

Worship with the Gospels - MATTHEW

Background: These resources were first produced by Clare Amos for 'Partners in Learning' an ecumenical resource of learning resources for all ages based on the lectionary readings and themes. They have been adapted here as a resource to encourage congregations to bring 'the particular interests, topics and concerns of each gospel writer' into our worship. We would be delighted if you want to use and adapt the material for use in worship or in Christian education. Please can you ensure that Clare and The Bible in the Life of the Church project are credited

Series Introduction

We have four gospels, each of which sheds different light on our portrait of Jesus. In these resources for worship we seek to experience the feel of each of the gospels, enjoying them as we use them to lead us closer to God in worship. The philosophy that undergirds these resources is that there should not be a rigid separation in church life between 'worship' and 'learning' and that ideally worship can be a means and tool for learning about the Christian faith.

The resources explore each of the gospels within the context of worship. It is one of the glories of the Christian faith that the story of Jesus is told in four different gospels - the words of each emphasizing different features of the portrait of Jesus - whose portrait they are all seeking to paint. Way back in the early history of the Christian church Irenaeus, one of the greatest theologians of the second century AD, commented that it was appropriate for the church to have four (*rather than one*) gospels because there are 'four winds' and 'four corners of the earth'. And though today we might put things slightly differently - none the less Irenaeus' words, though quaint, have a ring of truth. The person of Jesus Christ is so multi-faceted and so compelling that no one human author could hope to give us a total picture. We need the different insights of the four gospel writers to fill in the brush strokes and varied hues and colours that would be too great a task for one writer alone.

Taking the gospels into our worship

So each of these four resource outlines takes one of the gospels and looks at the particular interests, topics and concerns of that gospel writer. But we do so in what we believe is a particularly unusual and creative way. We use the topics and interests of that gospel writer to provide the actual structure for worship. As the worship develops we travel with that gospel writer through his presentation of the life of Jesus. In doing this we believe we are being true to the purpose of the gospel writers. They were not interested in writing a narrowly 'historical' life of Jesus. Instead they wanted their readers to soak themselves in the story of Jesus in such a way that they too became part of that story, positioning themselves alongside Jesus' first disciples, and equally so that the life of Jesus did not remain as something in the past, but became present and even future in the living experience and worship of the church.

There is a view held by some biblical scholars that the gospels themselves came to birth through the retelling of the story of Jesus in the weekly worship of the early church. Whether or not this is precisely true (*and it may of course be true for some but not for others*) the structure of the gospels does resonate with the typical pattern of Christian worship: beginning with a call of challenge, they then present the good news of what God has done in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and finally move towards commissioning the disciples to go out and continue the ministry of Jesus in their own lives.



What each writer tells us about the Eucharist

At the heart of our worship, and a model established by Jesus himself, is the service of Communion or the Eucharist. So perhaps it is not surprising that as we explore the gospels through worship we find ourselves led each week towards a celebration of Communion, and have the chance to discover the distinctive insights that the individual gospel writers have to share about this central act of Christian worship.

- **In Mark** we discover that Communion leads us back to remember more deeply the death of Christ and live the marks of the Cross in our own lives.
- **In Luke** we are encouraged to experience Communion as a sign of the hospitality and fellowship that friends of the risen Jesus are called to show to each other.
- **In Matthew** we are helped to understand that Communion also has a forward looking emphasis - it is a foretaste of the heavenly feast with which God will one day feed all people.
- **In John** we see the church's celebration of Communion acts as a link between time and eternity.

The Communion focus of each week is not essential to the resources. Churches that would not wish to celebrate Communion each week can draw from the prayers and readings offered to develop an interesting theme that can teach a great deal about the special concerns of each of the gospel writers. While these resources are primarily about the four gospels churches that wish to explore together more deeply the meaning of Communion could also use them.

Each 'resource file' provides an overview of the way the gospel writer was trying to get his message across; ideas and suggestions for how these ideas might be incorporated into a Communion service; and suggestions for hymns, songs, prayers etc that might be used. As the original writing was for the British churches there may be better material for your context. These outlines are offered with the invitation to adapt them to your situation so that, wherever we are, we might hear Scripture speaking into our context more clearly.

