

THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY  
— A Bible commentary for every day —



# Matthew

John Proctor

 BRF CENTENARY CLASSICS 



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THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

# Matthew

John Proctor



# PREFACE

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This commentary was written with churches and church people in mind. Some Christians have followed it in their daily Bible reading. Others have used it to help them lead Bible study. Preachers have turned to it, as they think about their sermons for Sunday. All of that is exactly what we hoped for when BRF asked me to write this commentary. It is a joy to know that it is being reissued. I hope it will help many people to grasp the good news of Jesus and to follow it in their own living.

There are some excellent big commentaries on Matthew's gospel, some stretching to several volumes. I have learned a lot from these. Yet for many people a big commentary would be no help at all – they would find it too costly or too heavy. So this much smaller commentary aims to digest the insight into Matthew that specialists can give, and to reflect on Matthew's message for today. What does it mean in the 21st century to hear the good news, to welcome God's kingdom and to be a disciple of Jesus? What can we receive from this gospel for Christian living in our times and among our neighbours?

God has surely given us four gospels for a good reason. Each of the four is unique. They tell of the same Lord, but in different ways. Each has its own angles and emphases, as it shares the message of Jesus. Here are some of Matthew's:

- Roots and continuity were important to Matthew. He wanted to connect the Christian good news with the past, with the story of God's work in the Old Testament. He believed that history pointed forward to Jesus, and that the New Testament story is rooted in the Old. To read Matthew is to be reminded of a God who works through the generations, and to think again about our own debt to the past.
- Matthew's gospel follows a sandwich pattern. Word and deed alternate. Blocks of Jesus' teaching are interleaved with blocks of action, with reports of things he did and people he met. Action and teaching mesh with one another, and in the mesh is a message. Belief in Jesus and practical Christian living are linked. True Christian living should be an integrated whole, where faith and conduct nourish one another.
- Matthew is a demanding gospel. It takes Christian commitment seriously – commitment to Jesus, to discipleship, to high standards of conduct, to one another. To read with care is likely to be a searching

experience. Yet Matthew was realistic. He knew that Christians are fragile, vulnerable and fallible. His gospel urges us to be patient with one another, and to find gentle ways of supporting each other in the church and in the Christian life.

- Matthew is a gospel of hope. He believed in the lordship of Jesus Christ, in Jesus' authority and presence in the church's mission, and in his coming to judge the world. To follow Jesus is to be in his company, under his command and within his care. Matthew wrote to give Christians confidence as they served Jesus in a complex world and in difficult times. We may read this gospel, and share its message, with that same aim. We too can be confident in the Christ who is with us always, whose word and presence we proclaim and enjoy.

Some people who use this commentary may worship in churches that use the Revised Common Lectionary. This calendar of Bible readings runs over three years of Sundays. In Year A of the three-year cycle – starting in Advent 2022, 2025, 2028 and so on – most of the gospel readings come from Matthew. Roughly half of this gospel will be read in main Sunday services, but it is not followed in precise gospel order, because we cover the sweep of the gospel story from Jesus' birth to resurrection in the four months from December to Easter. This involves a very selective approach to gospel readings in these months. The rhythm of the church year, rather than the flow of Matthew's text, sets the tone and context for these.

Once we come into the weeks after Trinity Sunday, from June to November, however, the gospel readings run steadily through Matthew from chapters 7 to 25, sometimes skipping a slice but always moving forward. Many of Matthew's main themes figure plain and large: miracles and mission, preaching and parables, crisis and controversy, fellowship and following. For churches who want to trace the movement and message of a big biblical book, the Revised Common Lectionary offers a great deal. Listen to Matthew's gospel in worship, and live by it through the year.

*John Proctor*

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# INTRODUCTION

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Jesus of Nazareth has a strong claim to be the most influential person who ever lived. Two thousand years after his own time, hundreds of millions of people in every part of the world are glad to be known as Christians, as his friends and followers. The life he lived, the things he said and did, how he died and what happened afterwards, make a remarkable story. Christians have always wanted to know about Jesus, to understand the Lord who launched our faith.

## Why write gospels?

That is why we have gospels. Probably they arose something like this. For a few years after Jesus' time, people remembered what he had said and done. Memories were good in the ancient Middle East, as they have to be in any culture where paper is expensive. But the people who remembered gradually died out, and Christians wanted a record of Jesus that they could keep. So about a generation after Jesus' lifetime, the gospels started to appear.

