think they know what it means – ‘fairy tales’ and the like – but they are incorrect. Hebrew words are formed from a triad of three consonantal letters, and DaRaSH is the root meaning to seek or inquire. In other words, midrash merely means ‘exegesis.’ It can refer to a process – ‘doing midrash’ – a citation – citing something from the tradition; or a collection – Genesis Rabbah is a large collection of Jewish midrashim on the Book of Genesis.

There are three forms of midrash: paraphrase, prophecy, and parable. With paraphrase, a story is retold or rewritten, with additions and changes. This is how the ancients did theology. The retold stories, filled in gaps, or answered questions that arose in the reading of the text. Additional phrases, sentences, and details were added. Often there was a political or religious agenda in the retelling. Sometimes a completely new sense was given to the story and the new meaning is embedded in the text.

There are several excellent examples of these retold/rewritten biblical books. The Book of Jubilees, written in the 2nd century BCE, was a paraphrase of Genesis and Exodus 1-20. It contains many traditions about Abraham that are not in our Bible. Additionally, its reinterpretation of Genesis discusses the creation of the angels. The Wisdom of Solomon is also in this category – it retold the history of Israel with a particular theological slant.

A parable, on the other hand, always means something else. Both the Old and New Testaments are filled with parables – *mashal* in Hebrew – and they are the seeds of the allegorical readings that come later on. For instance, the biblical Song of Songs is a very sensual – some would even say erotic – account of a woman and her lover. Many objected and did not want it included in the canon. But it was deemed to be a parable or allegory of God’s relationship with the people of Israel, so into the canon it went. The Church Fathers expanded that view and claimed that it was an allegory of God’s relationship with the Church or with the human soul.

In the New Testament, only Matthew and Luke have infancy narratives – accounts of the birth of Jesus. But there is a problem – they do not agree on several crucial points, so they cannot both be literally and historically true. The flight into Egypt is only in Matthew – not Luke. The visit of the three Magi is not mentioned in Luke, nor is the slaughter of the Holy Innocents. It is important to remember that this is ancient religious literature rather than factual reportage. There is a difference between literal historical truth and theological truth. Sometimes both agree but often they do not. It appears that both infancy accounts engage the sacred imagination and contain midrashic elements.

Four Different Presentations of Jesus

Last week, we examined some of the dominant and unique features of the Gospel of Mark. This week, we will focus on Matthew, which was written around 85 CE – roughly contemporaneous with Luke. It was always viewed as the ‘Church Book,’ since there is much on prayer, liturgy, community life, and spirituality. Many commentaries were written on it.

Who wrote it? Although widely and from an early time attributed to Matthew, its actual author is unknown. Traditionally, it was Matthew the tax collector (10:3), although in their accounts of the incident both Mark and Luke name the tax collector Levi.



Sano Di Pietro - The Flight into Egypt, 1450-55, Tempera on wood panel, Vatican Picture Gallery

Matthew portrays Jesus as the authoritative interpreter of the Law – even greater than Moses. He makes extensive use of Old Testament prophetic quotations – a midrashic technique – to confirm that Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy (Matthew 1:22-23; 2:15, 17-18, 23; 4:14-16.) A recurring theme in the gospel is the reliability and authority of Jesus’ teachings as well as the importance of being ‘righteous.’ Jewish messianic titles abound: Christ/Messiah 16 times; Son of God 4 times; Son of Man 16 times; Son of David 4 times; and Emmanuel 2 times. Throughout the gospel, great attention is paid to the details of the Jewish law, which were to be observed without compromise. The mission of Jesus was to proclaim and inaugurate the Kingdom of Heaven, which is mentioned 53 times. The age to come ushers in God’s renewed world.



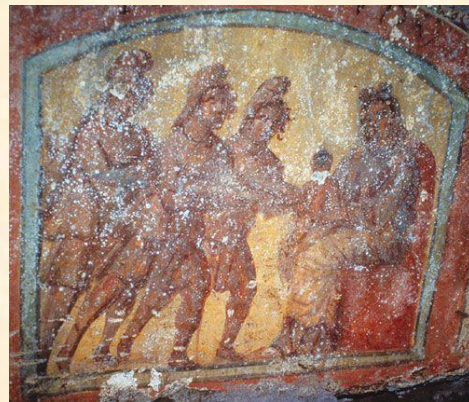
Mosaic presentation of the adoration of the Magi from the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome.

The mosaic is from the 5th century AD. There are a couple of interesting details: 1) the Magi are portrayed as kings, although no mention of this was made in Matthew's text; and 2) they are in Persian dress, as was often the case in depictions of the Magi. This is most evident in the Persian caps they are wearing. In early Christian art, a direct line was drawn between the three young men in the fiery furnace from Daniel to the three Magi. The young men were seen as a type or prefiguring of the Magi.

Three young men reject idols in Persian court – note Persian dress



Three identically dressed magi bear gifts to Jesus sitting on Mary's lap



According to tradition, when the Persians invaded and sacked the Holy Land in the 7th century AD, they first laid waste Jerusalem and then headed for Bethlehem. But they did not destroy the Basilica of the Nativity – the Persian troops were taken aback by the depictions of the Magi in Persian garb and decided to spare it.