

17A SFX 2023

We are reading St Matthew's Gospel this year. I thought it useful to step back and ask a few basic questions. Who wrote St Matthew's Gospel – who was Matthew? Who was it written for – where was it written? And what makes his telling of the story of Jesus different from the other Gospels? Because the text, the Gospel was born in particular context, just as in our own particular context we hear those words today.

In 2010 when I was in the monastery, I organized a pilgrimage that I will never forget. I took a group of 36 people to Syria, just before the awful civil war started. Syria is very important in the history of Christianity. Just ask our Keralans whose liturgy and traditions come from Syria. Many worship in the Syro-Malabar tradition: Syro, referring to Syria. Syrian Christianity has deep Jewish roots. Aramiac – the language of Jesus is still spoken in some parts.

Syria has rightly been called the 'Cradle of Christianity' because at the time the Gospels were being written, Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans and the faith took root in other cities. Most prominent was Antioch where Peter met Paul and the followers of Jesus were first called Christians.

But the place I really wanted to go to was a ruined city way across the desert on the Euphrates River close to the border of Iraq. It is called Dura Europos. There the oldest Christian church in existence, from a time when churches were still in people's houses. Ruins remarkably preserved with the oldest Christian paintings in existence. The town, abandoned in 256AD, excavated in the last century, is now mostly destroyed by the Islamic state – we were there just in time some of the last foreigners to see it.

In Dura Europos there is a Synagogue just a few doors down from the Christian Church. Perhaps that is how it was for Matthew. The Church and Synagogue were very similar both deeply rooted in the customs and traditions of Judaism, but increasingly at odds with each other in the central Christian belief in the person of Jesus. Hence Matthew's Gospel is at once deeply Jewish – think of all the quotations from the Old Testament, its emphasis on the Jewish Law and customs, but at the same time there is an hostility to the Jewish authorities that came to reject Jesus.

Which brings us to something else. Matthew's very Jewish community was changing. It found itself opening up to new-comers – to Gentiles who had come to faith in Jesus. There are hints in Matthew's Gospel of strangers, foreigners, coming to adore the Lord. Matthew's Gospel opens with a Genealogy – Jesus' family tree, where the line of Abraham and David is taken forward by the presence of foreign women. Only Matthew's Gospel has the story of the Gentile Magi, those strange men from the East coming to adore. And parables would speak of latecomers to the feast, latecomers to work – the Gentiles coming late to the party but finding their equal reward. So Matthew's Gospel is very Jewish but has this great openness to outsiders.

So when today's Gospel describes the scribe who becomes a disciple, many biblical scholars would say that this is the best portrait we have of St Matthew himself. "Every scribe who becomes a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who

brings out from his storeroom things both new and old." The old and the new coming together.

We can think of St Matthew as a Rabbi, that scribe who becomes a disciple. He loves his Jewish inheritance. But he is moving the story of Israel forward because he has found Jesus, his Pearl of Great Price for whom he is willing to sacrifice everything. In Jesus someone greater than Jonah, someone greater than Solomon.

What does it mean for us? In the first reading Solomon prays for that most important gift of all a discerning heart. On Monday we will celebrate the feast of St Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits – the great defenders of the faith after the tragedy of the Reformation. Perhaps his greatest legacy are the rules of discernment in his Spiritual Exercises. Rather than seeing a one-size-fits all solution, rather than applying general rules to everything he encourages us to look at each particular situation and find the will of God there. There is no surprise that the Pope is a Jesuit, and in the Synod process he is encouraging the Church worldwide to exercise that discernment.

We like St Matthew inherit a beautiful tradition. Our Catholic faith is a collection of customs and practices, writings and prayers, cherished ways of thinking about life, commands, values and principles we have received from the Lord that we try to live out every day. But the church is not stuck in the past, we are not archologists. Nor with the Bible are we fundamentalists because with the guidance and teaching of the Holy Spirit tradition is a living thing. The Holy Spirit guides us into the truth, is every new and creative, and calls us to look afresh at every situation, to read the signs of the times, to exercise discernment in every age to apply those eternal values. The teachings are constant, but our faith is expressed differently today than a thousand years ago. We treasure old things, but we are finding new things to cherish, new ways to express our faith, our love of Jesus. Our storeroom has things both old and new.

St Matthew gives us the beautiful figure of St Joseph described as a *man of honour* deeply rooted in his own Jewish tradition. But we celebrate him as a man who was able to welcome the unexpected in the birth of the child Jesus in a strange set of circumstances. He was a man capable of taking a leap of faith and embracing a new and different situation. The Guardian of Jesus became the Patron of the Church, and we too in each generation are called to discern the right course of action in a complicated world.

We don't know for sure who St Matthew was. Most scholars today would say he wasn't the tax collector of the Gospel called Matthew, although maybe that figure was behind some of the accounts. Some see his signature in the householder who cherished things old and new. They think the most likely place the Gospel was written was Syria, possibly Antioch, where the church rubbed shoulders with the Synagogue. A faithful Jew who in Jesus had found his Pearl of Great Price and like St Augustine came to love our God as "ever ancient, ever new."