That is very approximate. Nobody really knows when Matthew was written. Guesses vary from about AD40 to AD100. Many scholars come down in the middle of that range, between about 60 and 90. Around that time, the record of Jesus' life that we call Matthew's gospel was put to paper.

## Global or local?

For whom was the gospel written? Two answers are popular today. One says that Matthew (and Mark, Luke and John) always meant their gospels to be widely read. The church of that day was spread across much of southern Europe, western Asia and northern Africa. There were good communications between various Christian centres. The gospels were bound to travel. The gospel writers believed that Jesus' story was worth telling and wanted to preserve it for their own generation and those who would follow. From very early on, the four gospels belonged to the whole church.

A second approach suggests that the four gospels were written for Christians in different local areas. Each of the writers was trying to help the Christians he knew best. So each gospel is angled differently, to reflect the needs and circumstances of the writer's own local church. If we follow that sort of tack, we may try to read between the lines of each



gospel to find out about the needs and situation of the first readers, as well as about Jesus himself.

There is some truth in both those theories. The early Christians were interested in Jesus. They thought his life was important. They wanted to preserve their memories of him, so others could know about him too. Jesus is the main focus of the whole gospel story and of Christian faith. But the four gospels do have different selections of material and different emphases. They are portraits, not engineers' drawings. To some extent they each reflect their own author's perspectives on Jesus and the questions and concerns of four different groups of early Christians.

## Why read four gospels?

So I take a positive approach to the gospels. I value the material they contain, and I believe they give a true picture of Jesus. But none of them gives the whole truth. All of the gospel writers had to choose what to include and how to present it. Let me mention four reasons why it is helpful to have several gospels.

- **Selection:** Some material in other gospels is not in Matthew. For example, Matthew only shows Jesus making one journey to Jerusalem, at the end of his ministry. Jesus goes with grim foreboding, expecting to suffer. His enemies there act quickly and harshly against him, very soon after he arrives. That sequence of events is easier to understand if we connect it to John's gospel, which shows Jesus making several visits to Jerusalem. By the time of the last Passover visit he was known in the city and was a marked man. Both he and his enemies were ready for trouble. The accounts in two different gospels mesh together, to give a fuller and clearer picture of Jesus' career.
- **Order:** Some material in Matthew is in a different order in other gospels. For example, much of the teaching in Matthew 5–7 (the sermon on the mount) is scattered through Luke. Matthew seems to have a tendency to collect material on a similar theme and include it in one place in his gospel. There is something similar in Matthew 8 and 9, which shows a series of miracles in quick succession, whereas in Mark the same material is spread more widely, across Mark 1–5.
- **Detail:** Some material in Matthew is briefer than in other gospels. Mark reports action at length. Matthew cuts to the main point. Compare Mark 5:21–43 with Matthew 9:18–26, for example. Mark shows

each scene very closely and clearly; Matthew makes an impact by moving swiftly from one incident to the next.

- **Angle:** Some material in Matthew is told a bit differently in other gospels. Look at the comment on Matthew 26:26–30, for example. Jesus' words at the last supper vary a little as we move from one gospel to another. The main lines of the incident are very clear, but each gospel has its own emphasis and angle.

So for many reasons it is helpful to have four different gospels. But in some vitally important ways they are closely similar, both in broad outline and even in some fine details. Why is this? Why in particular are Matthew, Mark and Luke so very like each other at so many points?

## Identify your sources

Most people who study the gospels think Matthew knew Mark's gospel, or something very like it. The two gospels have a great deal of material in common. Most of that material – indeed all of it after Matthew 13 – is in the same order, and much of it has similar wording. So the thought that Matthew knew and used Mark, and adapted Mark's material into his own gospel, has become widespread in modern study of the gospels.

However, a lot of Matthew's material is missing from Mark. About half of that extra material, almost all of it sayings of Jesus, is very like parts of Luke's gospel. This raises the suspicion that Matthew and Luke both had the same source for this stuff. This source has been named 'Q', which is the first letter of the German word for 'source', and a suitably mysterious title for a shadowy body of material about which we really know very little indeed.

Everything in the two paragraphs above is sensible guesswork; we cannot be certain. Matthew, like many a modern journalist, does not identify his sources. Even so, something like the above may very well explain Matthew as we now have it. But as we read Matthew, it is important to hear the way he tells the story of Jesus, to listen for his own emphases, and trace his own plan.

## Matthew's plan

Have you ever been in an old building that was converted from one use to another during its lifetime? Both the original design and the later modifications contribute to the ground plan and the shape of the rooms. Some people think that has happened to Matthew. At any rate there seem to be two plans, dovetailed into each other.

