

Matthew the Storyteller

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Activity to show Mt's style



Last year *Echoing the Word* examined the Gospel of Luke. In doing so, it modelled the kind of use of Scripture which the Church applauds: use which seeks to determine what the author truly intended in writing as they did. This year, while the subject matter, that is, the actual Gospel we are focusing on, has changed, this principle remains the same. What this means in practical terms is that the reasons it was important to introduce Luke last year, apply equally now to Matthew! As a result, the activity you used last year to introduce Luke can now be used again this year to introduce Matthew. Last year's activity invited students to undertake a cursory examination of the Gospel of Luke in the component parts of a narrative: orientation, problem or conflict and resolution.

This year's activity takes up two realities of writing: the deliberate arrangement of stories by the author and the clever structuring of passages, both of which are affirmed as having been done by the writers of the four Gospels.¹

Some Background

While a whole narrative, Matthew's Gospel, is made up of individual stories. These stories would have circulated in his community orally for years before they were finally written down; that is they would have been told by one generation to the next. One of the big questions, therefore, that Matthew had to determine in deciding to write them all down was what order to put these stories into. The content of some stories would have made their place in the narrative obvious: Jesus needs to be born at the beginning and to die before he can rise again. The Baptism of Jesus would presumably come before his ministry. But most of the stories circulating in Matthew's community would have had little in the way of a 'time frame'. Did the calming of the sea happen before or after the miracle of the loaves and fishes? Did the argument about picking corn on the Sabbath happen before or after the argument about healing on the Sabbath? When did the Sermon on the Mount happen – early or late in the ministry? Which stories occurred before the journey to Jerusalem, which ones on the road there, and which ones actually took place in Jerusalem?

In putting his account of the life of Jesus together, Matthew had to decide what criteria would determine the order of the stories he would include. Would he try to provide a purely chronological account of the life of Jesus from his birth to his death, and order the stories as best as it can be remembered? Would he use 'reason' and try to sort out those things that would most likely have happened before others; for example, it would be reasonable to think that Jesus would have had to do a few provocative things before the authorities would have become annoyed with him. Would Matthew choose stories because, put together, they make an exciting meaningful narrative, one which makes his points well?

Matthew's arrangement of stories

Invite students to play the role of Matthew. Table A below has a number of stories Matthew includes in his Gospel. Have students cut out each story square and place them on their desks in the order in which they would put the stories if they were writing an account of the life of Jesus. Ask them to be conscious of why they place a particular story where they do. (You may need to give a brief summary of the stories but don't let students find them in their Bible until they have fixed their own order.)

ACTIVITY

over page

put in order students think they might have happened.

Random selection of episodes in Mt. gospel

Table A

Jesus heals a leper	The parable of the mustard seed	Teaching on worrying	The trial before Pilate	The Beatitudes
The Passover meal	The birth of Jesus	The parable of the pearl	Jesus calms the storm on Lake Galilee	The parable of the sower and seed
Teaching about storing up treasures	Jesus sends out the twelve	Jesus enters Jerusalem	The Baptism of Jesus	Twelve of the disciples are named
The plot to kill Jesus	The parable of the yeast	Teaching on judging others	Jesus prays in Gethsemane	Teaching on fasting
Teaching concerning anger	Jesus calls the first disciples	Teaching concerning prayer	The Crucifixion	The Resurrection of Jesus

Once they have decided on the order *they* would put these individual stories in, compare their order with Matthew's and discuss what you find: how near are students? Have they used some of the criteria Matthew appears to have used? Table B below includes each story together with its corresponding reference in the Gospel of Matthew.

Episodes with reference

Table B

Jesus heals a leper 8:1•4	The parable of the mustard seed 13:31•32	Teaching on worrying 6:25•34	The trial before Pilate 27:11•14	The Beatitudes 5:1•12
The Passover meal 26:17•30	The birth of Jesus 1:18•25	The parable of the pearl 13:45•46	Jesus calms the storm on Lake Galilee 8:23•27	The parable of the sower and seed 13:1•9
Teaching about storing up treasures 6:19•21	Jesus sends out the twelve 10:5•15	Jesus enters Jerusalem 21:1•11	The Baptism of Jesus 3:13•17	Twelve of the disciples are named 10:1•4
The plot to kill Jesus 26:1•5	The parable of the yeast 13:33	Teaching on judging others 7:1•5	Jesus prays in Gethsemane 26:36•45	Teaching on fasting 6:16•18
Teaching concerning anger 5:21•26	Jesus calls the first disciples 4:18•22	Teaching concerning prayer 6:5•15	The Crucifixion 27:32•44	The Resurrection of Jesus 28:1•10

Explain that when you look at the way Matthew has arranged his stories, you see that he has made very deliberate choices: he has plotted out the life events of Jesus first and then gathered similar passages together into blocks of speeches. There are five speech (or discourse) blocks but the two easiest to identify are the block where Jesus does most of his teaching (The Sermon on the Mount, 5:1-7:29) and the block with most of the parables of the kingdom in it (13:1-53). The two passages in Table A which name and send out the twelve disciples are from the block on the missionary activity of the disciples (10:1-42).²

Have students 'correct' their order and paste the story squares in their books in the order in which they appear in the Gospel of Matthew.

