

Sermon for Zion, January 21, 2018

Hymns: We Have Come To Join In Worship; I Hide Your Word Within My Heart;
671 – I heard the voice of Jesus say (vss 1,2) 510 – Deep in the shadows (v 4)

Scripture: Matthew 9:9-13; Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-32

Sermon Title: Who Wrote the Gospels?

Matthew 9:9-13

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Mark 2:13-17

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Luke 5:27-32

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Welcome to Part One of our Winter series on the Gospel of Matthew. This coming Wednesday, we'll begin the companion Bible Study to this sermon series. Last week, I challenged you - and I continue to challenge you – to join me in reading through the Gospels this winter, a chapter a day (each chapter being only a page or so; easy to catch up if you miss a day, but don't miss a day!) and through reading the Gospels, come to know Jesus better - his words, his actions, his compassion, his heart. There is nothing more important we can do as Christians than to come to know Jesus better and better, more and more, and in knowing him, to come to love him, and to follow him, as Saviour and Lord.

But before we start charging through the Gospels, there are a couple of questions we should ask, such as: Why were the Gospels written in the first place? When were they written? Who wrote them? Why are there four Gospels, and not one, say, or seven? And finally, how reliable are they? But first off, let's start with Why. And the simple answer is, there were only twelve Apostles. And they were dying.

To expand on that a bit, Christianity was spreading rapidly, numerically and geographically, and was becoming too large for the Apostles, the authoritative eye-witnesses of Jesus, to be able to share their testimony about Jesus first-hand to everyone who would hear. On top of that, the Apostles were dying, most often victims of violent persecution – James was beheaded, Peter crucified, Matthew run through with a spear. The voices of the Apostles, the testimony of the eyewitnesses, was being silenced.

This was a crisis, for in the ancient world, first-hand verbal testimony was considered far more valuable than written testimony. If you wanted the truth, you had to go to the source, or to a reliable second-hand verbal account of the source. In terms of the Christian faith, that was the job of the Apostles. Their job was to tell people what Jesus said and did. Nobody thought to write the sayings and teachings of Jesus down as he said them; that's not the way the ancient world worked or thought. You listened carefully to what your teacher or leader said, and then, having accurately committed it to memory, you repeated it to others.

So the Apostles travelled from town to town, city to city, country to country, and they shared the words and story of Jesus with all who would hear. The Apostles too had followers, and they too spread the story, although not with the same first-hand authority. But people could check up on these second-hand accounts by running them by the Apostles themselves. Sort of like, “Here's what Apollos told us about Jesus.

And if you don't believe me, you can check it out with any of the Apostles you can find. I think Thomas is coming through next month." Eyewitness testimony of the life and words of Jesus was the foundation upon which the church was built. The church wasn't built upon the Gospels; it was built upon the living, face-to-face verifiable testimony of the followers of Jesus.

But then the Apostles started to die. People – in fact, the Apostles themselves – thought the return of Jesus would happen in their lifetime. They had no concept of the much longer timeline which God had in mind. They assumed that they would spread the message of Jesus personally, until – this year, next year – Jesus would return and bring the story to a close. But as the years passed, people realised that God might have a different time-frame in mind. More disconcertingly, by the hand of antagonistic political or religious rulers the Apostles themselves began to be killed off. What if all the Apostles were to die before Jesus returned? How could the integrity of the Christian message be preserved? If I can't check with an Apostle to make sure what I've heard in a sermon is a true reflection of what Jesus said and did, how do I know someone isn't just making stuff up? After all, preachers should be trusted only so far (which is why I always remind you: don't just trust what I say. Read the Gospels for yourself!).

So, reluctantly, and as much as 25 years and more after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Apostles and their followers finally started writing stuff down. Mark was perhaps the first to realise the importance of this, and a fellow named Papias records what happened. This Papias, who lived from about 60 to 130 AD, had sought out and even known several of the early Christian leaders. He writes,

Mark having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatsoever he remembered... Mark made no mistake in thus writing things as he remembered them. For of one thing he took especial care, not to omit anything he had heard, and not to put anything fictitious into the statements.

The Gospel of Mark, then, as we've heard before, is really the Gospel of Peter, as collected and transcribed by his secretary Mark. Many think Mark, being the shortest, is the earliest of the Gospels.

But Papias talks about the Gospel of Matthew, too. He says that Matthew "*collected the teachings of Jesus in a Hebrew dialect,*" – almost certainly Aramaic, the language Jesus would have spoken among his friends and followers – and then,

Papias adds, “*every person translated and interpreted them as he is able.*” The Gospel of Matthew, as we have it today, is the product of this collection of teachings – such as the Sermon on the Mount – and the subsequent translation and ordering by an interpreter – either a student of Matthew’s in Antioch, or perhaps even Matthew himself, who, as a tax collector and therefore government employee, would have been fluent in the common Greek of the day.

