



The Passion according to Matthew

7

Matthew 26:1 - 28:20



Prayer

O God, who by the pages of both Testaments
Instruct and prepare us to celebrate the Paschal Mystery,
Grant that we may comprehend your mercy,
So that the gifts we receive from you this night
may confirm our hope of the gifts to come.
Through Christ our Lord Amen.
(From the Easter Vigil)

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The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus represent the climax and highpoint of each of the Gospels. It is here that each evangelist seeks to bring his message and themes to the attention of the reader. While Matthew has drawn heavily upon Mark as his principal source, he also has his own concerns and traditions. These include several expansions at the Last Supper, the Arrest of Jesus, the Fate of Judas, the Trial before Pilate, the Cosmic Events at Jesus' Death and Resurrection, the Guards at the Tomb and the Commissioning of the Disciples.

The result of these inclusions is that while Matthew includes nearly every verse of Mark, his passion has a very different atmosphere. Matthew uses the passion to pull together the main themes of the Gospel:

the fulfilment of the scriptures; the history of Israel; the person of Jesus, revealed as the Son of God and King of the Jews; the final conflict with the Jewish authorities - resulting in the transfer of the kingdom to the Gentiles.

This observation helps us to understand the importance of this final section of the Gospel in relation to the Gospel as a whole. While we may read the passion as a unit on its own, it should be understood in the light of the entire Gospel.

This has two consequences for Matthew's Gospel:

1. The discernment of common themes within the Nativity and the Passion, lead us to understand these passages as 'bookends' around the Gospel, underlining its message.
2. Mark's themes have a greater intensity within the context of Matthew's Gospel.

For example, the Nativity opens with Herod the King, the Chief Priests and the Scribes seeking the death of the child Jesus. The Gospel concludes with Pilate the Governor, the Chief Priests and the Scribes instrumental in putting Jesus to death. These two scenes contain Matthew's only reference to Jesus as the *'King of the Jews.'*

The failure of the disciples is attested to in each of the Gospels. However, while in Mark, their continual misunderstanding of Jesus may excuse their failure; in Matthew their clearly professed faith makes their failure and flight more shocking. This is particularly true of Peter who has such an exalted position.

Matthew's critique of the Pharisees is severe. However, their absence in the passion narrative only serves to underline the common theme within each of the Gospels: they were not responsible for the death of Jesus.

Judas' betrayal. The failure of the Disciples.

The failure of the disciples is brought home to us by Matthew's concentration upon two of their principal characters: Judas and Peter. Matthew supplies most of our knowledge of Judas. At the Last Supper, only Matthew has Jesus identify Judas as the betrayer.

Is Matthew's passion

'His blood be on us and on our children' (27:25) No other line in the passion narratives has done more to embitter Jewish and Christian relations than this. However can such a verse be understood to be anti-semitic?

Matthew's gospel is undoubtedly influenced by the decision to expel Christians from the synagogue. The polemic between the Church and the synagogue is evident within Matthew's passion. However, this does not necessarily mean that Matthew's passion is anti-semitic.

We cannot judge Matthew's world by our present day sensibilities. His sentiments represent the reality of Matthew's world. Within Judaism there was division, with the pharisees, essenes, sadducees and chief priests against each other. Earlier the chief priest had a number of pharisees crucified. The essenes considered him a heretic.

While this passage cannot be identified with many atrocities against Jews during history; (many of which were for greed, rather than religion) it must be admitted that some groups have found in this verse the justification they required.