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Matthew – Feast on the Mountain

Overview of Matthew's Gospel

When Clare (*the writer*) spent a year in 1980 at Queens, the ecumenical theological college in Birmingham, England there were two features of Methodist worship that made a particular impact on her as an Anglican. The first was the importance of Charles Wesley hymns in the context of Methodist worship, the second was a particular emphasis within the Eucharist that Methodism seems to have taken more seriously than any other Christian tradition. Perhaps it is partly due to the Methodist scholar Geoffrey Wainwright, and his key book 'Eucharist and Eschatology'. At any rate the phrase 'a foretaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for all mankind (*people*)' used in the prayer after communion in Methodist service books has always stuck in my mind and made me look at what communion may mean in a new and different way.

When we start to look at the gospel of Matthew this is also an emphasis we find. It is often suggested that Matthew is a gospel that is concerned to present the life and ministry of Jesus as the fulfilment of the past, of the Old Testament. That is certainly so, but one particular Old Testament theme that is at the heart of the gospel also encourages us to set our gaze towards the future. For one of the most exciting promises contained within the Old Testament is that there would one day come a time when God would invite all people, Jews and Gentiles, to a feast to be held on the mountain of God.

At this feast all would have enough to eat, there would no longer be famine, or tears or death. At this feast, God himself would be present as the host. All people would be invited - although perhaps not all would wish to attend. Perhaps they might not wish to sit alongside some of the other guests, those unlikely people - the foreigners, the disabled, those less than morally perfect - that God had chosen as his honoured guests, and so decide to refuse the invitation. Perhaps they might be so fearful of meeting God face to face, aware that God would be able to 'see through' them and the facade of respectability they wished to present. So they refuse to come to the feast: but that is their own choice. God's invitation was free and for all.

For Matthew the image of this feast on God's mountain is a theme that underlies much of his gospel. It is set out explicitly in Matthew 8.11 'Many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven'. It is implicit in the story of the Sheep and the Goats (*Matthew 25.31-46*) even though in this story some eventually find themselves excluded because of their attitude to their fellow guests! It resonates with the Beatitudes (*Matthew 5.1-11*) that almost feel like a pilgrimage song to be chanted on the way to God's mountain. It is of course linked with the fact that mountains are important throughout Matthew's gospel eg the Sermon on the Mount, Mount of transfiguration, Mount of Olives (*Matthew 24*), and the mountain of the final meeting with Jesus (*Matthew 28.16-20*). But there is one other mountain of which Matthew speaks - and it is this that provides our key reading for service.

In Matthew 15.29-39 Jesus, while in Gentile territory, first goes up a mountain, then cures the multitude of the disabled who come to him, and then still on the mountain offers them food. The feast of the nations is beginning to come to fruition in the ministry of Jesus!

What a strange pilgrim group to share in such a privileged occasion! Matthew was well aware that those who wanted to visit God in the Jewish Temple had to be physically perfect. No blind or lame were ever allowed near the place (*2 Samuel 5.6-8*). It is only when you realise this, that you begin to understand just how radical the gospel of Matthew is here. It is almost as though



the able-bodied only get invited to this feast if they are accompanying someone that Jewish tradition castigated as 'unclean'. (Incidentally Matthew is equally provocative at the very beginning of his gospel - the only four women mentioned in the Old Testament genealogy of Jesus are all distinctly dubious!) Matthew the gospel writer is very concerned with 'holiness' - but he also turns upside down what holiness conventionally meant!

And did the pilgrim group meet God at this feast on the mountain as Isaiah 25.6 suggests? Of course. For who else is Jesus but Immanuel, 'God with us', (*Matthew 1.23*), and who also on another mountain at the end of the gospel said: 'I am with you always to the end of the age'. (*Matthew 28.20*)

As the early church came to realise, however, that feast that had taken place on the mountain in the ministry of Jesus, was only an hors d'oeuvre, a taster, for a banquet of which the main course is yet to be. And for many in the early church (*and Matthew himself was probably one*) Communion was seen as the moment when members of the Christian community could eat and drink and themselves experience a 'foretaste' of this final banquet. The Didache, an early Christian document, that probably comes from a time and place fairly close to where and when Matthew's gospel was written, contains a Communion prayer which is totally forward looking. It has no explicit reference at all to the death of Christ, and directs our attention to a future ingathering of people 'from the four winds'. It is this text from the Didache that we have suggested could be used as the Communion prayer for this week. We have set out the text of this Didache version in full as it may not be easily accessible.

