

**Sermon for the Last Sunday of Epiphany, Feb 3 2008**  
**Exodus 24:12-18, Psalm 99, 2 Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9**  
**Prepared by the Rev. Dr. Seamus P Doyle**

Despite the amount of Christian education that has gone on for the past twenty five years it is still fascinating to hear individual talk about the Gospels as if they were written for modern readers. It is, however sad to hear people talk about them as if they were written a few days ago instead of being written for first century Jewish/Gentile Christians.

We have become so familiar with the Gospel stories that we have become almost numb to them. We forget how radical they were when they were first heard or read. We still have individuals who attempt to memorize these stories and quote lines from them and yet these same individuals do not realize the real meaning of what it is they are quoting. It is like two people looking at a piece of paper with a series of dots; one sees the dots and the other sees the picture.

The Gospel of Matthew was written some sixty years after the death of Jesus and about thirty years after the first letter of Paul. One might be tempted to say that Matthew was not an original thinker but rather a good editor. Matthew took the Gospel of Mark, the first one to be written, and edited it to give a different slant to his understanding of who Jesus was. He summarizes and abbreviates most of Mark's gospel and omits much of the physical details and well as Jesus' emotional responses to situations. On the other hand, Matthew highlights the miraculous elements, stressing that Jesus could work instant cures and his narrative of the Passion highlights the supernatural elements.

Biblical scholars state that Matthew had several objectives in composing his gospel and the three most important are: demonstrating Jesus' credentials

as Israel's true messiah; presenting Jesus as the supreme teacher and interpreter of the Mosaic Torah; and instructing the community in the kind of correct belief and behavior that will ensure Jesus' approval when he returns.

Those for whom this Gospel was written had ties to the ancient Israelites and Jewish religions. There is no doubt that he believed that a man named Jesus was the person for whom they were waiting, the Messiah, the Son of God, who made a promise he would never leave them.

From Matthew we learn about Jesus' heritage, his birth to an unmarried woman, his sermons, and his return from the dead. For Matthew, Jesus' life and work were not accidents in history but rather he is a continuation or fulfillment of dreams from a cherished Jewish past. Throughout his gospel he quotes or refers to the Hebrew Scripture ignoring the original meaning and context of these verses in favor of a more relevant or contemporary interpretation an application. For Matthew, verses found in the ancient literature are completed or fulfilled in history in the time and life of Jesus. Using many of the stories recounted in the Gospel of Mark, Matthew affirms that Jesus is the Son of Man, the son of God, and a healer. One of the most important characterizations of Jesus in Matthew's gospel comes from Peter who states: *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*

This is the background for today's story of transfiguration. Here we have Jesus and his three closest friends Peter, James and John going to pray. Jesus takes them to the top of Mt Tabor which is not exactly a mountain but its high enough that, on the top of it on a foggy day, (if you were a first

Century Jewish/Christian), you might believe that you were standing on the floor of heaven in the presence of God. Again, if we were first century Jewish Christians we would recognize the symbolism of the story in that it was on a mountain that Moses was given the Law and, according to some Jewish beliefs neither Elijah nor Moses died but were assumed into heaven. Matthew's story therefore, is connecting Jesus to two great figures in Jewish history. Also, a first century Jewish Christian would recognize that Moses and Elijah represent the first two divisions of the Hebrew bible; the law, represented by Moses, and the Prophets represented by Elijah. The reference to the bright dazzling while also reminds the readers of Moses face when he came down the mountain after talking to God.

In Matthew's gospel Jesus is presented as an authoritative and knowledgeable teacher who uses a commanding style of speech. One might say that those listening to Jesus or, reading his words in this Gospel of Matthew, might get the impression that Jesus was contradicting laws and lessons learned from the Hebrew Bible. According to Matthew Jesus made statements like these: *You have heard it said but I tell you.* and later on he says; *Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times.....But I say to you...* When teaching about Prayer, Jesus says; And *whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites.* Again when talking about fasting he says; And *whenever you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites.*

For Matthew, Jesus teaches a standard of living that emphasis authentic living for the individual and rises above the mere following of ritual for the sake of ritual. Matthew has Jesus proclaim; *It is not what goes*

*into the mouth that defiles a person but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles*

Looking at the Gospel of Matthew from an entirely different point of view it can be said that Matthew wrote to people who were in transition. He was writing to a people living somewhere in the Roman Empire who had survived physical violence and possibly war. When we stop and really read the Gospel of Matthew we discover the impact of violence both on the writer and those to whom he was writing. In Matthew's gospel people can be flogged, drowned, murdered, cast out, stoned, crucified, killed, choked, beaten, bullied, persecuted, maimed, beheaded, insulted tormented and trampled upon; become angry and have a variety of problems; People can end up weeping and grinding their teeth; Homes are destroyed and servants are beaten and cities are burned. In other words, a common thread of violence and abuse runs through the Gospel of Matthew.

Despite these challenges, and the loss of an exclusive past in which their God was their god, not some one else's God, this community was prepared to change. Despite the prevalence of violence, death and disease the evangelist attempted to bring some kind of organization and hope to this unstable world.

It is against this background that Matthew begins something new, the "church." The word "church" comes from two Greek words meaning "to call out." Family, community and church may have been synonyms for Matthew. For him Peter is important as the founder of this new community; however the community does not need to be large. Jesus promises that even where two or three are gathered he will be with them.

Peter acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah. It is Peter who, in the midst of the transfiguration, which does not seem to be unusual to him, he simply asks Jesus, “Lord if you wish I will make three dwellings here, one of you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” Matthew goes on to report that while Peter is still talking to Jesus about building three dwellings, he is interrupted by a voice from the cloud stating, *This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased: Listen to him!* None of those who also claimed the title “son of God” had cited experiences like this. For Matthew, only Jesus had God actually speak to him and tell the founders of this new community “listen to him.” In the midst of violence and pain, here is hope; a loving Jesus who advises his friends *Get up, do not be afraid.*

For those of us in twenty first century Christianity there is also another message in today’s story. Given that Peter James and John were also with Jesus in the garden, we can take it that one does not see the glory of Jesus without seeing his agony; As Christians we can not expect to experience the gory of Jesus without experiencing some of the pain of the life to which we were called in baptism and renewed in Confirmation.

Whatever we experience in life, let our attitude be *be not afraid* for God is with us.