

MATTHEW'S ACCOUNT

MATTHEW 1:18-2:15

Encountering God Series

OPENING PRAYER

Holy One, Let me be open to the outpouring of your goodness in the world, and alive to your presence with us, now and always.

Amen

EXEGESIS

This Gospel is likely to have been written towards the end of the first century AD, some years after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70AD. While the writer of Matthew appears to draw on the same source as Luke for some material (a hypothetical document known as 'Q'), at other times, like Luke, he is dependent on Mark's gospel, written soon after the fall of Jerusalem. There are also passages and variations which only appear in Matthew's Gospel, which offer insight into the particular outlook of this writer and the community of early Christians he emerged from and for whom he wrote.

This account of the birth of Jesus with the visit of the Magi is unique to Matthew's Gospel. We see some 'trademark' features of this author, such as connecting Jesus with the iconic figure of Israel's past, King David, through the genealogy of Joseph, 'the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born' (1:16). This adds substance to the assertion of Jesus's Messiahship (1:17). The writer of Matthew's Gospel makes frequent reference to Jewish scripture- again adding substance to his assertions about Jesus and indicating the respect in which the Jewish Scriptures were held by Matthew's community. Matthew is often referred to as the 'Jewish Gospel'.

In today's passage there are two particular citations from the Jewish Scriptures. The Hebrew text of Isaiah 7:14, about a 'young woman' conceiving and giving birth, which is translated into Greek as 'parthenos' or 'virgin' – a significant difference. The author also cites Micah 5:2, concerning the origin of a leader from Bethlehem, but weaves the Jewish concept of God's chosen king as a shepherd of the people into the text- a theme which occurs most frequently in Matthew, out of all the Gospels.

REFLECTION

Responsiveness to God is important in this passage. First comes the rather understated openness of Mary to the Holy Spirit; then Joseph changes his divorce plan, because an 'angel of the Lord' appears to him in a dream; and later, they flee the country with Jesus, following another dream. The Magi journey in response to what they see in the stars – at that time an acceptable source of information (see Genesis 1:14). They also listen to Jewish scholars' interpretation

of scripture and, like Joseph before them, pay heed to dreams, protecting them from harm.

It is as though God communicates ceaselessly, in any way people are able to grasp, to shape events for the good and draw these receptive characters into an encounter with Christ. In contrast, Herod is not open to this flow of inspiration and hears not joyful news but threat, which draws out his destructive power. We can find the interplay between all these responses in our own lives- in times of openness to God and times of fear. We can notice the times we simply let God in, we can notice what our dreams suggest, we can be alive to what the natural world is saying, and we can respond to Scripture. We can notice too, when fears cloud our openness to God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Among the many voices, signs and symbols around you, how do you discern what is of God?

What draws from you a sense of wonder or a desire to seek out the new-born Christ?

And what draws from you feelings of defensiveness and a desire to protect your own interests at the expense of others?

CLOSING PRAYER

Holy One, Forgive me for the times when my fears and attempts to control obstruct the flow of your love; protect others from my weaknesses as much as from my misuse of power, and lead me to the Christ-light, so that I may have my hope renewed. Amen

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- 'Annie Heppenstall, The Healer's Tree: a Bible-based resource on ecology, peace and justice', 2011, Wild Goose Publications (www.ionabooks.com).