

“FOLLOWING THE KING - Introduction”

Matthew 16:13-20

We've spent the last few weeks looking at our church mission statement – our vision, if you like – and we've been pondering on what it means and where we're going with it. And each week, as we've looked at the various elements of it, we've asked ourselves why we're doing it, what's the rationale – we've looked at examples, exhortations and encouragements from The Bible. And, ultimately, we are following this particular course of action because of Jesus, because of what he has done for us and what he has commissioned us, as his followers, to do. Over the next few weeks (and possibly months), we're going to remind ourselves of what that is all about, too. We're going to look again at the life and teaching of Jesus and try to relate what he said and did to our own lives here and now – here in the second decade of the third millennium in a little city called Lichfield. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus the Christ now?

And to help us in that we are going to work our way through one account of Jesus' life and teaching and try to see what it has to say to us today. As I'm sure many of you are aware, the place where we look to find out about Jesus is in the Bible – particularly, we look in the four books that begin the second section of the Bible, the New Testament, and we know those books as the Gospels. Over the past few years we've worked our way through the gospels of Mark, Luke and John, each with their own emphasis and their own slant on the life and works of Jesus, so now we turn to the one which appears first in our Bibles, that of Matthew.

Matthew's Gospel is the longest of the four books which record the life of Jesus. It's almost certain that it wasn't the first to be written, but it has traditionally stood as the first book of the New Testament. Of course, it covers the same ground as the other three Gospels, telling the same story, but including some things that the others don't, leaving out some things that the others do include, and offering a particular view on many of the things that they all mention. The Matthew who wrote it was one of Jesus' twelve disciples – referred to as Levi on occasions – and so he was an eye-witness of most of the things he records. Clearly he draws on some of the material that Mark uses because there are sections of their writings that are pretty well identical, but there is also material that he shares with Luke and some incidents and stories that none of the others mentions.

It's thought that Matthew wrote this book to help the infant Church to understand something of the life and teaching of Jesus and to give them some kind of foundation for their life and work together. Matthew would have been one of the leaders of the early Church around the middle of the first century. And these would have been followers of Jesus – some of whom had seen him or met him, many of whom hadn't – who wanted to know what Jesus had said and how they should respond to it. Life had become very different for them since they'd committed themselves to following him and they wanted to know how they should best continue his work and adapt to their new-found beliefs.

Of course, those first followers of Jesus, the growing church that Matthew was part of, were pretty well all Jewish and they were keen to see how this new way of living and believing fitted in with the faith that they had been brought up in. So Matthew is eager to show them that what Jesus said and did, what he called them to, was all part of God's original plan. This new form of faith – I don't think he would have called it a religion – is compatible with, but not exclusive to Judaism. In fact, much of what he writes, he writes to demonstrate that this is anything but exclusive. As we read through this book, we'll note the particular ways in which he does that, but let me just give you a bit of an overview this morning (and then you can go home and start reading through this book – a few minutes a day over the next couple of weeks should get you through it – and see if you can spot what I'm talking about).

It's clear that Matthew wants to demonstrate that Jesus has burst into the world in fulfilment of the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures with which these first Jewish followers of Jesus would have been very familiar. He wants them to see that this is all part of the unfolding plan of God which he has been working on and working towards since the very beginning of

time. Jesus comes as the culmination of that plan to rescue the whole of creation from the effects of evil, to save men and women from the consequences of the wrong choices and wrong decisions that they made under the influence of evil – what we might call (what we do call) sin. All through the Old Testament God had been promising a way out of that spiral of despair and hopelessness once and for all, a time when his rule, his Kingdom was going to be rolled out across creation. Read through the history books of the Old Testament – books like *Exodus*, *Samuel*, *Nehemiah* – and you can see the thread which runs through that, the gradual disclosure of God’s redemptive actions. Read through the books of prophecy – books like *Isaiah*, *Micah*, *Amos* – and you’ll see the visions that God gave his servants of what life would be like when his Kingdom was established. That’s why the Old Testament is still important for us today.

So Matthew refers again and again to those Old Testament prophecies. In fact, one of the most common phrases in this Gospel is “*this took place to fulfil what the Lord said through the prophet*”. There are all kinds of allusions and little hints that this Jesus stuff is all part of what God was planning all along. Here is Jesus portrayed as the fulfilment of God’s plan, Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the King, who has come to inaugurate God’s kingly rule on earth – what we refer to as the Kingdom of God, and what Matthew calls “the Kingdom of heaven”, because as a good Jew he cannot utter the name of God, so he has to find a way round it. Here is the King they’ve been waiting for. Here is the climax of the covenant which God made with his people. Jesus ticks all the boxes and fits in with all the prophecies. And Matthew even sets out his Gospel with five prominent chunks of teaching – the five “discourses” which appear in the book – as an allusion to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, the Five Books of the Law which were the basis of the Jewish faith.

So here’s Matthew writing for a bunch of new followers of Jesus, men and women who are feeling their way a bit, and many of whom are anxious about leaving behind the faith and the tradition of their ancestors, and he’s saying, “Don’t worry. It really is OK to believe all this. In fact, this is what you’ve been waiting for, looking for, praying for all along. This is the fulfilment of God’s plan for you and for this world”. And just so that they don’t assume that this is just the same old stuff tarted up for a new generation, Matthew also makes it very clear that Jesus was inaugurating a Kingdom that embraced everyone, not just the Jews. This is a faith that everyone can be a part of, its boundaries set far, far wider than the little nation at the end of the Mediterranean who considered themselves to be specially chosen by God. Yes, they were chosen, but only so that God could work through them his plan for the liberation of all humanity from the power of evil.

