



Faith into the Future

Jesus as the Servant
of God in the Gospel
of Matthew

Session 6
Sean Goan

Reading Matthew in Context – His and Ours

- In order to discover the sacred authors' intention *the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking and narrating then current.* 'For the fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts and in other forms of literary expression.'

(Catechism of the Catholic Church 109 quoting Dei Verbum 12)



Midrash and Matthew

- Midrash is a method of reading Scripture that was used by Jewish scholars at the time of Jesus. It was a way of trying to interpret the text for the time of the reader by seeing in it a significance not intended by the original text.
- Midrash takes different forms. The most well-known usage is that of the Rabbis, but New Testament midrash writers tended to use techniques different from those of the Rabbinic collection.
- New Testament midrash uses the Old Testament creatively to make Jesus more meaningful—it brings familiar Old Testament passages to bear on the story of Jesus. Matthew as a Jewish Scribe may well have been using this technique to recast Old Testament texts so that they might shed light on Jesus.



Jesus Tested on his Theology (Matt 22:15-40)

- In a context of growing opposition Jesus is challenged with three questions about his idea of God and how to read the Scriptures (22:15-40)
- The answer from Jesus to the third question may well have informed how Matthew used a midrashic approach to the Shema to interpret the life, ministry and death of Jesus.

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

(Matt. 22:34-40)

According to the Tradition of the Rabbis the Shema observed means:

- With all your heart = seeking only God's will
- With all your soul = being prepared to lay down your life.
- With all your strength = being prepared to put everything you own, all your material wealth, at the service of God's word.



Jesus in the Wilderness: Matt 4:1-11

- The forty days of Jesus in the wilderness recall both Moses' period of forty years in the desert of Midian before returning to Egypt and the forty-day retreat of Elijah to the wilderness after the contest with Baal's prophets (1 Kings 19:5-7), where Elijah, like Jesus, is ministered unto by angels. Matt 4:11
- Jesus resists the devil by citing three texts from Deuteronomy, 8:3; 6:16; 6:13, all of which refer to trials of the people of Israel in the wilderness. Now Jesus, the son and servant who embodies a new Israel sets out a ministry that will be guided his faithfulness to the Shema.

Tempted to set aside the Shema

Jesus is “tested” to abandon his identity as son of God, a true Israelite.

- By turning stones to bread i.e. to do his own will
- By testing God’s care for his life
- By seeking the wealth and glory of the world

He rejects each one with an appeal to the book of Deuteronomy which is itself a retelling of the covenant story.



Shema Faithfulness to the End

- “Not my will but yours be done” (26:39)
Jesus loves God with all his heart in Gethsemane
- “He cried out in a loud voice and gave up his spirit.” (27: 50)
Jesus loves God with all his soul (nephesh) dying on the cross.
- “Taking the body, Joseph wrapped it in clean linen and laid it in his new tomb.” (27: 59)
Jesus has loved God with all his material wealth - dies a poor man wretched man, stripped of everything (The son of man has nowhere to lay his head, 8:20)



Matthew, in his Life of Jesus, portrays him as

- The long awaited Royal messiah
- The fulfilment of the Scriptures
- “Immanuel who proclaims Kingdom in word and deed”
- The utterly faithful son of God
- The righteous Jew who seeks to live faithfully the Shema

Reading this, a community on the margins is uplifted, inspired, guided and challenged to be true.



Matthew and Faith into the Future

The Opportunities

- The focus on the person of Jesus as the presence of God
- Focus on the Kingdom as an expression of God's will
- Focus on Community built on reconciliation and mercy
- Focus on the connection between faith and life.

The Challenges

- The language of judgment which reflects the world of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology and does not sit easily with 21st century thinking
- The demands of the Kingdom ethic may be deemed an impossible dream or may so diluted or spiritualised as to become irrelevant.
- Moving from simply believing in Jesus to believing as Jesus believed.

Thinking about Faith in the 21st Century

**“Walk on air despite your better
judgment”**

Seamus Heaney (The Gravel Paths)

"I like the in-betweenness of up and down, of being on the earth and of the heavens. I think that's where poetry should dwell, between the dream world and the given world, because you don't just want photography, and you don't want fantasy either."

