

I think you know that Matthew's Gospel was primarily addressed to a Jewish audience. Matthew relied heavily on the Gospel of Mark for source material. Mark wrote between 10 and 20 years earlier than Matthew. Mark's Gospel was directed at a largely Gentile audience, so it focused on the deeds of Jesus and the miracles and the suffering. Matthew was focused on making the connection for a Jewish audience between Jesus and the predictions of the Messiah in the Hebrew Bible and with salvific events in the history of the Jewish people. That is particularly important in understanding our Gospel reading this evening. It is also important to remember that Matthew's Gospel was written sometime in the 80's, around 50 years after the crucifixion and more than 10 years after the destruction of the temple. It is also important to note that it was written at a time when tensions between Followers of the Way and the Synagogue authorities were high.

So let me outline those connections between Jesus and the predictions and salvific events in Jewish history. *From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.* Matthew's Jewish audience would have made the connection between the three hours of darkness and the three days of darkness which was the 9th plague that God visited on Egypt to persuade Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go in Exodus 10. Darkness was also seen as a symbol of God's wrath and the distance between God and humanity, again many in a Jewish audience would have seen the connection to Amos 8 verses 9 and 10: *On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day.* The darkness was like a veil of mourning. As the sinless Son of God took on the burden of sin, the darkness symbolized the distance from God created by sin. It may also be seen as a return to the formless void that antedated creation.

The darkness ended when Jesus let out a loud cry *Eli, Eli lema sabachthani – My God, my God why have you forsaken me?* Again, no Jew would have missed the connection to Psalm 22 which begins *My God, my God why have you forsaken me.* It was a custom in Jewish worship to often use only the first line of a Psalm to refer to it, for, of course, most members of a congregation would have memorized all the Psalms. Written many centuries before, the first half of Psalm 22 reads like an account of the crucifixion: V7: *All who see me laugh me to scorn; they curl their lips and wag their heads, saying,* V8: *“He trusted in the Lord; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, if he delights in him.”* V15: *My mouth is dried out like a pot-sherd; my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; and you have laid me in the dust of the grave.* V16: *Packs of dogs close me in, and gangs of evil doers circle around me; they pierce my hands and my feet; I can count all my bones.* V17: *They stare and gloat over me; *they divide my*

garments among them; they cast lots for my clothing. The second half of the Psalm is a complete flip with lines like: *V22 Praise the Lord, you that fear him; stand in awe of him, O offspring of Israel, all you of Jacob's line, give glory. And: My soul shall serve him; they shall be know as the Lord's for ever.* Despair and a return to hope in 30 verses. In Matthew, Jesus gives a loud cry and breathes his last. In John, his loud cry is, *It is accomplished*, i.e. redemption is achieved.

Our reading continues *When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah."* In Malachi 4: 5 *See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.* Jewish belief was that the prophet who bodily ascended into heaven, Elijah would return in advance of the Messiah.

Jesus breathes his last *At that moment the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.* The curtain of the Temple separated the main body of the Temple from the Holy of Holies in which God was believed to have his earthly home. Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies and he only on the Day of Atonement. When he would sacrifice a bull and a goat to God to atone for the sins of the entire people over the last year. The tearing of the curtain signified that no longer did the people need the High Priest as an intermediary. Jesus opened direct access for people to God. This point for Matthew's intended audience was both theological and practical. Remember that Matthew was writing at least 10 years after the complete destruction of the Temple and the execution of the entire priestly class. There were no priests to intervene with God. Accepting Jesus as the Messiah opened up direct access.

The earthquake and the rising of the dead is a sign that death no longer has power over those who are in Christ, as St. Paul, writing at least 15 years before Matthew, said in the letter to the Romans *We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.* Finally, the Roman Centurion, a Gentile, a hardened executioner, a servant of a brutal empire says, *"Truly this man was God's Son!"* If one such as he believes what excuse do we have?

Earlier in this homily, I said, "As the sinless Son of God took on the burden of sin". Do not for a moment imagine that this legitimizes the heinous doctrine of substitutionary atonement – the wicked notion that God required someone to be punished and to suffer for the sins of the world. To use the words from the hymn: *There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.* By his life, death, and resurrection Jesus gave each of us the opportunity to repent of our sins, to turn from them over and over again, and become one with God. As I have said in other homilies, sin is a state of alienation from God and neighbour out of which harmful actions

follow. The Christ gives us an ever-open route out of that alienation. Punishment and paying the price have nothing to do with it!

What do I hope you might take away from this homily? I hope that it might be a lesson in how to read the bible – not as a simple narrative, this happened and then that happened, etcetera, but as a mystical, deeply symbolic, metaphoric statement of eternal truth. Remember Matthew was writing at a time when the conflict between synagogue and church was reaching its heights. He was looking to persuade fellow Jews that to accept Jesus as the Messiah was not to abandon their heritage from Abraham, but rather it was to fulfill that heritage. Amen