Final part of activity

The first discourse block: The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew's decision to gather similar stories together can be seen easily in the Sermon on the Mount. Ask students to examine the sermon in their Bibles and to notice how 'neatly' Matthew begins and ends the block (Matthew 5:1 and 7:28). Have them visualise the event: Jesus gathered on a hillside teaching the crowd about a range of things.

Count how many individual teachings Matthew puts into this block (there are 24). Point out the language pattern Matthew uses in some of the stories ('You have heard it said... but I say' e.g. 5:21-22). Propose some contemporary equivalent examples and discuss what effect this language structure has on an audience.³ What sort of impression does it give of the speaker? What impression do you get of the speaker's values or morals? What does it suggest about the authority of the speaker?

By using this literary pattern, Matthew is able to have Jesus 'correct' what the people have heard. He is able to show that Jesus has wisdom, authority and knowledge. This is important for Matthew for two reasons: first the people he is writing for are Jews so they know their laws well – the fact that Jesus reinterprets them so well makes him extraordinary! Secondly, Matthew's community are confused about whether they should form a new movement or return to their synagogues, practise their faith as Jews and forget about Jesus. They thought Jesus was the messiah but maybe they were wrong! By having Jesus speak with such authority Matthew is able to reassure them: he is the long waited for messiah – they should not give up hope!

The Beatitudes

Finally, the opening teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is one of the most used passages in Scripture: The Beatitudes (5:3-12). Note that each of the Beatitudes (or blessings) is constructed the same way: it begins by stating an experience or state of living that people sometimes go through *now* and then finishes by saying that these people will live differently *one day*. The nature of the blessings as occurring in a *future time* is important: People are not blessed because they mourn per se: they are blessed because in the future, they will be comforted by a loving God. This time or era, when those who mourn, are hungry, are meek, or are persecuted will be blessed by God is a key theme in Matthew: the kingdom of heaven.⁴ Matthew will develop this theme in another of his blocks in Chapter 13.

Ask students to turn the Beatitudes into a picture story of contrasting 'now' and 'then' scenarios. Display these around the school with the words of Matthew beneath them. Remember, Matthew was most probably a scribe (copyist) so his writing would have been magnificent!

End Notes:

1. In its Instruction Concerning the Historical Truth of the Gospels (1964, n. IX), the Pontifical Biblical Commission states: 'From the many things handed down they selected some things, reduced others to a synthesis, (still) others they explicated as they kept in mind the situation of the churches. With every (possible) means they sought that their readers might become aware of the reliability of those words by which they had been instructed. Indeed, from what they had received the sacred writers above all selected the things which were suited to the various situations of the faithful and to the purpose which they had in mind, and adapted their narration of them to the same situations and purpose. Since the meaning of a statement also depends on the sequence, the Evangelists, in passing on the words and deeds of our Saviour, explained these now in one context, now in another, depending on (their) usefulness to the readers. Consequently, let the exegete seek out the meaning intended by the Evangelist in narrating a saying or a deed in a certain way or in placing it in a certain context. For the truth of the story is not at all affected by the fact that the Evangelists relate the words and deeds of the Lord in a different order, and express his sayings not literally but differently, while preserving (their) sense.'
2. The other two blocks are the block on Church life and Order (18:1-35) and the block on teaching about the end time (24:1-25:46)
3. For example, "You have heard it said that it is OK to tease kids who are smaller than you, but I say it is cowardly and mean. You have heard it said that it is OK to cheat if you get away with it, but I say to you it is wrong even if no-one knows. You have heard it said that it is good to lie to cover up for your friends but I say it is better to be honest and face the consequences."
4. Matthew refers to the kingdom of God as the kingdom of heaven. Matthew is believed to be a Jew and as such he would not want to use the name of God; neither would his audience want to hear it used. The two terms refer to the same era or reign.

RNTB
Intro

Henry Wansborough

The Gospel according to MATTHEW

Introduction

The first gospel comes second

St Augustine seems to have been responsible for putting the Gospel of Matthew first in the order of the four gospels, and it is always printed at the head of the gospels. In the early Church it seems to have been the most popular and widespread of the gospels, and until the 1967 reforms of the Lectionary it was the gospel read most frequently in the liturgy. However, it was almost certainly the second gospel to be written, for it uses and expands on Mark, expressing Matthew's own particular angle on the good news of Jesus. It contains far more of the teaching of Jesus than does Mark. Most scholars think that Matthew and Luke both drew this teaching from a collection of Sayings of the Lord which has since disappeared, though some attribute the elaboration to Matthew's own work.