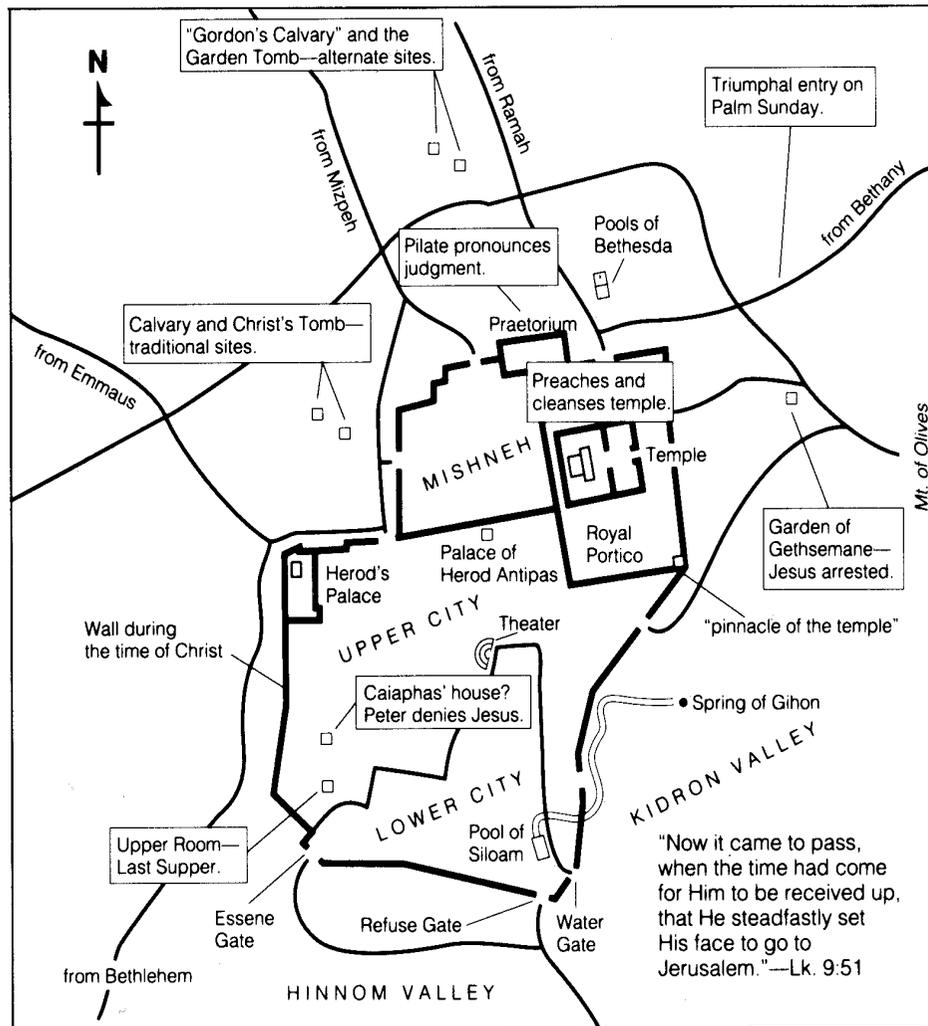
While Matthew is critical, it cannot be interpreted in any way as a justification against any group. The problem may often lie with the reader rather than the author.

anti-semitic?

■ HOMILY: The homily today must be careful to avoid any language that leaves worshipers with the impression that the Jewish people are responsible for Christ's death. In fact, the homily may need explicitly to correct any such impression left by John's Passion. The revised lectionary should help by distinguishing between the Jewish leaders and the whole people, but we have centuries of misunderstanding to overcome. The homilist should prepare in the spirit of these comments from the U. S. bishops:

The message of the liturgy in proclaiming the passion narratives in full is to enable the assembly to see vividly the love of Christ for each person, despite their sins, a love that even death could not vanquish. . . . To the extent that Christians over the centuries made Jews the scapegoat for Christ's death, they drew themselves away from the paschal mystery. For it is only in dying to one's sins that one can hope to rise to new life. (*God's Mercy Endures Forever, #22*)

The Places within the Passion of Jesus



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Matthew alone tells us that *Judas 'went to the Chief Priests and said, 'What will you give me if I betray him to you?' (Mtt 26,14)*. Matthew alone also tells us that Judas *'repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver' (Mtt 27,3)*. Jesus' greeting of Judas as 'friend' in the garden of Gethsemane stresses the tension between betrayer and betrayed. Matthew describes the death of Judas and tells us that Judas asked for the money – thirty pieces of silver. This serves another of Matthew's concerns: the fulfilment of the scriptures. The thirty pieces of silver echo the betrayal of Jeremiah (*Jer 18:2-3*) and Zechariah. (*Zech 11:13*)

The failure of Judas and the failure of Peter is contrasted with the dignified silence of Jesus at his trial. The difference in fate is greater given the last action of each character. Peter *'he went out and wept bitterly'*; Judas *'he went and hanged himself' (Mtt 26, 75. 27,5)*.

