

## MATTHEW

Matthew is named among the 12 Apostles. He even records in his gospel the actual day when Jesus called him from his business as collector of taxes for the Romans to become a wandering disciple (see Matthew 9:9). In Mark's description of this event Matthew is called by his other name (two names were common in the New Testament) - Levi son of Alphaeus.

Matthew, as we noted above, delights to point out the many amazing cases where something Jesus did, or that happened to him, was a direct fulfilment of a prediction made hundreds of years previously in the Old Testament. His favourite phrase is "*All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet*". As you read, look out for prophecies of the virgin birth, of Jesus' birthplace in Bethlehem, his work in Galilee, his healing of the sick, his quiet style of preaching, and the donkey ride into Jerusalem. Even Zechariah's forecast of the precise number of silver pieces paid over to Judas the betrayer falls under Matthew's notice.

Along with Luke, Matthew lists Jesus' family tree, proving his blood descent from King David and from Abraham. He is the only gospel writer to search out and record the visit made to the infant Jesus by the Wise Men from the East, and Herod's vain attempt to execute his potential rival.

In chapters five to seven, Matthew gives a very detailed account of the Sermon on the Mount. This is Jesus' opening statement of what he asks of his disciples. If you have thought of becoming a follower of Jesus, or have already started out on the road to the Kingdom of God, this is essential reading. Here Jesus develops the idea that God is not a remote deity who can be paid off by expensive sacrifices or fasting or alms for the poor. He shows us a Father who loves his children, and weeps when they let him down, a God who is himself the standard we

must reach up to. For Jesus' followers, it is not sufficient to claim they have never killed. They must conquer even the feelings of hate and the desire for revenge that lead to murder. He dismisses the elaborate system of oaths the Pharisees had developed to guarantee their promises. The believer must always tell the truth, just as God does. It is not permitted to love your neighbour but hate your enemy. You must show kindness even to those who make your life a misery, because that is what God is like. He sends the rain on bad and good alike, in the hope that his enemies might repent and become his friends. "*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matthew 5:48). Nothing less will do. And do not worry about food and clothes and what will happen tomorrow, he says. Concentrate on the Kingdom of God, and your heavenly Father will provide what you need.

From chapter 13 onwards, Matthew collects together a comprehensive list of Jesus' famous Parables. These are stories taken from everyday life, each of which teaches an important principle in an easily remembered form. Parables kept Jesus safe from his enemies. He could talk about the Kingdom of God, disguising himself as a farmer, or a businessman, or the son of a king, and there was nothing they could use to accuse him of treason against Caesar. If they did not understand, the disciples would ask him for the key to the characters in the story when they were alone with him. But often the meaning was so transparent that even his enemies could see he was condemning them.

In his run-up to the crucifixion of Jesus, Matthew portrays vividly how the leaders of the Jews hated Jesus, and how he in turn publicly exposed their hypocrisy (outward show). Like John, Matthew records Jesus meeting his followers in Galilee after his resurrection from the dead. He concludes

with Jesus' command to the Apostles - *“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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”* (chapter 28:19,20).

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