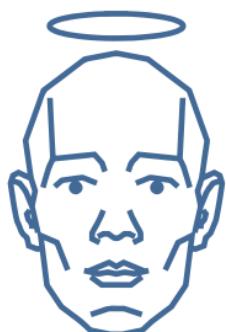


MATTHEW

A MESSAGE OF MERCY



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Matthew: A Message of Mercy

Welcome to *Matthew: A Message of Mercy*. This book is an action-packed account of the life of Jesus and his diverse band of followers, taken directly from a book of the Bible – the Gospel of Matthew.

What is a Gospel?

The word ‘gospel’ means ‘good news’ and refers to the overall Christian message – God’s saving acts for us through Jesus’ teachings, his death and resurrection and the coming of the kingdom of God.

Early in the history of Christianity, the word ‘gospel’ came to be used to refer to the books of the New Testament that tell the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. The four books accepted by most Christians as Gospels are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Each of these Gospels offers a different account and understanding of Jesus and his divine role. They were written by different people and for different audiences – but together they make one story of good news.

Matthew

The Gospel according to Matthew is traditionally said to have been written by a tax collector who became a disciple of Jesus. Matthew is mentioned in chapter 9 of this Gospel: he is the tax collector (called Levi in Mark and Luke) in whose house Jesus eats. As a disciple of Jesus, Matthew would have been an eyewitness to many of the events written about.

The Gospel of Matthew was probably written mainly for a Jewish audience, using quotes from the Old Testament that would have been familiar to Jewish readers. Matthew places emphasis on how Jesus was both the Son of God and the fulfilment of the hopes and expectations of the Old Testament writers.

In traditional Christian art, each of the Gospel writers is represented by a symbol. This symbolism started appearing around 100 years after Jesus’ death, but is commonly

associated with Jerome in the fourth century. Each symbol has a three-layered meaning – what that Gospel is about or how it starts, the nature of Jesus, and a quality or virtue that Christians should show.

Matthew is often represented by an angel or winged man. His Gospel starts with Jesus' family tree, so this symbol reflects that Jesus is God made flesh, mirroring Matthew's interest in Jesus' human nature. This signifies the need to be aware that the choices we make as humans matter if we want to be Christ-like.



A message of mercy

As a tax collector, Matthew would have been hated by others in his community, as he would have been seen as helping the occupying Romans. When Jesus was criticised for eating at Matthew's house, he said, 'I have not come to call respectable people, but outcasts' (Matthew 9.13). Can you imagine how it would feel to be hated by all of your neighbours? Would you believe that God had mercy for you? Could you show mercy to others?

Throughout the following pages, you will find seven reflections written by prison chaplains, based on this theme of God's mercy – his mercy for us, and how he empowers us to show mercy to others.

We hope that this book, the story of Jesus' birth, life and death and God's message of mercy for us and for others, starts you on a deeper journey with the Bible.

The Ancestors of Jesus Christ

¹This is the list of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, a descendant of David, who was a descendant of Abraham.

^{2-6a} From Abraham to King David, the following ancestors are listed: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah and his brothers; then Perez and Zerah (their mother was Tamar), Hezron, Ram, Amminadab, Nahshon, Salmon, Boaz (his mother was Rahab), Obed (his mother was Ruth), Jesse, and King David.

^{6b-11} From David to the time when the people of Israel were taken into exile in Babylon, the following ancestors are listed: David, Solomon (his mother was the woman who had been Uriah's wife), Rehoboam, Abijah, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh, Amon, Josiah, and Jehoiachin and his brothers.

¹²⁻¹⁶ From the time after the exile in Babylon to the birth of Jesus, the following ancestors are listed: Jehoiachin, Shealtiel, Zerubbabel, Abiud, Eliakim, Azor, Zadok, Achim, Eliud, Eleazar, Matthan, Jacob, and Joseph, who married Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was called the Messiah.

¹⁷ So then, there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, and fourteen from David to the exile in Babylon, and fourteen from then to the birth of the Messiah.

The Birth of Jesus Christ

¹⁸ This was how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. His mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they were married, she found out that she was going to have a baby by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Joseph was a man who always did what was right, but he did not want to disgrace Mary publicly; so he made plans to break the engagement privately.

²⁰ While he was thinking about this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, descendant of David, do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. For it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived. ²¹ She will have a son, and you will name him Jesus — because he will save his people from their sins."

