

29<sup>th</sup> Sunday of ordinary time  
October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014  
Mt 22, 15-21) APOCALYPTIC

**CHRISTIAN APOCALYPTIC? WORLD WITHOUT NEED FOR AN END?  
KEEPING YOUR HEAD ABOVE TROUBLED WATERS**

**Jewish eschatology** is behind what Matthew writes. It is a support theory for the primacy of Israel....Matthew grew up in it, believes in it, and draws much material from it. He lets the core Christian vision modify it significantly.

You get, in Mt, stories about the workers in the vineyard which is Israel, about two sons who did and didn't, about the responsibility for the vineyard, about the spousal union of Israel with God,. They are not random parables. They are a gathering of interpretations about the alleged **giftedness of Israel**...which is the framework of Mt's apocalyptic...Jewish apocalyptic is a way of upholding that primacy of Israel in God's plan. If it were to be upturned, parabolically, the Jews would find themselves no longer in the first place, but dispersed in the diaspora. Mt knows - he writes after the **destruction of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem** - that that is actually where they have come in his time. All the New Testament writers are trying to deal with that. Is it death, or what?

**Paul** brought in a **birth image, not a death image**. He spoke of himself as giving birth to new Christians. He said his work was like being again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you (Gal 4,19). He said it was like the labour pains of a pregnant woman (1 Thess 5,3). Paul turns Jewish apocalyptic into a description of a new birth of a new world. Paul is very original here. The (later) gospel writers have simply picked up his vision, and given it story form.

**Mark** 13,8 speaks of something more than the 'beginning of a major crisis'. He speaks of something much more than a temporary difficulty whose outcome is something good. Literally, the word he uses means prenatal pains. It means the pains before childbirth. **Our whole world is not dying, it is giving birth**. Yes, again, in our own time. To another and more ultimate stage of world. Stand by! A new world is being born!

**Matthew** copied Mark here and told of the beginning of these birth pains (Mt 24, 8).

**Luke** said God freed Jesus from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him (Ac 2,24). The agony in the garden was like birth pains: Jesus was like a mother giving birth to new life for us.

**John** 16,21 speaks of the woman who gives birth – after the hard work of labour – and who rejoices because a new person, a new human (anthropos), has come into the world as a result of the labour.

This brief 'dip' into Apocalyptic, and its use in the New Testament, tells us not to be too depressed. Our troubles now are giving birth to a real Christmas in our world, and we have a new rhetoric of Easter as Passover. Through Jesus with us, we can be truly new persons, in a new world. We can give birth to that new world.

**Christian apocalyptic** is ‘born’ of this attitude. But it is a different kind of apocalyptic. Despite the customary (and valuable) scholarly practice, I wonder some times if it ought to be called apocalyptic...but I have no alternative word.

Turn to the gospel of **Mark**, the first of the gospels. Look at the opening page. It is the scene of Jesus going into the waters of the river Jordan to be baptized by John. [Jesus, as far as the people know, is a nobody – just a name, from a nowhere village up north called Nazareth.] He comes out of the water. And at that moment, the heavens open, and the Spirit of God comes down on Jesus and a Heavenly Voice proclaims him not just as a prophet but as God’s own Son. [This is classic apocalyptic imagery.] He is then known to be the awaited one. He is the fulfillment of the universe. I think it is **a kind of birth scene**: he comes out of the water for this new life. [The baptism scene is a kind of Markan ‘infancy gospel’ – you could call it the first of all the infancy gospels! It’s a pity it has not often been recognized as such.]

The writings of Jewish believers in this Jesus (gospel-writings) called him the ‘Son of Man’. It could mean a man of no distinguished background. Son of no-one in particular. It could mean the ‘human being’ as such, or the one in whom humanity was at its humblest and best. It could mean all human beings, become different because he had come as one of them. They believed that the universe would return to God, and be what God wanted it to be, through the way he lived. They urged one another to lift up their hearts, and stand tall in his presence. It is time to be awake, to be alive, and to enter into his sort of relationship with God. He is the key to it all.

When **Matthew** wrote his gospel, he picked up, I think, Mark’s insight that Jesus’ coming in the Jordan was **a kind of birth into a previously unheard of world**. So he began his gospel with the story of Jesus’ actual birth and infancy. His ‘infancy chapters’ are an expansion of Mark’s insight. They don’t just talk about babyhood!

**Luke** followed suit, after Matthew, and gave us yet another infancy gospel. But Luke played with the numbers he knew from the book of Daniel. He began with an annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist (to Zachary his father). Six months later John was born (180 days). Luke continued with an annunciation of the conception of Jesus by Mary, and nine months later Jesus is born (270 days). That’s 450 days all up. Luke knows enough of Jewish rituals to realize that Mary, after giving birth, would be considered unclean for 7 days, and that she would have to purify herself for a further 33 days. Forty more days...and that adds up to 490 days! Playing with symbols like that, Luke is saying that Jesus is the one that was hoped for in the book of Daniel and in all the apocalyptic writings... [So don’t read Luke’s numbers and dates too literally...]

We are not meant to get into thoughts about violence and war in the ancient world or in our own. We are not asked to go down into the darkness of human or Jewish history. We are not asked to imagine ourselves drowning in the waters of a perturbed sea. We are asked to **stand erect, hold our heads and hearts up, and be proud and joyful in the knowledge that everything has come together in Jesus**. This is actually like a birth scene for us – we ourselves are asked to be reborn into a new kind of grown up and positive humanity like that of Jesus. This is what the evangelists

called the 'gospel to all nations' and to all periods of history too. It really is good news.

Sometimes the world can look pretty grim, but if you have faith in Jesus, you can believe in this. If you do, it's Christmas!

Is this why Matthew is the first of the Christian writers (gospel writers) to come up with an infancy narrative? Has he created a different apocalyptic, more like a celebration of a birthday of the universe in the ordinariness of every day.

Next week we will look more fully at **the difference Matthew made to (Jewish/Christian) apocalyptic.**

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