## The 'Jesus began' plan

The first three or four chapters of Matthew are a sort of preface to the main action. Jesus is born; later on he is baptised and tempted. Then he is ready to start his ministry, and at 4:17 it says, 'From then on Jesus began to preach.' The gospel then shows Jesus making God's kingdom known, in word and action, in and around Galilee.

Gradually we see a very mixed response arising, and there is a hint that serious difficulties may be emerging, when we read in 11:20, 'Then he began to speak against the places which had not heeded his word.'

Opposition now starts to sharpen, and at 16:21 we realise where this will lead: 'From then on Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer and die.'

By using the word 'began' as a milestone, we have found the route the gospel takes. By that plan, Matthew's gospel has twelve chapters about the mission of Jesus in Galilee (4–16), and twelve chapters leading to the Passion of Jesus in Jerusalem (16–27). Once we pass chapter 16, the story is drawn to the cross like a moth to a lamp. Opposition steadily advances, the moment of destruction is inevitable, and there is a deepening mood of sorrow and fear. Only at the very end does hope return, with Easter and resurrection and a completely new beginning.

## The 'Jesus finished' plan

The first plan has picked out the action of the gospel – what Jesus did. The second plan picks out what Jesus said. The words 'When Jesus had finished these sayings' come five times in Matthew (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Each one ends a major block of teaching, the five great sermons of Matthew's gospel. Each of the blocks has a main theme running right through:

- Chapters 5–7, the sermon on the mount, about practical living.
- Chapter 10, about mission and evangelism.
- Chapter 13, a long string of parables about God's kingdom.
- Chapter 18, about Christian community and relationships.
- Chapters 24 and 25, about the future.

So the teaching and action are interspersed, like a giant multi-decker sandwich. Each section of teaching connects with the action around it, and carries the story forward.

Why two plans? Many people answer something like this. Mark used

the first plan: half of his gospel is about Jesus' mission in Galilee, and half is about Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his suffering and death there. Matthew adopted Mark's plan. But Matthew also knew a good deal of Jesus' teaching, most of which Mark had missed (including the so-called 'Q' material), and wanted to highlight this. So the second plan, overlaid on the first, draws attention to Jesus as teacher. The church remembers and trusts the Lord who lived, died and rose again. The church also values and follows what he taught. Both aspects are important to Matthew.

## Who was Matthew?

Jesus had a follower called Matthew, a former tax collector, whom he had called and who belonged to the circle of twelve disciples. We meet this man at Matthew 9:9, and there is an ancient tradition that his personal reminiscences of Jesus have come into this gospel. But did he actually write it? Many people think it would be odd if Matthew, who was one of the twelve, copied from Mark, who was not.

Matthew's gospel also shows a close acquaintance with Jewish religious lore and custom, and tax collectors were not very religious Jews. Some of the style in the gospel seems to be much more like that of a Jewish religious teacher. So could Matthew the tax collector be the source for some of the information, but someone else be the writer? And is there a trace of that writer – rather like a film director appearing for a moment in the film – in Jesus' saying about the 'scribe trained for the kingdom' (13:52)? None of the other gospels has this saying, but the writer of Matthew feels it describes his own calling, and is glad to include it.

If we take that approach, whom shall we mean when we say 'Matthew': the tax collector, or the writer of the gospel? I shall use the name 'Matthew' to refer to the person who wrote the gospel, and to the way he tells the story of Jesus.

## Matthew and Judaism

In many ways, Matthew is the most Jewish of the gospels. It shows a strong acquaintance with Jewish customs and laws (for example, 5:23; 17:24; 23:5). It stresses how the ancient law of the Old Testament is fulfilled in the teaching of Jesus (5:17), and how the prophecies come to fulfilment in his life and work (1:23; 12:17). In some sections it presents Jesus as a new Moses (see comment on 2:13–23, pp. 26–27).

Yet Matthew also includes some sharp criticism of Jewish leaders. This is clearest in chapter 23. We also read that ‘the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom’ (21:43). Some of Israel’s ancient privileges are being taken over by the community that Jesus is founding. So Matthew’s gospel is very Jewish in its background and atmosphere, but it also tells of Judaism being split by the coming of Jesus. At the start of Matthew’s gospel, we see Jesus’ mission focused on Israel. But Israel divides: there is a core of opposition among the nation’s leaders, yet many of the ordinary people are warm and receptive. Although Matthew does not directly mention this, the Christian gospel made great strides among the Jewish people in the years after the resurrection, as the church began to grow. But it was never accepted by the nation’s official leadership.