Taking Matthew into our worship – some suggestions

To sum up, it is a 'forward looking' feel that we are seeking to convey in worship as we explore the dynamics of the gospel of Matthew. We are attempting to present, at least symbolically, the sense of people journeying to the 'feast on the mountain', humbled to find out who their fellow pilgrims may be, discovering that we are all called to be 'holy'. Yet we also discover holiness means something very different from what we have so often imagined it to be. When we arrive at this mountain we are invited to feast, to eat and to drink, and we have the awe-inspiring yet life giving opportunity to see God face to face.

Then it will be time for us to depart, to come down from the mountain, and journey back as God's messengers to east and west and north and south. But we shall never be alone again, for we carry Jesus' promise in our hearts wherever we go: 'I am with you to the end of the age'.

Call to worship

Leader: Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?

And who shall rise up in his holy place?

People: Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.

They will receive blessing from the Lord,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.

(Psalm 24.3-5)

Introduction to the worship



Introduce the themes, bringing out the links with the 'feast on the mountain' theme. Then have the following read, by someone standing near the altar/communion table.

Bible reading - Isaiah 25.6-10a (...the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain)

Verses 9-10a could be repeated with all joining in from 'See, this is our God...'

Reading/Activity: Including the outsiders

Have two voices read the Beatitudes as they do have a number of individuals come forward one by one and stand near to the table, each with a visible placard either held or around their neck. You can choose either from the list A or B or both.

List A: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, The wife of Uriah

List B: hungry, thirsty, a foreigner, naked, sick, in prison

When those bearing placards have reached the table, the leader asks if people can work out who they are. List A comprises the Old Testament women mentioned in Matthew 1, all of whom were 'odd'. List B are those who are the 'least of my brethren' in Matthew 25, and about whom Jesus says that we stand or fall by our treatment of them.

Then invite people to share in the following expression of penitence:

Penitential (Use several voices for the specific comments, or say them together)

Leader: Christ calls us to share the heavenly banquet of his love with all the saints in earth and heaven. Knowing our unworthiness and sin, let us ask from him both mercy and forgiveness. **Amen**

Voice 1: I was hungry and you gave me no food,

Voice 2: I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,

All: Lord have mercy.

Voice 3: was a stranger and you did not welcome me,

Voice 4: naked and you did not clothe me.

All: Lord have mercy.

Voice 5: I was sick and you did not visit me,

Voice 6: in prison and you did not come to me.

All: Lord have mercy.

Leader: Hear the gracious promise of Christ: Many will come from east and west and north and south and eat at my table in my kingdom.

Representatives of the congregation now come from each of the four points of the compass.



Each group could bring appropriate symbols from their 'region ie north, south, east, west, which could be placed on the table. While this is happening 'Hills of the north' or a hymn with similar meaning could be sung.

Prayers of intercession

The following prayers of intercession bring out well a number of key themes in Matthew's gospel eg teaching, the ministry, mission and community, and link into the overall thrust of the service. You might prefer to use them earlier or later in the worship

In every age you have raised up holy men and women to reflect the light of Christ and to teach us the ways of holiness.

We thank you for those who have been teachers
in the school of Christ (especially Matthew):
give understanding to those who study
the faith the Church has handed on,
and clarity to those who communicate the gospel
in a changing world..

**Response: Lord hear us,
Lord graciously hear us**

We thank you for those who have been shepherds of your people:
give a pastoral heart to ministers and leaders of the flock,
and the needful gifts to all your people in their ministry...

Response

We thank you for those who have been Christian rulers in the world,
and for those who carried the good news
to lands where it had not been before:
give wisdom to all who have power and influence among the nations,
and establish God's sovereignty among people of every race...

