

A Synthesis of the Gospel of Matthew in Preparation for Cycle A of the Lectionary and the New Liturgical Year

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The Gospel of Matthew in Cycle A of the Lectionary and the New Liturgical Year

As we enter into the Gospel of Matthew Cycle A lectionary readings in the new Liturgical Year, it makes sense to step back and to trace some of the key themes, literary approaches and uniqueness of the Gospel. This synthesis will help us to receive the individual passages of the Gospel of Matthew that the Church will present to us Sunday by Sunday in Cycle A of the lectionary.

In his introduction to his classic three volume commentary on the Gospel of Matthew entitled *Fire of Mercy: Heart of the World*, the Cistercian Fr. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (also known as Fr. Simeon) writes: “Thus, we shall not approach the sacred text as a simple literary specimen, although, since it is a literary text, we will approach it with *at least* the same attention we would devote to the understanding of a great poem. Our reading (of the Gospel of Matthew) seeks to allow the reader to be molded by the text; the text must echo in our souls and establish its own rhythm in our thinking, feeling, and even breathing.”¹

Analysis of poetry requires a very slow, repetitive and meditative reading with an alert but contemplative attention to rhythm, cadence, structure, image, sequence and theme.

Pope Benedict XVI enflashes this approach for us in *The Word of the Lord* when he emphasizes a rhythm in *lectio divina* of reading/studying, meditating, praying, contemplating and living the text before us.²

¹ Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy: Heart of the World (Volume 1)*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 24. Note: Bishop Barres highly recommends this biblical commentary because it provides biblical analysis that leads the reader to prayer.

² See Bishop Barres’ 2019 Lenten Letter in the March 2019 *Long Island Catholic* (page 3) which analyzes in depth Pope Benedict XVI’s approach to *lectio divina* in his Apostolic Exhortation *The Word of the Lord* (2010).

What goes beyond a poetic analysis is the calling of the power of the Holy Spirit teeming through the text, a calling on the Spirit that allows the text to “echo in our souls and establish its own rhythm in our thinking, feeling, and even breathing.”

Some Critical Themes and Emphases of the Gospel of Matthew

In *The Gospel of Matthew*, Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri identify some key characteristics of the Gospel in their commentary: “Matthew was the first Gospel to be published bearing the name of one of the twelve apostles. Second, the Gospel is both well written and well organized – two great advantages for assisting memorization in a predominantly oral culture such as prevailed in the early Christian centuries. Third, the gospel offers a beautifully balanced picture of Jesus, alternating between his mighty deeds and his memorable discourses. Fourth, the Gospel of Matthew has important things to say about the relationship between the Old Covenant and the New, providing the earliest Christians instruction on what it meant to live as the messianic people of God and in what ways this differs from living according to the legal and liturgical traditions of Israel. Finally, the First Gospel insists that the good news is destined for proclamation, not only among the Jewish people but among the Gentiles. Whatever else can be said about the reasons for its popularity, it is clear that Matthew’s Gospel was well suited to the needs of Christian formation and supplied the ancient Church with a charter for the life and mission in the world.”³

Mitch and Sri emphasize the Gospel of Matthew’s distinctive and balanced view of Christ (Christology) expressed in Our Lord’s great deeds and great discourses, the Church (Ecclesiology) expressed in the Gospel’s effective literary and narrative strategies that are well-organized, memorable and formational and Mission (Missiology) expressed in the Gospel serving as the ancient and contemporary Church’s charter for the life and mission of the world.

It is helpful to keep in mind these five themes as we read, pray and live the entire narrative of the Gospel of Matthew as well as the individual passages presented to us by the Church.

³ Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture)*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 15.

Bishop Richard Henning, our Vicar of Parish Evangelization and Pastoral Planning and a fine biblical scholar, states: “The unique power of the Gospel of Matthew flows from the evangelist’s Old Testament DNA – he creates a dynamic double helix of Israel’s scripture and tradition with the person of Jesus Christ. What results is a remarkable witness to the universal Lordship of this Jesus who remains with His restored and renewed people.”⁴

Christ the Teacher and the Parables in the Gospel of Matthew

In *The Writings of the New Testament*, Luke Timothy Johnson states that “Jesus’ most prominent activity in Matthew’s Gospel is teaching. As God’s Son, he uniquely knows the Father’s will, and can reveal it to others (11:25-30). For the Matthean church, moreover, Jesus is now risen Lord, whose teachings mediate God’s presence...For Matthew, Jesus is teacher precisely as Lord of the church.”⁵

