
A Homily Observing Matthew

An Evensong homily by Dean Sam Candler
The Feast of St. Matthew, *observed*

This afternoon, we remember some religious person known as Matthew. Many of you probably realize, however, when it comes to New Testament scholarship, that we have little idea whether the Matthew who wrote the gospel is the same Matthew who was a tax collector.

We probably do not know much about the apostle who was called Matthew and who was also, apparently, a tax-collector. All we know are the attitudes that surrounded tax collectors in those days, and so we write the hymns and anthems that we sang today.

But this afternoon, I will speak of the Matthew who wrote the gospel. Because we do know something about him (I suppose he was a him). He left something written down. He left a gospel.

The early gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, were creating a new genre of literature in those days. So, they shared some things in common. They present the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth in a similar narrative fashion. But their differences are apparent.

For instance, the gospel of Matthew includes one verse that no other gospel includes. It is Matthew 5:17, a fairly well known verse, because it is so powerful. Jesus says there, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17).

The saying is striking, because Jesus was certainly accused of disobeying the law and the prophets. He healed on the Sabbath, which apparently was a prohibition against working on the Sabbath. He ate in unclean ways, and he was finally persecuted such blasphemy.

Something happened in Matthew’s interpretation of Jesus that is an important lesson for us. Matthew the gospel writer definitely wanted Jesus to fit into the standing pattern of Hebrew prophetic fulfillment. For instance, the gospel of Matthew contains more explicit references to the Old Testament than do the other gospels. Many times, it is Matthew who says something like “This happened in order to fulfill the scriptures.” Matthew wanted the scriptures fulfilled. Matthew wanted Jesus to fit the pattern.

But Matthew discovers something striking about Jesus. The way Jesus fulfills scriptures is different. Jesus fulfills the scriptures by changing them. I mean, of course, that Jesus changes the interpretation of those scriptures.

Matthew introduces a phrase that was new in those times. We think of this phrase as very familiar, because we have heard it so many times! But the pattern is unique to the Gospel of Matthew. It goes like this: “You have heard it said, but I say to you.”

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment” (Matthew 5:21–22).

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27–28).

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, ... if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (Matthew 5:38–39).

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43–44).

Wow. This is new stuff. This is unique to Matthew. We remember today Matthew, a man who learned something when he tried to fit Jesus into his pre-existing system of Law. He learned that Jesus fulfills the law, but he does so by changing it.

Yes, parts of Matthew’s gospel are still quite strict and straight-laced. His gospel contains some rigid lessons. But his gospel also contains grace, the grace of Jesus fulfilling the law by changing it.

That is the saint whom I want to acknowledge today. Each of us wants order, for sure, and we usually want the order to which we have grown accustomed over time, the order we are used to. But Jesus brings us new order, new life, new fulfillment, that often changes our sense of whatever the old order was. We don’t have to be strict observers of the Jewish law and prophets to experience this. We can be observers of Hinduism or Buddhism, or even Atheism.

The savior Jesus fulfills our hopes and expectations, whatever they might be; but he often does so by changing our sense of law and order. The Gospel of Matthew shows us this transformation quite clearly, and so we give thanks for Matthew today. We have heard lots of things said in our lives, but Jesus says something beyond, and fulfilling, and life-giving.

Love your neighbors. Paul, the writer to the Romans, saw the same thing: “Love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:8). Jesus came not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip