

SCRIPTURE  
FOR  
PREACHING

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## Preaching the Gospel of Matthew

The First Sunday of Advent begins a new liturgical season and a new cycle of liturgical readings. The focus in Year A is on the Gospel of Matthew and the letters of Paul (1 Corinthians 1–4 [Sundays 2–8]; Romans [Sundays 9–24]; Philippians [Sundays 25–28]; 1 Thessalonians [Sundays 29–33]). The OT readings vary since they are chosen to correlate with the Gospel. The three-year lectionary cycle suggests that each Gospel is different, each has a particular focus or theological vision. The preacher can use this “Year of Matthew” to develop a deeper appreciation of Matthew’s literary and theological artistry. Here I would like to suggest some concrete steps to help the preacher prepare for the Year of Matthew and along the way to mention some important resources that are available.

### STEP 1—READ THROUGH THE WHOLE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Before reading commentaries, articles, or books *about* Matthew, the preacher should read the whole Gospel since this is the inspired text, the Word of God. In this reading one should strive for a holistic view of the Gospel. Try to read it as if you knew little or nothing about Jesus, salvation, or the Church. What is the portrait that emerges? What is the conflict that is driving this narrative? Who are the characters, how would you describe them? What are the recurring themes (e.g., “righteousness,” 3:15; 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33; 21:32) or phrases (e.g., “this took place to fulfill . . .” 1:22; 2:15; 3:17; “Now when Jesus had finished . . .” 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). The lectionary cycle begins during Advent with various readings from the Gospel (Matt 24:37-44; 3:1-12; 11:2-11; 1:18-24) before settling down to a relatively continuous reading of the Gospel from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of the Year (4:12-23) to the 34<sup>th</sup> Sunday (25:31-46). A holistic reading will help the preacher to place these individual stories within the whole story of Matthew.

### STEP 2—STUDY THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THIS GOSPEL

The interpretation of the weekly reading from Matthew requires that the text be placed within its proper historical and literary context. There are a number of excellent resources available that can guide the preachers in their self-study of this Gospel. An invaluable resource is Raymond Brown’s recently published *Introduction to the New Testament*

(1997). Brown studies the sources and compositional features of the Gospel, the question of authorship, the locale or community involved, and the date of writing. He guides and encourages the preacher to further study with a section on “Issues and Problems for Reflection” and a good bibliography (Brown: 203–24). Another very helpful book is Donald Senior’s recently revised *What Are They Saying About Matthew*. He provides a very good and clear survey of scholarly discussion on this Gospel.

In works such as Brown and Senior, one will discover that the first Gospel was probably not written by the apostle Matthew but by a Jewish Christian sometime in the 80s in Antioch of Syria. John Meier, *Antioch and Rome* (Brown and Meier, 1982), provides a wealth of information about Antioch and the establishment and growth of the Christian community there. This information helps us to see the Matthean community as a real flesh and blood community and thus to bridge the gap between our community and this community.

#### STEP 3—STUDY THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE GOSPEL

The study of the historical background is essential to protect us from interpreting a text in an anachronistic way. This historical study, however, can also make the text seem distant and irrelevant, written for another age and time. There is the need, therefore, to study the Gospel not only on a historical level but also on a social and literary level. The preacher is aided in this self-study by a number of resources. Bruce Malina provides a good and accessible overview of the social setting of the NT world and helps one to appreciate the values and identity markers in this Mediterranean society (Malina, 1993). Other books (Malina and Neyrey, 1988; Overman, 1990) apply this type of analysis to Matthew’s Gospel.

Historical research suggests that Matthew’s Jewish-Christian community has experienced the loss of their Temple (A.D. 70) and their exclusion from the synagogue (*ca.* A.D. 85). Social analysis gives us a deeper appreciation of what this loss and exclusion meant. It meant the loss of their identity markers which pushes the community into an identity crisis. This loss of identity markers is not something unique to Matthew’s community but it is something which teens, separated and divorced, and recently arrived immigrants also face. A social analysis of both Matthew’s community and our own will provide ways of actualizing these texts today.

#### STEP 4—STUDY THE NARRATIVE CONTEXT OF THE GOSPEL

The first evangelist is a careful author. A close reading and analysis of the text will lead to a deeper appreciation of his artistry. As we analyze the Sunday reading we should be careful to place it into its literary

context. For example in Matt 4:23 and 9:35 two phrases are almost identical. These verses describe Jesus going about and “teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness . . .” These two bookends or brackets provide the content of what is between them: Jesus *teaching* (5:1–7:29) and *curing* (8:1–9:34).

Attention to the repetition of words and phrases will help us to develop an appreciation for Matthew’s careful construction and artistry. Jack Dean Kingsbury is the Matthean scholar who has pioneered a narrative approach to this Gospel. His books will help the reader to develop his/her own skills using this type of analysis (Kingsbury, 1975, 1988). Such a narrative approach focuses on the Gospel as a story so the correlation or dialogue with the story of the community becomes easier and more direct.

#### STEP 5—GUIDED READING OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

The final step is to select some commentary to guide you through your reading of the Gospel for the year. The resources here vary in length and approach. Brown provides a good “mini-commentary” on the Gospel in his *Introduction* (Brown: 173–203). At the other extreme is the encyclopedic commentary of Allison and Davies in the International Critical Commentary Series (1988, 1991, 1998). Probably the most helpful for the preacher are the commentaries by Meier (1980), Harrington (1991), and Garland (1993). Meier’s commentary appears in the New Testament Message Series. His approach is a basic redactional critical study of the Gospel. Harrington’s commentary appears in the very well received *Sacra Pagina* series. His study places this Gospel into its literary and Jewish context. Finally, Garland’s commentary appears in the Reading the New Testament Series. His emphasis is not on a word-by-word analysis of the text but on the literary and theological development of the Gospel. Each commentary is very well done and reflects the plurality of methods employed in the study of the Gospel today.

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