Furthermore, “Matthew’s distinctive understanding of Jesus as teacher affects his presentation of Jesus as parable speaker...they are genuine instruments for teaching the church.”⁶

Pope Benedict XVI emphasizes that “the parables constitute the heart of Jesus’ preaching. While civilizations have come and gone, these stories continue to touch us anew with their freshness.”⁷ He refers to Joachim Jeremias’ point that the parables have a “definite personal character, a unique clarity and simplicity, a

⁴ Bishop Barres wishes to express his gratitude to Bishop Richard Henning for his recent seminars to the clergy on the Gospel of Matthew in preparation for the coming Liturgical Year and for all the ways he enriches the Diocese of Rockville Centre with his presentations of Catholic Biblical Theology, Scholarship and Spirituality as well as his outstanding homilies in both English and Spanish.

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 181

⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, 182-183.

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 183.

matchless mastery of construction”⁸ and he stresses that the “mystery of the Cross is inscribed right at the heart of the parables.”⁹

The Beatitudes in Matthew 5

In *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI points to the Gospel of Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes: “The Beatitudes are the transposition of the Cross and Resurrection into discipleship. But they apply to the disciple because they were first paradigmatically lived by Christ himself. This becomes even more evident if we turn now to consider Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes (cf. Mt 5:3-12). Anyone who reads Matthew’s text attentively will realize that the Beatitudes present a sort of veiled interior biography of Jesus, a kind of portrait of his figure. He who has no place to lay his head (cf. Mt 8:20) is truly poor; he who can say, ‘Come to me...for I am meek and lowly in heart’ (cf. Mt 11:28-29) is truly meek; he is the one who is pure of heart and so unceasingly beholds God. He is the peacemaker, he is the one who suffers for God’s sake. The Beatitudes display the mystery of Christ himself, and they call us into communion with him. But precisely because of their hidden Christological character, the Beatitudes are also a road map for the Church, which recognizes in them the model of what she herself would be. They are directions for discipleship, directions that concern every individual, even though – according to the variety of callings – they do so differently for each person.”¹⁰

Pope Benedict XVI sees the Matthean Beatitudes as both a portrait of Jesus and a road map for the Church on earth. He would emphasize that the person who lives and breathes the Beatitudes is a *realist* because “the realist is the one who recognizes in the word of God the foundation of all things.”¹¹ He stresses that this foundational biblical realism is critical to our times since such false idols as

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 183.

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 194.

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 73-74.

¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI’s Apostolic Exhortation *The Word of the Lord* (2010), #10.

possessions, pleasure and power are “ephemeral” and “show themselves sooner or later to be incapable of fulfilling the deepest yearnings of the human heart.”¹²

The Gospel of Matthew Chapter 25, the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 and the Global Missiology of Pope Francis

Furthermore, the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 cannot be separated from Matthew 25: 35-36: “I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me.”

In his commentary on the 25th Chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Fr. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (also known as Fr. Simeon) writes: “Now the surest argument in favor of identifying the apostles with ‘the least of these my brethren’ comes from Jesus’ own use of language in Matthew. The background to the catalogue of human sufferings and needs that the King here draws up (hunger and thirst, alienation and nakedness, illness and imprisonment, all for his sake) is to be found in the Beatitudes, which provide a similar catalogue (poverty and mourning, hunger and thirst, persecution and insult ‘on my account,’ 5:3-11). At the mount of the Beatitudes, the mortal Jesus was speaking directly to his disciples, instructing them in the secrets of the Kingdom and the bliss promised to those willing to suffer and be persecuted for his sake and the sake of righteousness: ‘Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven’ (5:12). Here, at the Parousia, and in the sight of ‘all the nations’, the glorified Jesus is pointing with royal pride to those who have actually lived the Beatitudes as he taught them to them and who have thus become completely identified with his own person and divine mentality.”¹³

Pope Francis has always emphasized a compelling global missiology and evangelization that are grounded in the spiritual and corporal works of mercy and the intrinsic unity of Matthew 5 and 25.

In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis writes: “Jesus, the evangelizer par excellence and the Gospel in person, identifies especially with the little ones (cf.

¹² Pope Benedict XVI’s Apostolic Exhortation *The Word of the Lord* (2010), #10.

¹³ Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy: Heart of the World (Volume III)*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 846.