### **Matthew’s church**

The strong Jewish flavour to Matthew’s writing suggests that he was writing for a Jewish audience, probably for a group of Jewish people who had accepted and believed in Jesus. Matthew saw this faith as a true fulfilment of their ancient Jewish heritage. Prophecy and law found focus and completion in Jesus. Jesus was Israel’s Messiah, and God’s ancient purpose was being carried forward through him.

Yet Matthew’s first readers may have had very awkward relations with some of their neighbours, who did not share their beliefs. Jews who had accepted Jesus would have been suspect, seen as a fringe group within Israel. That may be the reason Matthew included so much controversial material, involving disputes and criticism between Jesus and his opponents. All the gospels show some of this, but it is clearest in Matthew, and it may have been especially relevant to his readers’ own situation. (The comments at the start of chapter 23 discuss this point further.)

But Matthew did not expect Christianity to stay within a Jewish horizon. He was convinced that the church’s mission should include Gentiles too. Jesus sometimes met Gentile people during his mission in Galilee. When he saw their faith, he recognised and welcomed it. Those contacts were a hint of what was ahead. Once Jesus is risen, the horizon is the world. After the resurrection the Christian message spreads out to all the nations.

## Matthew and Christian living

Three major emphases stand out when we compare Matthew with other gospels.

- Matthew's is the only gospel to use the word 'church' (16:18; 18:17). He shows very clearly that Jesus is gathering and shaping a community.
- There is a lot of material in Matthew about practical living. Jesus' teaching about lifestyle and relationships has a very prominent place. Matthew obviously believes that faith must show itself in everyday life.
- Matthew includes a great deal of Jesus' teaching about judgement. God weighs and measures the way people live. Faith that does not show itself in deeds is hollow, and will never be able to bluff God. God is rich in forgiveness, but that does not give Christians the right to be casual or complacent about how we live.

So Matthew's Christianity is church-centred: we belong to one another. It is practical: we aim to express our faith in love and action. And it is serious: we trust God's mercy, but we must not be careless and complacent in the service we offer.

## Text and translation

Have you ever noticed a footnote in your Bible saying, 'Some manuscripts have...' or 'Other ancient authorities read...'? We do not have the original manuscript of any book of the Bible. Thank God, the early Christians copied out the biblical books, by hand. But some of the first copies got lost, decayed or were destroyed in persecutions. So when we want to find out what Matthew wrote, we use the earliest copies we have. But these manuscripts come from several generations after Matthew's own time.

These manuscripts do not agree with each other precisely. That can always happen with copying by hand. Where we meet disagreements in wording, we have to work out as well as we can which version is original – what Matthew actually wrote. Very rarely those differences affect a whole verse – included in some manuscripts, missing from others. Examples are 6:13; 16:2–3; 17:21; 18:11; and we now doubt whether those five verses were actually written by Matthew. Yet much, much more often we have no serious disagreements in the manuscripts:

what we read in our 21st-century English Bibles is based on a very solid knowledge of what Matthew wrote in the first century.

Matthew did not write in English. He used Greek, though not exactly the language spoken in Greece today. In some places it has been hard to translate the Greek into English, and English Bibles show different meanings. One example is in 28:17: the last few words could mean ‘but they doubted’ or ‘but some of them doubted’. Were all the disciples hesitant, or just a few of them? We do not know. That sort of problem is occasionally to be expected when we use a very old piece of writing. It is hard to know fully and exactly what the ancient language meant. But most of the time we can be confident in our modern translations. In our day, as for the last 2,000 years, Christians are happy to use the four gospels because they were written close to the time and place where Jesus lived, and give us the best information we have about his life and work.

### **Matthew’s good news**

So Christians read Matthew as an introduction to Jesus. That was Matthew’s main motive, to present Jesus clearly and helpfully, so that his readers would understand and trust Jesus. The word gospel means ‘good news’, about Jesus and about the life he invites people to live.

So listen to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew, take it seriously, and try to apply it in your own life. Value your Christian relationships with the brothers and sisters who help you to follow this way. And treasure above all your relationship with Jesus who is ‘with you always, to the end’ (Matthew 28:20).

The Bible quotations included in the commentary are usually taken from the New Revised Standard Version; occasionally I have used a translation or paraphrase of my own.