And that idea of a plan that has its roots in the Jewish people but is intended to embrace all the world is evident again and again in the stories and parables of Jesus which Matthew decides to include in his book, as we’ll see as we go along. But it’s also evident in the way he’s put the book together. You see, Matthew didn’t just sit down and write what he could remember as some kind of stream of consciousness, making a jumbled list of all the things that had stuck in his mind. This book is very cleverly put together – we’ve already mentioned the five discourses. And it begins, as we shall see next week, with a section that roots this whole story very, very firmly in the tradition of the Jews. It might seem a bit of a boring way to start a book (although we’ll see just how exciting this is next week), but the first section is a genealogy, a list of names. Where does that list start? – Abraham, the founder, if you like, of the Jewish faith, the great patriarch to whom all Jewish people looked back with awe and wonder. This was the man with whom God made his great covenant of redemption, the first in a long line of people who would eventually lead to Jesus. And Matthew is saying through this, “Look – this Jesus is about as Jewish as you can possibly get. His pedigree runs right back to Abraham himself! Don’t worry – you’re not betraying your heritage by following him. In fact, you’re doing exactly what God wanted you to do.”

But, after taking us through the birth and life and teaching and miracles of Jesus, through his trial and death and resurrection, Matthew ends with this new King telling his disciples to go off to all nations with the news that God’s Kingdom has finally arrived. The Great Commission, as we often call it, is the final seal on the covenant which God made with Abraham. The things he said to Abraham weren’t just about that one little nation and the way God might bless them. If you look back to *Genesis 22:18*, you’ll read there that God told Abraham “*all nations on earth will be blessed by your offspring*”, offspring that

Matthew started out by showing included Jesus. This is for everyone. Jesus is King, not just of the Jews, but of all peoples, all nations. The Kingly rule of God, which Jesus inaugurates, will include the whole of humanity – indeed, the whole of creation.

So, in some ways, the passage we read earlier from *Matthew 16* is the very heart of this book. Of course the death and resurrection of Jesus – and all that they imply and all that they accomplish – are at the very heart of our faith. But we need to be aware of what they are so closely linked to – to the establishment of God’s rule, the inauguration of the Kingdom of God, and that Kingdom’s defeat of the power of evil. And especially for the first Jewish readers of this book, the members of that infant church that Matthew was trying to teach, it was important that they saw how this fitted in with the Messiah figure they’d been waiting for for centuries. Here is Peter, the rough and ready Jewish fisherman, recognising that Jesus is not just another preacher or prophet, like Elijah, or Jeremiah or even John the Baptist. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah (as we’ve said so often, Christ is the Greek translation the Hebrew word Messiah), the King. “Christ” is not, as we so often seem to use it, Jesus’ surname or a nickname – it’s his title. Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the King, Jesus the Christ. Jesus is the person that the Jews had looked for and who had been foreseen, foretold and described by the prophets of their faith. He is the Son of Man and the Son of the Living God. Jesus is the King and one day everyone will have to recognise that. In the mean time, we can start to get a glimpse of what that means for us by reading Matthew’s Gospel.

Because, if we believe – as did those first Jewish people to who Matthew was writing – that Jesus is the King, that he did start to usher in the Kingdom, the kingly rule of God, what difference should that make to us? How are we to let it affect our lives? We submit ourselves to Jesus the Christ and say we acknowledge him as Lord – so what does that mean for us? In Tom Wright’s most recent book, *How God Became King*, he makes the point that most people’s view of the Gospels is really only of the beginning bit (the birth stories) and the end bit (the death and resurrection), but most of us don’t bother too much with what’s in between, the bits that help to make sense of the beginning and end, the actual life and teaching of Jesus. That may be a little overstated, but it’s true that we don’t always look very carefully at the things Jesus said and did which should provide a pattern for our worship, work and witness as his people. So, over the next weeks, as we read through and reflect on this amazing book, let’s resolve to learn about why Jesus is King, what it means for the world – and maybe for our little bit of it in particular – and how we are to respond to it. This is all part of God’s plan for us, a plan that began with one man – the nomadic figure of Abraham – but which because of another man now means that his Kingdom is spreading across the whole of the globe.

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The book is carefully planned and begins with a genealogy showing that Jesus is descended from Abraham. There is much in the book to show that Jesus is the promised Messiah (or Christ), the King. And it ends with this new King telling his disciples to go off to all nations with the news that God's Kingdom has finally arrived. In *Genesis 22:18* we read that God told Abraham "*all nations on earth will be blessed by your offspring*", offspring that Matthew started out by showing included Jesus. This is for everyone. Jesus is King, not just of the Jews, but of all peoples, all nations. The Kingly rule of God, which Jesus inaugurates, will include the whole of humanity – indeed, the whole of creation.

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Questions for discussion

1. Each of the four Gospels tells the same story but there are differences between them. Why? Why do we have four gospels?
2. Matthew clearly thinks the Old Testament is important. What do you think? How should we, as Christians, use the Old Testament?
3. Which bits of Matthew's Gospel stick in your mind? Why?
4. And if we believe that Jesus is the King, what difference should that make to us?
5. What do you hope to get out of this series?