Matthew 25:40). This reminds us Christians that we are called to care for the vulnerable of the earth...It is essential to draw near to new forms of poverty and vulnerability, in which we are called to recognize the suffering Christ, even if this appears to bring us no tangible and immediate benefits. I think of the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly who are increasingly isolated and abandoned, and many others.”¹⁴

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Rejoice and Be Glad*, Pope Francis emphasizes in his chapter 3 analysis of each individual Beatitude from the Gospel of Matthew that “Jesus explained with great simplicity what it means to be holy when he gave us the Beatitudes...In the Beatitudes, we find a portrait of the Master, which we are called to reflect in our daily lives.”¹⁵

Since the life of every saint “is like a ray of light streaming forth from the word of God”¹⁶ and a variety of biblical passages they have prayed and lived in the course of their lives on earth, all of their lives stream from the Matthean Beatitudes and Matthew 25 in a most luminous and inspiring way.

The Beatitudes bring out the uniqueness of every person’s mission in the Church. In his Apostolic Exhortation to the young people of the world entitled *Christ is Alive*, Pope gives this sage advice: “But I would also remind you that you won’t become holy and find fulfilment by copying others...You have to discover who you are and develop your own way of being holy, whatever others may say or think. Becoming a saint means becoming more fully yourself, becoming what the Lord wished to dream and create, and not a photocopy. Your life ought to be a prophetic stimulus to others and leave a mark on this world, the unique mark that only you can leave.”¹⁷

Though every person read and prays the same Beatitudes from the Gospel of Matthew, these Beatitudes are expressed through the unique charisms, gifts, history and personality of a unique individual in history in communion with every person in the Church.

¹⁴ Pope Francis Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* (2013), #209-#210.

¹⁵ Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *Rejoice and Be Glad* (2018), #63.

¹⁶ Pope Benedict XVI’s Apostolic Exhortation *The Word of the Lord* (2010), #48.

¹⁷ Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *Christ is Alive* (2019), #162.

The Gospel of Matthew's Focus on Catechesis and Evangelization

In *The Gospel of Matthew*, Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri emphasize how the Gospel concentrates on Catechesis and Evangelization.

In regard to catechesis, Mitch and Sri emphasize: “*Catechesis* has traditionally made extensive use of Matthew, earning it a reputation for being ‘the catechist’s Gospel.’ One thinks of the Sermon on the Mount, where so many essentials of Christian living are brought together into an inspiring vision of the new life made possible by Christ (chaps. 5-7). So too the ecclesial discourse stresses that humility and mercy are the hallmarks of authentic Christian leadership and service to others (18:1-35). One also finds teachings on prayer (6:5-15), celibacy (19:12), marriage (19:1-9), children (19:13-15), and keeping the commandments (19:16-19). At its core, Christian formation involved modeling our lives on Jesus, who says, ‘Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart’ (11:29). Now as always, the way of the disciple is the way of imitating the Master...Matthew teaches us to read and ponder the whole Bible with reference to Jesus, for he recognized that our understanding of God and his ways are deeply enriched by discovering the unity of the Father’s plan as it unfolds in the pages of Scripture.”¹⁸

In regard to evangelization, Mitch and Sri emphasize: “*Evangelization* is also at the heart of Matthew’s Gospel. Not only does Jesus set the example by his actions, but this is also the subject of his final words in the book: ‘Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ (28:19). This missionary mandate still has the force of marching orders for the Church today. At one level, Jesus calls us to engage in personal evangelization, which means sharing the good news with friends and family members, coworkers and business contacts, neighbors and new acquaintances. However, it is also a summons to transform entire nations by inculturating the gospel and shining the light of Christian truth into every corridor

¹⁸Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture)*, 27.

of human society and its institutions. This is what it means for disciples to be ‘the salt of the earth’ (5:13) and the ‘light of the world’ (5:14).”¹⁹

In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis emphasizes that “all evangelization is based on the word of God, listened to, meditated upon, lived, celebrated and witnessed to”²⁰ and that “the best incentive for sharing the Gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart.”²¹

In this New Liturgical Year and Lectionary Cycle (A) where we focus on the Gospel of Matthew, may we contemplate it with love, linger over its pages, read it with hearts on fire and minds illumined by the Light of Christ so that we can be instruments of a new Springtime of Catholic Evangelization on Long Island and a new era of *dramatic missionary growth*.

¹⁹ Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture)*, 27.

²⁰ Pope Francis Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* (2013), #174.

²¹ Pope Francis Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* (2013), #264.