### **Some further reading on Matthew**

A lot has been written about Matthew’s gospel in recent years, and I have learned much from these books. This list aims to give credit for that. It also suggests books that might help you to explore Matthew further.

# 50

## Matthew 13:44–52

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### Treasure new and old

So far, the parables in this chapter have spoken of the kingdom's struggles, and of its certain growth. They trace what God is doing. Now come three short, punchy stories that urge us to join in.

#### Doing business with God

It must be every farmer's dream to turn up a hoard of gold coins beneath the blade of the plough (v. 44). In the Holy Land, territory that had often been fought over, there was always a chance. A former tenant might have hidden valuables in the ground before fleeing or going out to war.

Historians have puzzled over the legal background. Would it be lawful to cover treasure up and then buy the field, without telling the owner? Certainly that question could have been in Jesus' mind. Perhaps he told the parable with a twinkle in his eye, to stir people into thinking about such an odd and dubious tale. But his main point is at the end of this little story: the kingdom is so important, it is worth everything you have to make sure you secure it.

That matches exactly the parable of the pearl merchant (vv. 45–46). Again the story is about a single treasure which turns a businessman into a lover. Suddenly he can no longer simply buy and sell. Here is something so precious that he must possess it. And so he is possessed by it; he gives himself to make sure he gets it. This is not commerce; it is commitment.

Matthew has already shown his readers a couple of times that Christians must not be preoccupied by property and possessions (6:19–34; 10:9–10). These two little stories, with their line about 'selling everything', remind us that seeking and serving God's kingdom may involve material sacrifices. Commitment to Christ includes the commitment of our wealth.

#### Coming to the surface

A drag-net was long, and hung from floats a few feet beneath the surface of the water. It could be positioned by two boats and then hauled in by ropes to the shore. The sifting of the catch was an everyday job, but Jesus uses it as a picture of God's great day of judgement (vv. 47–48).



An explanation is given with the parable, rather like the one that followed the wheat and the tares (13:37–43). But the focus here is sharper: nothing is said about waiting; there is only one point, the final sorting out. The emphasis is on the down-side of judgement (vv. 49–50). Alongside the two little treasure parables, which stress the excitement of finding the kingdom, this strikes a solemn warning. It is vital to be ‘righteous’, to be like soil that welcomes the gospel seed, to grasp the kingdom when the opportunity arises and to serve it faithfully from then on.

The first time I worked carefully through Matthew, I was struck by its solemnity. This gospel presents discipleship seriously. Every one of the five long discourses ends with a parable about judgement and reward (see also 7:13–27; 10:41–42; 18:23–35; 25:31–46). ‘Don’t be casual,’ Matthew seems to be saying. ‘Don’t take the kingdom for granted. Take it seriously.’

## Wealth to share

The disciples have been given privileged insights into the parable material (13:11, 36). They still need to ‘hear’ (13:18, 43) and to respond earnestly and actively (vv. 44–46). But their nearness to Jesus gives them a special role. They have been able to understand, and now they can share that understanding with others. They will have a teaching role in the church to come.

So when Jesus says, ‘Have you understood?’ he goes on to speak of the ‘scribe trained for the kingdom’ – someone who knows the ancient scripture, and can use it to proclaim and explain the freshness of God’s kingdom. Treasure is to be grasped (v. 44), but also shared (v. 52). The kingdom message is to be passed on, in a way that shows its firm base in God’s past work.

So the disciples’ task is threefold: to grasp the message of the kingdom; to live by its truth, as people whose lives will be judged; and to share its message.

## For reflection

*The gospel still needs teachers whose message is up-to-date and yet is firmly grounded in ancient scripture. There is just a suspicion (see the section ‘Who was Matthew?’ in the Introduction, p. 13) that 13:52 is Matthew’s own ‘signature’, his hopes and ideals for his own teaching ministry. Could it also be yours?*



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# BRF CENTENARY CLASSICS



Matthew's gospel, written close to the time and the places where Jesus lived, is clear, organised and practical, giving prominence to Jesus' teaching about lifestyle and relationships. Alongside this focus on how faith shapes everyday living, Matthew looks back into Jewish history, emphasising how the events of Jesus' birth and life, cross and resurrection, fulfilled Old Testament prophecy about the Messiah, and telling of the Son of God who is 'with you always, to the end of time'.

**Revd John Proctor** recently retired as a minister of the United Reformed Church. He worked at URC's central office in London from 2014 to 2020, and prior to that he was based at Westminster College, Cambridge, for nearly 30 years.