Response

We thank you for those whom you have called to live in community:
establish mutual love among those drawn into fellowship in your service
and bless with Christ's presence
all the communities to which our lives relate

Response

Hasten Lord, the day when people will come from east and west,
from north and south,
and sit at table in your Kingdom,
and we shall see your Son in his glory.

**Merciful Father
Accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son
our Saviour Jesus Christ.**

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Move straight into the gospel reading.

Gospel reading - Matthew 15.29-38

After reading the gospel the reader turns to the congregation and offers the following invitation enthusiastically:

Come on,
Let us celebrate the supper of the Lord.
Let us make a huge loaf of bread
and let us bring abundant wine...
Let the woman not forget the salt.
Let the men bring along the yeast.
Let many guests come,
the lame, the blind, the crippled, the poor.
Come quickly.
Let us follow the recipe of the Lord.
All of us, let us knead the dough together
with our hands.
Let us see with joy
how the bread grows.
Because today
we celebrate
the meeting with the Lord.
Today we renew our commitment to the Kingdom.
Nobody will stay hungry.

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Communion prayer

Leader: We give thanks to you, our Father, for the holy Vine of your servant David, which you have made known to us through your servant Jesus. *(bless cup)*

People: **Glory to you, world without end.**

Leader: We give thanks to you, our Father, for the life and knowledge which you have made known to us through your servant Jesus.

People: **Glory to you, world without end.**

Leader: As this broken bread, once dispersed over the hills, was brought together and became one loaf, so may your Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. *(bless bread)*

People: **Yours is the glory and the power, through Jesus Christ, forever and ever.**

Leader: Thanks be to you, holy Father, for your sacred Name which you have made to dwell in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and everlasting life which you have revealed to us through your servant Jesus.

People: **Glory to you, forever and ever.**



Leader: Almighty Lord, you have created all things for your own name's sake; to all people you have given meat and drink to enjoy, that they may give thanks to you, but to us you have graciously given spiritual meat and drink, together with life eternal, through your Servant. Especially and above all, do we give thanks to you for the mightiness of your power.

People: Glory to you, forever and ever.

All: Our Father...

Leader: Be mindful of your Church, O Lord; deliver it from all evil, perfect it in your love, make it holy, and gather it from the four winds into the kingdom which you have prepared for it.

People: Yours is the power and the glory forever and ever.

Leader: Let Christ draw near, and let this present world be transformed.

People: Hosanna to the God of David.

Leader: Whoever is holy, let them approach. Whoever is not, let them depart.

People: O Lord, come quickly. Amen.

Affirmation before Communion (said by all)

O God, you promise a world
where those who now weep shall laugh,
those who are hungry shall feed,
those who are poor now and excluded
shall have your Kingdom for their own.
I want this world too.
I renounce despair,
I will act for change.
I choose to be included in your great feast of life.

(© Christian Aid, 50th Birthday prayer)

After Communion

Father of all, you gathered us here
around the table of your Son:
we have shared this meal with saints
and the whole fellowship of the household of God.
In that new world
where the fullness of your peace will be revealed,
gather people of every race, language and way of life
to share in the one eternal banquet
of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Words of dismissal - Matthew 28.18-20 read as a dismissal

The following prayer is then said as people leave the church. We suggest that different individuals read the first half of each stanza, with all joining in (loudly) the sentence 'Behold I am with you' etc.

We are wayfarers, following roads



to the ends of the earth,
pilgrims on our way to the end of the age.

**All: 'Behold I am with you
to the end of the age.'**

We are travellers on the road to freedom,
a community of grace
with good news for all we meet.
Behold...

We'll travel lightly, travel together,
learn as we go; we are disciples,
our mission is love,
the journey is long.
Behold...

We travel with authority
fearful of none;
we are sent, opponents of evil,
heralds of hope.
Behold...

We'll travel with humility,
no task is too small;
we are servants, the cross is our compass,
love is our sign.
Behold...

When the way is uncertain,
shadows are sinister,
and dangers threaten,
we'll not be afraid, but take heart.
Behold..

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