

ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

A Commentary

The Holy Father and the Bishops have recently uttered an Exhortation on the Word of God, *Verbum Dei*, a phrase used to denote the Bible. In this document they strongly recommend the practise of *lectio divina*, which can be translated as “spiritual reading.” Hopefully the *Oratory Magazine* can provide help to the first stage of spiritual reading, which the Pope says is “reading the text asking the question what does the text say in itself?” There are three other stages I’m afraid which must be commended to readers but which cannot be the subject of this commentary. These further stages are; what does the text say to us? Next, what do we say to the Lord in reply? And finally Contemplation, asking what conversion of mind and heart is the Lord asking of us?

The purpose of this and subsequent articles is to provide helpful notes to answer the first question, what does the text say in itself? arising from reading the Gospel According to Matthew, the first gospel. Maybe we can also make a start on answering the question, what does the text say to us?, but anything further will have to be left to our readers’ initiative and prayer.

At once we are confronted with the teasing question – is Matthew in fact the first gospel? It is necessary to ask this because in modern times many commentators have asserted that it is not, that Mark was the first. Although this has almost been assumed, the Church continues to present Matthew as No. 1. This is because of Tradition – we find that it was the first to become well known widely in the Church. The earliest allusions to its words can be found in the letters of St Clement to the church in Corinth which can be dated about the year 95. There are many such allusions in this letter and in those of St Ignatius of Antioch, written a little later during the reign of Emperor Trajan. They are allusions only, not quotations, i.e. Matthew is not mentioned by name, but they show that the words of the first gospel were known to Clement and Ignatius. They give the impression that this was in fact the only gospel that was known at that time. There are no such allusions which can be identified with the other gospels. The *Didache*, or “Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,” also gives the impression that at the time of its writing there was only one gospel text, as it seems to mean Matthew when it refers to “the Gospel of the Lord” and most of its allusions are to Matthew. It is interesting that even in the film industry Matthew is still taken as presenting the standard, as it were, of a gospel. In my view there is much to be said for maintaining this stance. The tradition is that the gospel was first written in Aramaic, the language of Jesus and His disciples, and soon after made into a Greek version, which is the one accepted by the Church as inspired Scripture.

The opening words, with no other original heading, are “BIBLOS,” meaning Book or Document, “of the Genealogy.” The word Document must refer only to the first 17 verses of the gospel. Any reader who has been studying Genesis will know how important a place genealogies have in the Bible. Basically genealogies meant what we call History, at least they were the foundations of history. The fact that the Church’s first gospel leads off with a document of this kind makes us aware that just as ancient Israel had its sacred scrolls and texts, so it was the intention of the Holy Spirit to provide the Church also with its own sacred texts. Jesus Christ, , son of David, son of Abraham. The word son has the sense here of descendant, meaning to place Jesus in the full stream of Jewish real time and especially in the history of the Jewish royal dynasty. So right from the start we are taught that we are dealing with a real historical figure and one of central importance in sacred history.

As we read the genealogy, we are being subtly and as it were unconsciously presented with a reality which on the one hand is real, in the worldly and actual sense, and at the same time is also utterly strange and transcendent, almost otherworldly. For example, all the names up to Zerubbabel inclusive are found in the Old Testament, regardless of the merits of those named. Some of the kings mentioned were apostates or at least patrons of unorthodoxy. Several women are mentioned, all in some way challenging to conventional propriety. Tamar in verse 3 used commendable, though

morally and physically risky, guile to gain her rights. Rahab in verse 5 was a Canaanite harlot, Ruth in the same verse was a foreigner and in v.6 there is recalled, in decent anonymity, an adulteress. The genealogy is a scheme, artificially organised though historical; a list divided into three equal parts and we know nothing of most of those mentioned in the third part, except that they must all have been "Davidide."

So far, so human. But in verse 16 we suddenly realise what we are being led into, why these characters have been selected for this family tree. Another woman is mentioned of whom it is said that of her, not Joseph, not the man as in all the previous members of the genealogy, was born Jesus! Thus Jesus, whose title and surname is King, Christ, is descended from David etc, but not through Joseph. Jesus, then, is of this world, of the royal family, but transcendent, strange, and utterly superior to his royal ancestors. Already, in this opening document, we are being introduced to the One Person, with Two natures, of our Lord.

It can be thought strange that Joseph, a Davidide, was not apparently of the upper class in Jewish society. If this seems odd to us it is because we British have become accustomed to a sort of royal mystique. Kings and Queens, "Royals," are not ordinary people in our eyes. But a little thought and especially a study of history should dispel this illusion. Kings and emperors and so forth have not always come from the "best families" and the descendants of august names do not invariably occupy distinguished positions. In any case the Fathers of the Church have generally considered, and the liturgy supports this, that our Lady was also Davidide, even though the genealogy in both Matthew and Luke leads to Joseph.

The remaining verses of chapter 1 give a more detailed account of the birth of Jesus, just as chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis give a more detailed account of the origin of humanity. Joseph and Mary were engaged, that is, there was already a legal bond between them and also between their respective families. If those commentators are right as they probably are who think that the first gospel was published in Christian Jewish circles in northern Palestine and Syria, the words of this text are concerned with dispelling slanderous accounts current at that time and place which were being circulated among the Jews calling in question Jesus' legitimate birth. The justice, that is obedience to God's Law, of Joseph is stressed, his religious piety and sensitivity to the supernatural is emphasized, as also his being heir of David. It should have been unthinkable that such a man would have condoned an attempt to introduce an illegitimate child into the family. Although some Fathers thought that Joseph at first suspected his fiancée of infidelity, the great Dominican scholar Lagrange is surely right to say that nothing in the text supports this view. The text gives us to understand that Joseph was perplexed what to do in a situation which was full of unanswerable questions and needed and obtained enlightenment from Heaven, in the light of which he immediately acted. All this the gospel tells us could have been predicted from the prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 7.

Early commentators have been exercised in repudiating the assertion by Helvidius and other heretics that the last verse of the chapter implies that Joseph and Mary had marital relations after the birth of Jesus. I shall leave commenting on Jesus "brothers" until we reach chapter 13, because at the stage of chapter 1 the Evangelist is concerned mainly with Our Lord's legitimacy. Almost incidentally the Evangelist shows that He enjoyed the natural legal rights attached in the Torah to the first-born, regardless of whether there were subsequent children or not. C.D.