

Section I : The Infancy Narratives (Matthew 1-2)

04. Section II : Setting the stage for Mission

Matthew 3:1 - 4:16



John the Baptist Bill Muehlenberg

Matthew now presents four portraits, each of which creates a perspective that is central to his understanding of Jesus and his mission.

First Portrait : John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-12)

Matthew continues to place Jesus in the context of the religious experience of Judaism. Now, however, Judaism has reached its goal, for John the Baptist is the Messianic herald.



Matthew 3:1-2 (Mark 1:4)

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness *of Judea* proclaiming: “Repent, *for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*” (Jesus, 4:17; Disciples, 10:7)

John the Baptist gathered people on the far bank of the Jordan, and led them through the waters of the Jordan (their immersion, or baptism) into the Promised Land, to claim it as their own, given to them by God. That land had currently been usurped and occupied by the Roman Empire. Herod Antipas was presenting himself as the ‘Messiah’. John’s ritual was a land-rights procession, a political act of resistance to the oppression of the Empire.

Matthew 3:3-6 (Mark 1:2-3, 5-6)

For this is he of whom it was said by the prophet Isaiah (40:3):

“A voice of one crying in the wilderness:

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

John had his garment of camel's hair and a leather girdle around his waist (Elijah, 2Kings 1:8); and his food consisted of locusts and wild honey (ascetic, Matthew 11:18).

At that time Jerusalem went out to him and all Judea *and all the region of the Jordan* and had themselves baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Matthew 3:7-10 (Luke 3:7-9)

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism,

he said to them, “You brood of vipers! (Jesus, 12:34; 23:33)

Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Do not presume to say to yourselves,

‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you,

God is able from these stones (abanîm)

to raise up children (banîm) to Abraham.

Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees;

every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit

is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Jesus, 7:19; 13:42, 50; 18:8-9; 25:41)

Matthew 3:11 (Mark 1:7-8)

“I baptise you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire (= Luke 3:16).

‘Fire’ has been interpreted as the purifying fire of love = the Holy Spirit. We too can prepare to encounter the one who is more powerful than we are, and who calls us to journey with him to a deeper meaning and a fuller freedom.

However, in the light of verse 10 and verse 12, and Matthew’s use of ‘fire’ throughout his Gospel, Matthew’s focus in portraying the Baptist is on the ‘fire’ of judgment.

Matthew 3:12 (= Luke 3:17)

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Second Portrait : Jesus and God : Matthew 3:13-17

The focus of attention in the second portrait is **Jesus**, and precisely the intimacy of his relationship with God. As we watch Jesus throughout the gospel Matthew wants us to see the action of God's Spirit at work in him. As we listen to Jesus' words we are to realise that we are hearing the word of God.



We have been prepared for this moment by the account of Jesus' conception (Matthew 1:18-23). Here, however, for the first time Matthew explicitly speaks of Jesus as **God's Son**: a theme which is central to his presentation of Jesus (11:27; 16:16; 17:5; 26:63; 28:19). The intimacy experienced by Jesus during his Nazareth years was the intimacy of one whom God was 'taking by the hand and forming' (Isaiah 42:6).

Mathew 3:13-15 (Mark 1:9)

Then Jesus comes from Galilee to the Jordan to John *to be baptised by him*. John tried to prevent him and said: “I need to be baptised by you, and you come to me?” *But Jesus answered and said to him: “Let it be now, for it is thus fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.”* (see 5:17). *Then he permitted him.*

Matthew 3:16-17 (Mark 1:10-11)



And when Jesus had been baptised, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him (Isaiah 64:1-12) and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. (Noah; Song of Solomon 2:10-14). And a voice from heaven said 'This is my Son (Psalm 2:7), the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

(Compare Transfiguration Matthew 17:5)

Matthew 3:17

‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

Isaiah 42:1-4

Here is my servant Israel, whom I uphold,
my chosen one, with whom I am well pleased.
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will establish for the nations a just order.
He will not shout or raise his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.
He will establish a just order.
He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established in the earth a just order;
and the coastlands wait for his law [Torah].

Isaiah 42:5-7

Thus says God, the Lord,

who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:

I, the Lord,, have called you in righteousness,

I have taken you by the hand and kept you;

I have given you as a covenant to the people,

a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind,

to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,

from the prison those who sit in darkness.

Third Portrait : Jesus and us : Matthew 4:1-11

In his third portrait Matthew establishes the fact that Jesus, although truly God's Son, is also one of us, experiencing humanity as we experience it. Jesus was flesh like us; he suffered and was tested. The wonder of his life was that, unlike us, he did not sin but remained perfectly open and responsive to God.



‘We have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin’ (Hebrews 4:15).

Matthew 4:1 (Mark 1:12-13)

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil (διαβόλος).

The key message for us in this passage is that Jesus' mission was to defeat evil in all its manifestations, by the power of the Spirit of love that graced him so beautifully at his baptism. This conflict and Jesus' victory is a theme which permeates the whole of Matthew's gospel.

Matthew dramatises the testing of Jesus by drawing on catechetical material that had been developed within the Christian community as a result of reflection on the classical temptations of Israel in the wilderness.

1. Israel tempted by hunger to go back to Egypt (Exodus 16)
2. In their thirst the people failed to trust God (Exodus 17)
3. Worshipping the golden calf (Exodus 32)

A precedent for this can be found in the Book of Deuteronomy, which Matthew quotes at the conclusion of each of the trials.

In Deuteronomy 8:2 we are told:

‘Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart.’

Having passed through the waters (Matthew 3:13-17), just like his ancestors, Jesus is tested, like them, in the wilderness. In this testing we find what is ‘in his heart’.

1. Matthew 4:2-4 (Jesus the prophet) (= Luke 4:2-4)

Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights, (Moses Exodus 34:28)
and afterwards he was hungry.

The tempter came and said to him,

‘If you are the **Son of God**, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’

But he answered, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’

(Deuteronomy 8:3)

It is from his many experiences of deprivation, when all he could do was remain trusting in God and obedient to the Spirit that guided him — experiences dramatised here in the first trial — that Jesus could say:

‘Do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ It is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well’(Matthew 6:31-33).

We see from his overcoming of the first trial that his heart is with his Father. He needs 'bread', he needs sustenance, but he knows that his greatest need is for love, and this love is received as a gift, with empty hands, from the one to whom we pray:

'Give us each day our daily bread' (Matthew 6:11).

2. Matthew 4:5-7 (Jesus the priest) (Luke 4:9-12)

Then the devil takes him to the holy city and places him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him,

‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you,” and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’(Psalm 91)

Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ (Deuteronomy 6:16)

see later tests: 26:36-38 (Agony); 27:40 (Come down from the cross)

Psalm 91

‘You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust’. ... he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge ... For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. ... Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honour them.’

3. Matthew 4:8-10 (Jesus the king) (Luke 4:5-13)

Again, the devil takes him to a *very high mountain* (see 17:1; 28:16)
and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour;
(compare Moses: Deuteronomy 34:1-4)
and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and
worship me.'

Jesus says to him, 'Away with you, Satan! (see 16:23) for it is written,
"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him" (Deuteronomy 6:13)

Matthew 4:11 (Mark 1:13)

Then the devil leaves him, and suddenly angels came and served him.

At the close of Matthew's gospel, we see Jesus again on a mountain. Having completed the forty days and forty nights of his journey, having battled with the powers of darkness, and having conquered evil through his obedience, he is able to say: **'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'**(28:18). What the devil offered, God has given.

How Jesus, the beloved Son, inherited this authority, and how he, as God's Messiah, has established the kingdom of God is the subject of Matthew's gospel for which he is preparing the stage.

How often we find ourselves struggling to find direction in a 'wilderness'. Tracks that we once followed now seem to go nowhere, or are swept away, and we find ourselves in a trackless waste. Loves that once sustained us have proved fickle and have gone. Worst of all, our own sins return to haunt us, and we are faced with our powerlessness to find direction and freedom. This happens to us personally. It happens to those we love and to communities that are significant to us.

Fourth Portrait : Jesus on mission : Matthew 4:12-16

When Jesus heard that John had been given over (παράδιδωμι), he withdrew to Galilee (see Mark 1:14).

He left Nazareth (see Luke 4:16) and made his home in Capharnaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah (8:21-23) might be fulfilled.



‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the way of the sea (Du’ru), across the Jordan (Gal’azu), Galilee of the Gentiles (Magidu), the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.’

Isaiah 8:21-23

‘He [a nameless refugee] wanders across it [a nameless land], oppressed and hungry and in his starving condition he becomes desperate and curses his king and his God as he turns his face upward. Downward to the earth he looks and there is anguish, darkness, swirling oppression, confused gloom. For there is no glimmer of light for an oppressed land. At the time a beginning of humiliation of the **land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali** led afterwards to a worsening of oppression in the Way of the Sea, in Trans-Jordan and in the Galilee of the nations.’



Isaiah 9:2-6

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shone. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy ...

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with just decrees and righteousness from that time on and forever.

Section III : The coming of God's kingdom : Discipleship

Matthew 4:17 - 7:29

Matthew 4:17 (Mark 1:14-15)

From that time Jesus began to proclaim,
'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

(see 3:2 and 10:7)

Isaiah 52:7

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger
who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces
salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns'

Jesus calls disciples : Matthew 4:18-20 (Mark 1:16-18)



As Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

‘I am now sending for many fishermen, says the Lord, and they shall catch them [the dispersed people]’ (Jeremiah 16:16).

Immediately they left their nets and followed him. (ακολουθεω).

A favourite theme in Matthew (see 6:19-34; 8:18-27; 9:9-13; 10:9-10, 34-37; 19:16-21, 27-30).

Matthew 4:21-22 (Mark 1:19-20)

As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them.

Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

‘In this text Matthew relates the beginning of the story of Jesus. Disciples are with him from the beginning, immediately after he has started to proclaim the kingdom of heaven. They are there from the beginning as witnesses of his activity, as hearers of his message, as the first of the future apostles (10:2). At the beginning of his story Jesus already indicates what their future will be: they will be fishers of people. They will be the apostles whom the Risen One will send to all nations (28:19–20).

In this way the beginning of the Jesus story that Matthew tells here is at the same time the beginning of the story of his own church. That is especially true for Peter, the first one called. He has special significance in the area of Syria where the Matthean community lives.’