

Meeting Matthew 1 - 4

These studies are based on the readings from the Gospel according to Matthew chosen in part for the revised Common Lectionary Year A, but designed to be used at any time.

1. Matthew 1 – Outsiders and Insiders
2. Matthew 2 – Foreigners and Refugees
3. Matthew 3:1-17 – Jesus and John the Baptist
4. Matthew 4:1-11 – Options in the Outback

You can do all four studies or pick only those which interest you.

Each study asks you to read a passage from Matthew, offers you a commentary which brings today's thinking into dialogue with the text, and some open-ended questions for you to use as springboards for your own discussion and action. The questions are deliberately very open, so you can have space to bring your own experience and questions to the text and take it where you need to go, which may differ from group to group.

If you are coming together as a group, make sure

- everyone can see everyone else
- everyone is included and is encouraged to participate as they would like
- there is room for people to agree, differ, be clear or confused, and be accepted
- people are encouraged to value each other's input, to listen without using that time to work out what you are going to say and without interrupting, and when discussing a question to keep the focus on the question

You will need at least one Bible translation. NRSV is probably best, but others might include NIV or some other new translation.

The sessions are designed to last around 60 minutes and encourage you to explore not only what the texts meant on the basis of the latest historical research but also what they might mean for living today.

Making these studies work for you and your group.

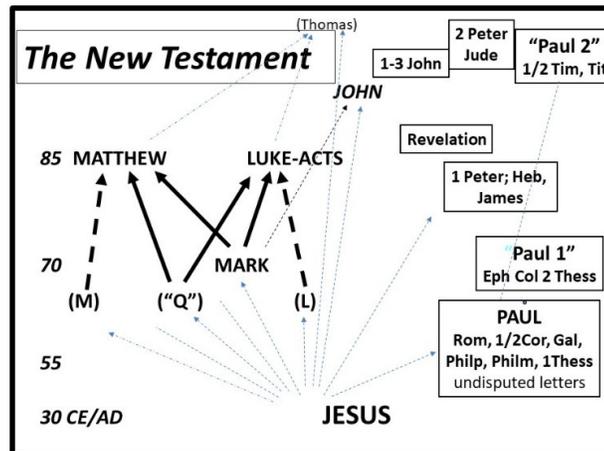
Adapt them to suit your group and its preferences. For instance, you can read the gospel passage and the commentary and then look at the questions *or* you could first read the passage and note anything which popped out for you and then read the commentary, section by section, stopping to talk about anything that arises, before going right through to the end and looking at the questions *or* you could start with a general question on the topic before doing one of the above *or* you may want to circulate the studies in advance, so that people have already read the passage and commentary before they come. Then go through it when you come together in one of the ways mentioned above. ... whatever makes the studies work best for you!

Before we start:

Meet Matthew!

Like the other gospels, Matthew contains no information about the author. When we move beyond what it actually says to ask when it was written and who wrote it, we are on shaky ground. Matthew was one of Jesus' disciples, also called Levi. He may well have had a major influence in the region where Matthew was written and perhaps even been their founder. This may be why this gospel later came to be attributed to him.

Its actual author appears not to rely on personal memory, as the disciple Matthew could have done, but, like Luke, is heavily dependent on Mark's gospel, which he supplements with additional material. Both Matthew and Luke apparently also had another common source which has not survived (called "Q"), but which contained, among other things, the Lord's Prayer and the core of the Sermon on the Mount. Beside that, the author also had sources not shared by the others (M). Matthew wrote his gospel probably some 10-15 years after Mark wrote his, so some time in the 80s.



What we have for sure is what he wrote, words with which he challenged the people of his day and which challenges us. That is our starting point.

Fortunately two of these four passages tell stories found in other gospels, so we can have a stereoscopic view and also see how each gospel writer adapted each story.

For further information about Matthew, see <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/matt.html> and: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MatthewRecentResearch.pdf>

For weekly commentaries on the revised Common Lectionary readings from the gospels, see my website: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/lectionaryindex.html>

These studies are prepared by Emeritus Professor William (Bill) Loader FAHA, a Uniting Church Minister and New Testament researcher and teacher. Literal translations in appendices are his own.

Images are Bill's own photos, including London Royal Academy of Arts sculpture, camel scene in India, Ravenna baptistry art, and Uluru

Session One

Matthew 1 – Outsiders and Insiders

How many names do you recognise? Best known are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and then David. Matthew introduces the genealogy by referring to Abraham and David. Abraham was the great forefather of the people of Israel, who therefore sometimes describe themselves as the children of Abraham. David was the great king and so the model for the great Jewish hope for the Messiah, the Christ, a “son of David”, a king like David.

Genealogies are like family trees, but also very different. There is only one trunk and no branches. In the ancient world they were used to stake a claim to continuity and we frequently find them used symbolically. The trunk goes back via the men. They often spoke of descendants as the seed. This reflects ancient notions of human reproduction: the man plants the seed in the woman’s womb, like sowing seed in a field and the woman incubates the seed. We now know that the seed or egg is already in the woman. Men are still important but not nearly as important as they thought they were and women have a much bigger role than people thought then.

There is symbolism in this genealogy at a number of levels. It is deliberately divided into 3 sets of 14 (very roughly). In the ancient world that meant 6 lots of 7 and meant that what comes next is the beginning of the seventh lot of seven. Seven is the perfect number, so Matthew’s first hearers would have got the point: perfection is reached in Jesus. Hebrew consonant letters were also used for numbers. In Hebrew D = 4 and V = 6, so David’s name (DVD) = 14.

Beyond the symbolism Matthew wants to underline that Jesus is not only the seed of Abraham, but also the seed of David and so qualifies to be the Messiah, the Christ. Strictly speaking his miraculous conception cut Joseph out, so that according to Matthew he was physically descended not from Joseph but from Mary, but they counted adoption as continuing the connection.

Mary is not the only exception to listing men only. We also find reference to four other women: Tamar, the Aramean, who seduced her father-in-law, Judah; Rahab, the prostitute; Ruth, the foreign woman from Moab, who seduced Boaz; and the wife of the foreigner, Uriah, a Hittite, seduced by David. We do sometimes find that genealogies made occasional reference to women, but one might normally expect to see very respectable women listed like Sarah or Rebecca or Rachel. Perhaps Matthew was responding to gossip about Mary by listing other women who some considered to be far from respectable. In each case, however, these exceptional women were also deemed to be heroes in Israel’s history.

In this way Matthew defends Mary. He also gives greater significance to women. But, beyond that, he also hints at the worthiness of people who were outsiders and foreigners. Matthew picks up one of Jesus’ emphases, which showed that sometimes it is the outsiders who grasp the meaning of the gospel, whereas insiders prove themselves blind. Jesus’ last act in Matthew’s gospel is to send his disciples out to all the nations of the world to invite them to become disciples of Jesus and embrace what he has taught them. As foreigners, these women foreshadow that foreigners, Gentiles, can also belong.

Both Matthew and Luke bring the story about Jesus’ miraculous conception and only they bring it. This was their way of explaining the common faith that God was in Christ. The author of John’s

gospel has a different explanation: though human Jesus was also the embodiment of God's Word which was with God in the beginning. Paul writes similarly. Other explanations include that Jesus had a unique filling of God's Spirit.

Matthew's and Luke's explanation is that Jesus must have been miraculously made – without Joseph's sperm. Conception was often seen as a miracle. Some will find the virginal conception falls in the category of mythology and point to similar stories in the world of the time. Others decide to take it at face value and speak of mystery.

Nothing in our texts suggests that having sex was something unholy nor that when the gospel writers speak of Jesus' brothers and sisters, they must have meant cousins, as later church fathers suggested who thought that Mary would be extra special if she never ever slept with Joseph. Sometimes admiration and adulation runs contrary to what were likely to have been realities. Nor is there any evidence to support the speculation that a Roman soldier had raped her, as some later critics of Christianity maintained, not that, had it been true, it would have done any more than underline faith's solidarity with the abused – at least as we would see it today.



