

Lent Group session 4: Holy Week (I)

We've seen how Matthew doesn't feel he has to arrange his Gospel on quite the same framework as Mark or Luke, but it's remarkable how that all changes when we get to Holy Week. Though both Matthew and Luke add extra material to Mark's timeline, they stay pretty much in lock-step from Palm Sunday until Easter morning. To copy out all the passages would take a lot of paper, but you can get the picture from this short extract:

Event	Matthew	Mark	Luke
Entry into Jerusalem	21.1-9	11.1-10	19.28-38
Jesus in the Temple	16-17	11	45-46
Question: authority	23-27	27-33	20.1-8
Parable: Wicked Tenants	33-46	12.1-12	9-19
Question: Tribute to Caesar	22.15-22	13-17	20-26
Question: The Resurrection	23-33	18-27	27-40
About David's Son	41-46	35-37	41-44
Woes against Pharisees	23.1-36	37-40	45-47
Destruction of the Temple	24.1-3	13.1-4	21.5-7
Signs of the End	4-8	5-8	8-11
Beginning of the Troubles	9-14	9-13	12-19

The events fall in the same order across all three Gospels, and if we continued through to Easter morning that would continue. John, of course, isn't quite in line, but even so he sticks much more closely to the chronology than he does elsewhere. This *could* tell us something really interesting – any thoughts as to what it might be?

We have a king who rides two donkeys

Everyone's used to the Palm Sunday story, even to the point of borrowing a donkey to do the job year on year. Matthew is pretty close to Mark and Luke, but he does two things differently:

1. He puts in the quote from the Old Testament. It's a sort of mixture of Isaiah 62.11 and Zechariah 9.9.
 - a) Why do you think he puts this in?
 - b) What are we meant to understand by this story?

Reflect in pairs, and share any thoughts with the group.

2. How many donkeys? (*Technically speaking, the word translated 'ass' means 'beast of burden', but it's not likely Jesus rode in on, say, a camel!*)
 - a) Is Matthew 'flat-footed' in his understanding of the Old Testament story?
 - b) Just what does Jesus sit on?
 - c) What's this all about (perhaps)?

Discuss in pairs any initial thoughts.

The second Century Christian writer Justin the Martyr wrote *'The Dialogue with Trypho the Jew'* in which Justin attempts to persuade Trypho that Jesus is the promised Messiah. In it (chapter 53) he argues:

it was prophesied by Zechariah, one of the twelve[prophets], that such would take place, in the following words: 'Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion; shout, and declare, daughter of Jerusalem; behold, thy King shall come to thee, righteous, bringing salvation, meek, and lowly, riding on an ass, and the foal of an ass.'(1) Now, that the Spirit of prophecy, as well as the patriarch Jacob, mentioned both an ass and its foal, which would be used by Him; and, further, that He, as I previously said, requested His disciples to bring both beasts; [this fact] was a prediction that you of the synagogue, along with the Gentiles, would believe in Him. For as the unharnessed colt was a symbol of the Gentiles even so the harnessed ass was a symbol of your nation.

Possible? Convincing? Forced? What do you think? Is this another hint of Matthew's concern about Gentiles?

In the parable of the wedding feast, there's a perplexing reference to a guest brought in off the streets who is thrown out again for not having his best clothes on. Is this another reference to the presence of non-Jews within the faith – 'It's not enough just to turn up, you have to take the invitation seriously'?

Woe, Woe and Thrice Woe

Luke and Mark contain a handful of verses each against the Pharisees. Matthew has 36 verses, most of which have no equivalent in either Luke or Mark. What might this suggest? Read a little of Mt 23.1-36 for yourself and get the flavour of them.

The heated, impassioned, almost libellous denunciation of Jewish religious traditions and figures may make us feel very uncomfortable. Now read the following:

For the apostates let there be no hope. And let the arrogant government be speedily uprooted in our days. Let the nozerim and the minim be destroyed in a moment. And let them be blotted out of the Book of Life and not be inscribed together with the righteous. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant".

This isn't a Christian text, but a Jewish one. It was added at some point to the 'Eighteen Benedictions' of Jewish daily prayer*, and there is some reason to believe it dates from around the same time as Matthew's Gospel. 'minim' has been translated as 'heretics' or 'Sectarians' (perhaps derived from a word meaning 'divided up', 'counted'); 'nozerim' it's been suggested, is 'Nazarenes' (a term which Islamic State used to describe Christians). If (big 'if') the prayer is from the same period as Matthew, what does it tell us about relations at the time between the Jesus movement and traditional Judaism?

*It has long since been expunged! Nevertheless, compare the BCP Good Friday Collect

O merciful God, who hast made all men, and hatest nothing that thou hast made, nor wouldest the death of a sinner, but rather that he should be converted and live; Have mercy upon all Jews, Turks, Infidels, and Hereticks, and take from them all ignorance, hardness of heart, and contempt of thy word; and so fetch them home, blessed Lord, to thy flock, that they may be saved among the remnant of the true Israelites, and be made one fold under one shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

and the Good Friday Reproaches (traditional form) eg:

*My people, what have I done to you? How have I offended you? Answer me.
I opened the sea for you,
And you have opened my side with a spear.*

Does this it help us understand the 'Woes' better?

In pairs: How do we deal with historic texts like these? Are we allowed to have friendly or respectful dealings with Jewish people – and if so, how do we square them with this bit of Matthew?

Bring your thoughts to the rest of the group.

'Depend upon it sir, the prospect of being hanged in a fortnight concentrates a man's mind wonderfully.'

Read to yourself Mt 24.4-36. reflect on it for a few moments, and then ask yourself:

- What is Jesus describing – in simple terms?
- When will this come about?
- Who is the intended audience? Where do we fit in?

Discuss in pairs, and share thoughts with the group

This style of writing about the end of All Things, is probably best known to most of us in Daniel and Revelation, but it makes a major showing in all three of the parallel ('Synoptic') Gospels, and is given by Jesus himself. It's been argued that this style of writing occurs 'When prophecy fails' – that is, when the good times don't materialise, no matter how faithful the people. ('Apocalyptic' is the technical word, of course, and it's slid into our speech with the meaning of 'devastating,' but in the Biblical writings it's got more to do with the secret truths of God being revealed to the favoured.)

- What impact do the apocalyptic bits of Scripture have on us and the Christian faith?
- Reflect on Dr Johnson's quote (above). How might apocalyptic have shaped Christian priorities?
- Did Jesus expect the End of the World would arrive soon?

Share your thoughts with one another, and then with the group.