Jesus before the Sanhedrin and Pilate. Judgement on the Jews?

Matthew alone identifies the High priest as Caiaphas. Matthew is concerned to establish that Jesus was innocent of charge of blasphemy. However, the prophecy of Jesus has come true - Peter did deny Jesus three times. The reader would know that the Temple had been destroyed. Only the prophecy of the return of the Son of man in glory has yet to be fulfilled. The fulfilment of past prophecies should highlight the truth of this future prophecy.

Pilate's judgement of Jesus emphasises his innocence. By publicly washing his hands, a dramatic gesture, he declares *'I am innocent of this man's blood'*. (*Mtt 27:24*) This gesture is not Roman but Old Testament practice and it is only found in Matthew's Gospel. (*Deut 21:6-9; Ps 26:6; Ps 73:13*) Although Pilate declares himself innocent by his words and gestures, he is none the less responsible for Jesus' death. This passage is one of Matthew's 'bookends.' The King and civil authorities sought the death of the infant King of the Jews. At the conclusion of the Gospel, they are responsible for the death of Jesus. Pilate's direct question, *'are you the King of the Jews?' (Mtt 27:11)* reminds us of this. The dream of Pilate's wife echoes the dream of the Magi. Each dream is a revelatory warning given to a Gentile dreamer.

Matthew is determined to place the guilt for Jesus' death upon the Jews, or their religious leaders. *'His blood be on us and on our Children!'* (Mtt 27:25)

No other line in the Passion Narrative has done more to embitter Jewish/Christian relations. Matthew's own experience may be responsible for this polemic.

From this point onwards the events happen quickly. Matthew follows Mark's schema. The crucifixion is equally gloomy. Matthew stresses the divinity of Jesus, particularly by irony. Those who would mock him as Son of God, ironically speak the truth.

The polemical and apologetic theme continues after Jesus' death with the appointment of guards to secure the Tomb. This passage may represent the arguments of Matthew's day; his disciples stole the body: they bribed the guards. The spiritual bankruptcy of the Chief Priests and Elders is revealed. While Jesus would direct his disciples to teach the nations, the Jewish leaders teach the guards to lie. This is the claim until Matthew's day. By the time the Gospel is written the Synagogue and the Church are accusing each of deceit. The miraculous events surrounding the resurrection only serve to prove that the authorities cannot prevent Jesus' victory over death.

The Resurrection and the Commission of the Disciples.

The miraculous events surrounding the Resurrection are supernatural signs of God's power. The earthquakes, darkness, and rising from the tombs are signs of the Day of the Lord. This is the final day: the vision of Daniel and Ezekiel's vision of dry bones coming to life. The mighty angel rolls back the stone, undoing the efforts of the Sanhedrin and interprets the meaning of these events: Jesus has risen. (Mtt 28:6)

The disciples return to Galilee, to the Mountain where Jesus had arranged to meet with them. Various places have been suggested:

1. The *Mt of Transfiguration* (Mtt 7:1) where a vision of the risen Jesus was first glimpsed
2. The *Mt of Beatitudes* (Mtt 5:1) from where the disciples are commissioned to teach.
3. *Galilee of the Nations* (Mtt 4:15), from where the mission to the nations will begin.

The final words of Jesus are divided into three parts: past, present and future: *'All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.*

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations ... I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Mtt 28:18-20)

The disciples are commissioned to go make disciples of all the nations. This includes the people of Israel. It is an extension of the limited mission of Jesus. The disciples are commissioned to teach. They are to carry on the mission and teaching of Jesus. Their subject matter is to be the great sermons of Jesus particularly the Sermon on the Mount. In the future they will proclaim the message of the Gospel and its messenger: Jesus the Son of God.

The solemn last words of Jesus, *'I am with you always, to the end of the age'* (Mtt 28:20) echo the first words of the Gospel: *'they name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us' (Mtt 1:23 -= Isaiah 7:14)*. This is the greatest of the 'bookends' of Matthew, which ties the beginning and the end of the Gospel together. It is in the church that the presence of Jesus abides. His presence gives meaning to the commission of the disciples and their role in the world until this day.