²² Now all this happened in order to make what the Lord had said through the prophet come true, ²³ "A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called Immanuel" (which means, "God is with us").

²⁴ So when Joseph woke up, he married Mary, as the angel of the Lord had told him to do. ²⁵ But he had no sexual relations with her before she gave birth to her son. And Joseph named him Jesus.

Visitors from the East

¹Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, during the time when Herod was king. Soon afterwards, some men who studied the stars came from the east to Jerusalem ²and asked, “Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him.”

³When King Herod heard about this, he was very upset, and so was everyone else in Jerusalem. ⁴He called together all the chief priests and the teachers of the Law and asked them, “Where will the Messiah be born?”

⁵“In the town of Bethlehem in Judea,” they answered. “For this is what the prophet wrote:

⁶ ‘Bethlehem in the land of Judah,
you are by no means the least of the leading cities of Judah;
for from you will come a leader
who will guide my people Israel.’ ”

⁷So Herod called the visitors from the east to a secret meeting and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem with these instructions: “Go and make a careful search for the child, and when you find him, let me know, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹⁻¹⁰ And so they left, and on their way they saw the same star they had seen in the east. When they saw it, how happy they were, what joy was theirs! It went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹¹They went into the house, and when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshipped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and presented them to him.

¹² Then they returned to their country by another road, since God had warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod.

The Escape to Egypt

¹³ After they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph and said, “Herod will be looking for the child in order to kill him. So get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you to leave.”

¹⁴ Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and left during the night for Egypt, ¹⁵where he stayed until Herod died. This was done to

make what the Lord had said through the prophet come true, “I called my Son out of Egypt.”

The Killing of the Children

¹⁶ When Herod realized that the visitors from the east had tricked him, he was furious. He gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its neighbourhood who were two years old and younger — this was done in accordance with what he had learned from the visitors about the time when the star had appeared.

¹⁷ In this way what the prophet Jeremiah had said came true:

¹⁸ “A sound is heard in Ramah,
the sound of bitter weeping.
Rachel is crying for her children;
she refuses to be comforted,
for they are dead.”

The Return from Egypt

¹⁹ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰ and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go back to the land of Israel, because those who tried to kill the child are dead.” ²¹ So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went back to Israel.

²² But when Joseph heard that Archelaus had succeeded his father Herod as king of Judea, he was afraid to go there. He was given more instructions in a dream, so he went to the province of Galilee ²³ and made his home in a town named Nazareth. And so what the prophets had said came true: “He will be called a Nazarene.”

The Preaching of John the Baptist

¹At that time John the Baptist came to the desert of Judah and started preaching. ²“Turn away from your sins,” he said, “because the Kingdom of heaven is near!” ³John was the man the prophet Isaiah was talking about when he said:

“Someone is shouting in the desert,
‘Prepare a road for the Lord;
make a straight path for him to travel!’ ”

⁴John's clothes were made of camel's hair; he wore a leather belt round his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵People came to him from Jerusalem, from the whole province of Judea, and from all the country near the River Jordan. ⁶They confessed their sins, and he baptized them in the Jordan.

⁷When John saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to him to be baptized, he said to them, “You snakes — who told you that you could escape from the punishment God is about to send? ⁸Do those things that will show that you have turned from your sins. ⁹And don't think you can escape punishment by saying that Abraham is your ancestor. I tell you that God can take these stones and make descendants for Abraham! ¹⁰The axe is ready to cut down the trees at the roots; every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire. ¹¹I baptize you with water to show that you have repented, but the one who will come after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. He is much greater than I am; and I am not good enough even to carry his sandals. ¹²He has his winnowing shovel with him to thresh out all the grain. He will gather his wheat into his barn, but he will burn the chaff in a fire that never goes out.”

The Baptism of Jesus

¹³At that time Jesus arrived from Galilee and came to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. ¹⁴But John tried to make him change his mind. “I ought to be baptized by you,” John said, “and yet you have come to me!”

¹⁵But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so for now. For in this way we shall do all that God requires.” So John agreed.

¹⁶As soon as Jesus was baptized, he came up out of the water. Then heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷Then a voice said from heaven, “This is my own dear Son, with whom I am pleased.”

