

I want to begin this evening with reminding you that the Gospels are not histories. They are theological documents that use narrative to make theological points. So, also, I would like to remind you of some things about Matthew's Gospel. Firstly it is the only Gospel that begins with a lineage for Jesus connecting him directly back to Abraham. Secondly, Matthew is the first Gospel to include a nativity story. The Gospel of Mark which predates that of Matthew by at least 5 years and possibly as many as 20 includes no such story. Luke has an even more elaborate nativity story. John like Mark has no such story. Thirdly of all the Gospels, Matthew is the most Jewish. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus is presented over and over again in contexts that allude to Hebrew history that would not have been missed by Jewish readers. The lineage is an example, but there many such connections made, including that it is only in Matthew that the flight into Egypt to escape the murderous campaign by King Herod is recorded. Why? In Matthew 2: 14 it is recorded: *Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."* This is a direct reference to Hosea chapter 11, verse 1. Hosea was referring to God's calling Israel from out of Egypt, but Matthew uses the story as he builds for Jesus to be seen as the Messiah. The ensuing massacres of the innocents allows Matthew to say *Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."*

Our passage this evening is the first incident in Matthew in Jesus' adult life. It is preceded by John the Baptist quoting Isaiah Chapter 40 verse 3: *A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.* Jesus comes from Galilee to be baptized by John. The significance of the Jordan is profound. As Moses prayed to God to part the Red Sea to allow the Children of Israel to pass, so Joshua parted the waters of the Jordan to allow them to enter the promised land. So too Elijah and Elisha parted the waters of the Jordan. It is clearly fitting that Jesus should be baptized by John in those same river waters. But Jesus is different. Before I tell you how, let me remind you of Genesis 1: 6 to 8. *And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky.* In Jesus' Baptism it is not the waters of the Jordan that are parted. It is the dome, the sky that God created to separate the waters, that is parted so that the Spirit of God can descend upon Jesus like a dove – a clear signal that Jesus is much more than Moses, Joshua, Elijah or Elisha. And then Matthew to be sure no one misses the message has a voice from heaven say through the parted dome: *This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

As Moses and the Children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, Jesus' baptism is followed by Jesus wandering in the wilderness for 40 days. While Moses was in the wilderness he faced three serious challenges, the first was a shortage of food which was solved by manna from heaven, the second was water which forced Moses to put God to the test by striking a rock, the third was when the people turned away from God and worshiped a golden idol of a calf. While Jesus was in the wilderness he faced three major temptations from the devil: 1. a shortage of food and the devil tempting him to turn stones into bread. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy Chapter 8 verse 3 *...one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.* 2. The devil tempts Jesus to throw himself down from the pillar of the temple putting God to the test, Jesus again quotes Deuteronomy 6:16, *Do not put the Lord your God to the test.* Finally, the Devil says to Jesus that he will give him all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would but worship him. Jesus replies, *Away with you Satan, for it is written, worship the Lord your God and serve him only.* I trust that by now you can see the parallels with the story of Moses, but also that Matthew positions Jesus as doing even more than Moses. The connections of Jesus to Jewish liturgical life continue throughout Matthew's Gospel. That is why unlike John, Jesus' entire ministry seems to be accomplished in a year because Matthew makes it connect entirely to the liturgical year in the synagogue.

To really appreciate Matthew it helps to have some appreciation of the conditions in which he was writing. Matthew was thought to have been writing in Antioch in Syria most probably in the 80's of the Common Era – some 50 years after the resurrection. The Temple had been destroyed in the year 70 entirely threatening the future of Judaism. The Jewish faith was saved by the Pharisees who reoriented it to become focused on the synagogue as it remains today. Followers of Jesus attended the synagogue and were eager if, indeed, not desperate to have Jesus recognized by their fellow worshipers as the Messiah. In many ways that is the *raison d'être* of Matthew's Gospel. The struggle was ultimately lost in 88 when the "Christians" as they were just coming to be called were expelled from the synagogues. That was when the complete break between the two faiths occurred. Parenthetically, that is why in John's Gospel which was written some considerable time after Matthew's, often appears to cast Jews as the villains. What does all this mean to us? Well I hope this explication of our reading from Matthew gives you some guidance on how the Bible needs to be read if one is really to understand it. We are such prisoners of literalism, ill equipped to read a book so foundational to western societies that is not even remotely concerned with literal truth. It is about spiritual truth as told through narrative. One author I read quite often describes literalism as the "Gentile Heresy". For now, I can only remind you of the last line of John: *But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. And that through believing you may have life in his name.* Developing our understanding of what our Holy Book is really telling us can only make that belief stronger and that life richer. Amen.