Another early church witness, Irenaeus, writing in the 100s, narrows down the date of Matthew’s Gospel: “*Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church.*” This puts Matthew’s Aramaic collection in the late 50’s or early 60’s AD, and the Greek version in the mid-70’s. Why does Matthew come first in our New Testaments, if it is later than Mark? Well, among other reasons, it starts with a genealogy of Jesus, and then goes on to the birth of Jesus, while Mark begins when Peter met Jesus as an adult. It makes sense to start at the beginning, and the first line in Matthew in the original Greek language is, “*Biblos geneseos Iesou Christou*” – literally, “The Book of the Genesis of Jesus Christ.” The first book of the Old Testament begins with the word, “Genesis.” So does the first book of the New.

So that’s Matthew and Mark. What about Luke? Luke himself, while not a direct eyewitness follower of Jesus, helpfully provides us with the reason for his Gospel, which relied heavily on eye-witness testimony. Luke, as we heard last week, introduces his Gospel in this way:

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (Luke 1:1-4)

Luke wasn’t himself an eyewitness, but relied upon eyewitness testimony to make sure he got it right. As a companion of the Apostle Paul, accompanying Paul on many a missionary journey far beyond the geographic scope of the Apostles, Luke saw the need for a reliable, well-ordered account of the life and teaching of Jesus, which could form the basis of belief for the new Christians forming the far-flung Gentile congregations. Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles as well, which tells the story of

those early churches and focusses on the ministry of Paul. Acts ends somewhat abruptly while Paul is still alive; this dates Luke's Gospel to the early 60's AD, probably written while Paul was in prison, and Luke had the necessary time on his hands.

So, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are records of first-hand eyewitness testimony regarding the life and work of Jesus. They are intended to provide a firm foundation of truth, a ruler, a reliable guide, in the absence of the Apostles themselves, against which all other teaching might be judged. In fact, these three Gospels tell of Jesus in such similar order and ways, often word-for word, that they are called "The Synoptic Gospels," which means, 'to see the same way.'

We heard that in our readings this morning, which told the story of the call of Matthew. Matthew's Gospel puts it this way: *As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.*

Mark adds that this took place by the lake, and that Matthew was also known as Levi, son of Alphaeus – many people in the New Testament era were know by several names; first names, last names, nick names, Hebrew names, Greek names. Like the Apostle Peter, who is variously known as Simon, son of Jonah, Peter, and Cephas. Matthew is known as Matthew, Levi, son of Alphaeus. Had we only Matthew's Gospel, we wouldn't have known that. Luke adds that not only was Matthew manning the tax booth, but that he was, in fact, a tax collector, and not simply an employee or attendant.

As we heard in Rev. Andrew's sermon a few weeks ago, Matthew, in gratitude and celebration, hosts a dinner for Jesus and the disciples. Luke tells us it was a "great banquet," and a "large crowd." Mark explains, "for there were many who followed him." Part of that crowd, we hear, were Pharisees, says Matthew; "who were teachers of the law," explains Mark, whose non-Jewish audience wouldn't have known that. The Pharisees were a sect of Judaism, explains Luke.

These Pharisees, says Matthew, asked the disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Luke tells us that it wasn't only a question, it was a complaint. The Pharisees are not only curious; they don't like what's going on. Matthew gives Jesus' answer, which includes an Old Testament quotation, an important addition, as that's what Matthew's Hebrew audience would be interested in

hearing: *Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."* When Jesus tells the Pharisees to "go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifice," he is telling them that they are misunderstanding the core value of the Hebrew faith, and quotes the Prophets Hosea (6:6) and Micah (6:6-8) as proof. Matthew is telling his Hebrew audience that Jesus is not destroying, but fulfilling, the Jewish faith; as Jews, they could do no better than to follow Jesus, in fulfillment of their Jewish faith. Mark and Luke, whose audiences wouldn't be interested in such things, leave that part out.

But Luke adds an interesting line: While Matthew and Mark record Jesus as saying, "*I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners,*" Luke clarifies things by putting it like this: "*I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners **to repentance.***" The call of Jesus, Luke stresses throughout his Gospel, is not just a welcome, but a call to repentance; all are welcome, but all are called to change their ways, and to find new life in Jesus. "Come as you are, but don't stay as you are; come as you are, and be changed." A valuable message for us today.

The Gospel of John adds to all these stories, supplementing them, filling in the blanks. He had outlived all the other Apostles, and was still going strong when the Gospel of Matthew, Mark and Luke were in wide circulation. His Gospel sounds so very different than the others, because, as John's contemporary Clement of Rome wrote, "*John last of all, aware that the 'bodily' facts had been set forth in the other Gospels, yielded to the exhortations of his friends, and, divinely carried along by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel.*"

The Gospels, then, are eyewitness, authoritative accounts of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, written to preserve the teaching of the Apostles and their direct experience of him. That there are four and not just one Gospel enriches and broadens our understanding of the recorded events, as each reveals the characteristics of both audience and author. There were numerous other Gospels in circulation, but only in later years; these four were the ones deemed accurate and authoritative by the eyewitnesses and their direct descendants.

To read the Gospels, then, is to eavesdrop on the Apostles, as they remember and retell the stories of their Master and Friend; to read the Gospels is hear his very words. Journey with me, as together, we read them anew; as together, day by day, we listen for the voice of Jesus. Amen.