The Temptation of Jesus

- ¹Then the Spirit led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the Devil.
- ²After spending forty days and nights without food, Jesus was hungry.
- ³Then the Devil came to him and said, “If you are God's Son, order these stones to turn into bread.”
- ⁴But Jesus answered, “The scripture says, ‘Human beings cannot live on bread alone, but need every word that God speaks.’ ”
- ⁵Then the Devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, the Holy City, set him on the highest point of the Temple, ⁶and said to him, “If you are God's Son, throw yourself down, for the scripture says:
- ‘God will give orders to his angels about you;
they will hold you up with their hands,
so that not even your feet will be hurt
on the stones.’ ”
- ⁷Jesus answered, “But the scripture also says, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”
- ⁸Then the Devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in all their greatness. ⁹“All this I will give you,” the Devil said, “if you kneel down and worship me.”
- ¹⁰Then Jesus answered, “Go away, Satan! The scripture says, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!’ ”
- ¹¹Then the Devil left Jesus; and angels came and helped him.

Jesus Begins his Work in Galilee

- ¹²When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he went away to Galilee. ¹³He did not stay in Nazareth, but went to live in Capernaum, a town by Lake Galilee, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. ¹⁴This was done to make what the prophet Isaiah had said come true:
- ¹⁵ “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
on the road to the sea, on the other side of the Jordan,
Galilee, land of the Gentiles!
- ¹⁶ The people who live in darkness
will see a great light.
On those who live in the dark land of death
the light will shine.”
- ¹⁷From that time Jesus began to preach his message: “Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near!”

Jesus Calls Four Fishermen

¹⁸As Jesus walked along the shore of Lake Galilee, he saw two brothers who were fishermen, Simon (called Peter) and his brother Andrew, catching fish in the lake with a net. ¹⁹Jesus said to them, “Come with me, and I will teach you to catch people.” ²⁰At once they left their nets and went with him.

²¹He went on and saw two other brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They were in their boat with their father Zebedee, getting their nets ready. Jesus called them, ²²and at once they left the boat and their father, and went with him.

Jesus Teaches, Preaches, and Heals

²³Jesus went all over Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, preaching the Good News about the Kingdom, and healing people who had all kinds of disease and sickness. ²⁴The news about him spread through the whole country of Syria, so that people brought to him all those who were sick, suffering from all kinds of diseases and disorders: people with demons, and epileptics, and paralytics — and Jesus healed them all. ²⁵Large crowds followed him from Galilee and the Ten Towns, from Jerusalem, Judea, and the land on the other side of the Jordan.

**While he was thinking about this,
an angel of the Lord appeared to
him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph,
descendant of David, do not be afraid
to take Mary to be your wife. For
it is by the Holy Spirit that she has
conceived.’**

Matthew 1.20



Reflect

Put yourself in Joseph's shoes and you'll soon see why the angel tells him 'not to be afraid'. He must have been terrified about what others thought of him and Mary having a child while they were not married. He must have felt confused, anxious and very alone. He and Mary were good people. Why was all this happening to them?

We all experience fear and anxiety. You may even have those feelings right now. They are emotions that we can feel at the very bottom of our stomachs. Unchecked and unaddressed, they can make us physically ill.

Worry and anxiety paralyse us. They prevent us from being fully alive and free as God wants us to be. To stop worrying is easier said than done. It can chew away at us, usually in the quiet times of the day and especially in the dark of night.

The angel appears to Joseph in a dream, in the middle of the night, when he might have felt most alone and most vulnerable. It's both Joseph's and Mary's willingness to do what God asks of them, and overcome their fear, that eventually brings Jesus into the world as the Son of God and our Saviour.

Jesus was born not in some perfect place, but into a messy world of uncertainty, worry and even fear – and this should actually give us some comfort. When we have those feelings in our own lives, we should remember that from the beginning, the life of Jesus was set against a background of unrest.

Pray

Lord, give me the courage and spirit of trust that Joseph had, so that I, like him, can always listen to your voice. Even when I face difficulties and uncertainty, fear and anxiety, help me to feel the closeness of your presence. Help me to place all my trust in you. Pour into my heart and mind the peace that only you can give.

Help me to be always aware of the needs of those around me, especially those who are troubled and afraid. May I be for them a messenger of your peace and an instrument of your love.

Amen

Act

- How do you react when you feel frightened or anxious? How are you with others when feeling this way? What do you do to try and take a step back and view the whole situation?
- Are you able to recognise and feel God's presence in such times?
- Try and create five minutes of stillness in each day to listen to what God may be saying to you.
- Keep an eye open for anyone around you who you think may be anxious or fearful. Be there for them and let them know you care.

Fr Robert Halshaw, Prison Chaplain