

The 1st Sunday of Advent — December 1, 2019

Happy New Year ! An appropriate greeting for today's homily. I say this because, as you know, and as you can see from the colors, this is the first Sunday of Advent, which for Christians is the beginning of a new Church, or Liturgical Year. I am pretty sure if I were to ask some of our young people in the 'Catechesis of the Good Shepherd' program that they could give us a very helpful understanding of what this Season means, and why we do many of the things we do.

We have calendar years, financial years, school years, and so on. So, we also have a church year. Church years are on a three-year cycle, they are called Cycle A, Cycle B, and Cycle C. Yes, I understand not very imaginative indeed. This is one of the many areas where we could do with the help of our female sisters in terms of bringing imaginative energy to our Church !!! Each year is devoted to one of the synoptic Gospel writers, those three writers whose works are very similar to each other Synoptic meaning 'One-Eye' !

Year A belongs to Matthew, Year B to Mark, and Year C to Luke. St. John's Gospel being a different breed altogether, has many of its parts scattered among the other three, and it is used on special Feasts and Celebrations throughout the year, and on some ordinary Sundays.

Last year, you may recall, we were on Cycle C and so we followed the Gospel of St. Luke. You may recall when I asked you, back in June, to follow along on the journey as Jesus set His eyes toward Jerusalem. It was a 21-week journey, and we experienced the core of His teaching and instruction on this journey. Many of you followed along, and the bulletin tracked the journey for you.

Today, on our Church New Year's Day, we begin all over again and start Year A, that means Matthew's Gospel. We will be hearing from Matthew all this year until Advent of next year. Holidays and Feasts will be the exceptions to this, where material from the other Gospels will be used.

So, I have a New Year's Proposal : Why not make this the year when you read the whole of Matthews Gospel ? What a great accomplishment that would be when we come to the beginning of Advent this time next year!

So who is St. Matthew ? We know very little about him. Clearly, he is not the Apostle Matthew. He is the author of the second Gospel, though we have traditionally listed him first. This was due to the fact that many thought he was the first author. Research now has established that Mark was the first Gospel writer, and that Matthew drew the major portions of his story from Mark's text. This is not a problem in any way. It does help us to see that he was writing to a very specific community, with very specific concerns and issues in their lives. Matthew wrote his Gospel most likely around the year 85, some 50 years removed from Jesus, and it appears to be written outside of Palestine.

He is a faithful Jew who had accepted the form of Judaism that Jesus embodied. It is clear that he is writing to a Jewish Community (The Diaspora) that has fled their homeland, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 A.D., which he mentions in his Gospel. Antioch in Syria, which had a large Jewish population, appears to be a likely place where he wrote. He is writing to a very troubled community, which appears to be made up of **Jews for Jesus, like himself, and gentile converts to Judaism of Jesus**, consisting of men and women of various civic and ethnic standing. It is quite a mixed group.

His task in writing to these people was a very tough and delicate task : how to reconcile two expressions of Judaism ? On the one hand, there were those members of Matthew's community who, like himself, were Jews and proud of it, but were followers of Jesus. On the other hand, there were members of the Pharisees who were Jews and proud of it, and they followed the Torah, the old Law.

Matthew's Gospel provides us a front-row seat as the story unfolds. We see the tension in his Gospel as many of those confrontations between the Pharisees and Jesus unfold. The issues are regularly about following 'The Law' or not following 'The Law.' Matthew is at his wit's end trying to reconcile both factions. He is saying, fellow Jews, we are just as faithful as you, we are as loyal as you, we are following the law, but Jesus is the 'fulfillment' of that law. **He is not some novelty** that has appeared among us, but He is the very 'Enfleshment of our God' the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is a faithful Jew fulfilling the law and the prophets, not abrogating it.

So, as we study and come to try and understand Matthew's Gospel, we have an Epic Story that challenges our core beliefs powerful reading, powerful teachings, powerful clashes, in regard to doctrine and law.

So what can you expect as we enter into this year of Matthew ? Look for 4 things :

- 1) Lots of references to the Old Testament, as Matthew attempts to validate Jesus as a true Israelite.
- 2) Lots of conflicts with the Pharisees, reflecting the tensions of his time.
- 3) Lots of calls to Discipleship, to Follow Him, to shore up our struggling brothers and sisters, His brothers and sisters. And calls to surrender.
- 4) Lots of parables to bring home the message to bring home His point in the teaching.

So ! Please stay tuned, and read along with us "The Greatest Story ever told" — What an Amazing Journey Ahead ! Please join us for our Penance Service on Monday, Dec16th.

Happy New Year !
Fr. Gerry Hurley