Matthew and Judaism

Matthew is the most Jewish of the gospels, insisting on every page that Jesus fulfils the promises of the old Law. Jesus is a second David, adopted by Joseph into the House of David (1:18-25), addressed frequently as 'son of David' (1:1; 9:27; 15:22), and hailed as the messianic king of David's line (21:9). Matthew also depicts him as a second Moses (2:20, compare Ex 4:19), who forms a new people of God, just as Moses formed the people of God in the Old Testament (16:18). In Mark Jesus re-interpreted the Law; in Matthew Jesus gives a whole new interpretation of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount (5:17-20), which perfects the old, bringing it to completion by interpreting it in accordance with the scriptural principle, 'My pleasure is in mercy, not sacrifice' (Ho 6:6; Mt 9:13; 12:7; cf. 23:23). So it is the old Law read in a new way.

Nevertheless, Matthew is deeply Jewish in his thinking. He is much less absolute than Mark on the abolition of such Jewish practices as the Sabbath and the prohibitions of eating certain foods (compare Mk 7:19 with Mt 15:17). He shows Jesus acting always carefully in accordance with scriptural precedent (12:5, 11). With habitual Jewish reverence he avoids using the name 'God', speaking of 'the kingdom of Heaven' rather than 'the kingdom of God', with very rare exceptions.

Yet at the same time there is stern criticism of current Judaism, especially Pharisaic Judaism as it was lived in Matthew's own day. The Jewish leaders, the scribes and Pharisees are heavily criticised for their concept of righteousness (5:20), for their hypocrisy (23:1-36) and for their performance in public of the three classic good works of Judaism - fasting, prayer and almsgiving (6:1-18). Right at the beginning the Jewish King Herod is sharply contrasted with the gentile Magi, when he attempts to kill Jesus and they bring their gifts to the newborn child (2:1-18). Of the centurion of Capernaum Jesus says, 'in no one in Israel have I found faith as great as this' (8:10). In his parables Matthew's Gospel underlines that the Jewish leaders are no longer the custodians of the vineyard of Israel (21:43), and that their city is doomed to be destroyed (22:7). A hint of why this may be is occasionally given: they will 'scourge you in their synagogues' (10:17) suggests a background of persecution of Christians by Jews - or rather, in Matthew's situation, of Christian Jews by Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Christ (11:21-24). They had failed to accept that one greater than Solomon (12:42), one greater than the Temple was present (12:6). Such a background of persecution and mutual hostility goes far to account for the terrible saying which has been at the root of so much Christian anti-Semitism, 'his blood be on us and on our children!' (27:25).

The exalted Christ

More clearly than in Mark, Jesus is an exalted figure, as though he were already the risen Christ. In some of the miracle-stories the crowd scenes have melted away to leave a solemn and solitary confrontation between Jesus and the sufferer (compare Mk 1:29-31 with Mt 8:14-15; Mk 5:27 with Mt 9:20). His exalted status cannot remain hidden. At the final judgement it will be Jesus enthroned with his holy angels who exercises the divine prerogative of judgement (25:31). Far sooner than in Mark, human beings recognise Jesus as 'Son of God', Peter confessing him as such when in Mark the disciples are still utterly puzzled (14:33; 16:16; compare Mk

6:51-52). As Mark is the story of the gradual understanding of the meaning of Jesus as 'Son of God', so Matthew goes one step further and is the revelation of what it means that through Jesus God is with us. At the outset the child is to be named 'Emmanuel', which means 'God-is-with-us' (1:23), and at the end the risen Christ promises to be always with his people (28:20, bracketing the gospel at beginning and end). In the great chapter on the community he promises that when two or three are gathered together, there he is in the midst of them (18:20). This promise is the source of their authority, which makes the decisions of the community binding also in heaven. Just as in the Old Testament the people of God is made holy by the presence of God among them, at first in the Tent of Meeting and later in the Temple, so the new people of God is made holy by the presence of Christ.

Matthew on the community

While in Mark all the emphasis is on the arrival in Jesus of the Sovereignty or kingdom of God, Matthew makes far more provision for the permanence of this community of the Church. In Mark Jesus makes little or no provision for the future of his community. In Matthew the promise of Christ's divine presence in the Church brings with it provision for a structure of authority, a machinery for achieving reconciliation (18:15-17), an authority for making decisions, conferred both on the community and on Peter himself (16:18; 18:18). Jesus' chosen Twelve will have a position of judgement, sitting on twelve thrones (19:28), though this does not contradict the fact that all are still brothers in the Church (23:8-12). This may be the reason why Matthew quietly omits much of the criticism of the Twelve which occurs in Mark. There is a whole chapter on how missionaries should behave and how they should be received (10:1-42). The need for continuing good works is emphasised: good works are like a wedding garment (22:11), like oil prepared for long-burning lamps (25:7), and will finally be the criterion on which all people will be judged (25:45).

Matthew's poetry

Much of Matthew's power comes from what can only be described as his poetry. The rhythm of the sayings is beautifully balanced, often with a neat double opposition: 'grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles', (7:16); 'the harvest is rich but the labourers are few' (9:37). The same balance is seen in the parables. While Mark's parables are all about nature (seed, growth, harvest), all the long