Within the exchange over Mary's pregnancy there are some other points of interest. Joseph naturally interpreted Mary's pregnancy as meaning that she must have slept with someone else. That reflects the fact that the norm was that people did not have sex before marriage. It also carried implications under the laws of the time which required that where adultery had taken place divorce must follow – no exceptions. This applied also when people were engaged. Joseph shows up well by choosing the less shaming manner of divorcing Mary until he is told otherwise by an angel. He was a "righteous" man, which in Matthew's terms, as we shall see, meant that he was compassionate. Theirs was a different world. Adultery is no less a problem for relationships today, but we have learned from the heart of the gospel, that in many instances reconciliation is possible and that when things go wrong in relationships adultery may be one among many issues which need to be addressed in both partners.

The prophet Isaiah in the 8th century BCE predicted that the kingdom of Judah would be relieved of the threat of the Assyrian army and its ally the northern kingdom of Israel in a short time, like the time it takes for a young woman to fall pregnant, give birth and the child to grow up to know right and wrong. Using the child as a sign, he declares that the child would be named Emmanuel "God is with us" to emphasise the point (Isaiah 7:14-16). The Greek translation of young woman used a word which can mean not only young woman but also virgin and this made it attractive for people like Matthew to quote it as foreshadowing what in their account had taken place with Mary (Matthew 1:23).

This chapter with its fill of symbolism has more: the name Jesus/Jeshua/Joshua means God saves/liberates (1:21). So it depicts the mission of Jesus as liberating people from their sin, which means much more than forgiveness. It is about liberating them to be a people committed to love and compassion. Emmanuel symbolised the key message about Jesus which the story of the virginal

conception sought to explain. It never became his name, but his birth name, Jesus, said enough and still does.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. There were different ways of explaining how God meets us in Jesus: if someone asked you, how would you explain it?
3. Why do you think that often the people least expected to know and understand, turn out to really get what the gospel is about?

Session Two

Matthew 2 – Foreigners and Refugees

When Matthew and Luke bring us stories of Jesus' birth, they are engaging in a practice which was widespread in the ancient world. That was the attempt to describe the birth of famous people in a way that foreshadowed their later significance. It was a form of serious artistry. Artistry, because it used freedom and creativity, as a painter would to enhance a scene far beyond what a photograph could achieve.

The typical signs of such artistry are interventions of angels, people having dreams, stars behaving strangely, and deliberate echoes of loved stories. In the case of Jesus this included echoes of the stories about the patriarch Joseph, and of the angel of death killing all male infants before Israel's exodus from Egypt under Moses' leadership. And it was serious, because in the case of Jesus these stories were seeking to highlight the significance of life, ministry and death.

Already in the biblical story of Moses we see his great achievement in leading the exodus from Egypt, the land of the river, foreshadowed when as an infant he himself is rescued from the river, found in a basket among the bulrushes. Other birth stories of famous people, such as Alexander the Great and some of Rome's emperors, included miraculous births, signs in the heavens, and visits from the world's wisest.

The story of the magi, astrologers, from the east is full of such symbolism. Thus it is outsiders, non-Jews, the legendary wisest of the pagan world, who came to acknowledge Jesus, as would many outsiders once the disciples turned to fulfil their mission to the nations. In the story a star moves across the sky and then stands still over the place where Jesus lay. The artist is saying: here is something which the whole of creation celebrates!



The star was also a symbol of the Messiah. People read Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24:17, that a star would arise from Jacob and a sceptre from Israel as predicting the coming of a Messiah. One of the would-be Messiahs who led a fateful revolt against the Romans in 132-135 CE bore the title, Bar Kochba, "Son of the Star". Matthew's first hearers would have recognised the symbolism. Jesus was the Messiah, king of the Jews, and appropriately also born in David's city, Bethlehem.

Messiah, as the Hebrew word, *mashiach*, has come down to us, means the Anointed One, a term used primarily of kings. The Greek word, *christos*, which translated it, has come down to us as the "Christ". Outside of Jewish circles it came to mean little more than a surname, almost as though Jesus Christ was the son of Mr and Mrs Christ – not quite, but at least as something rather harmless like a second name. In the Jewish context of Palestine it was far from harmless. The Roman authorities knew well that most people who looked for a Messiah were looking for regime change.

King David was the model. The son of David to come, to be God's Anointed, adopted as the Son of God to be God's regent in earth would, like David, lead the nation. With his armies he would defeat their enemies, and liberate them from oppression. That was the common expectation. It was,

therefore, very dangerous to be called a Messiah. It is not even hundred percent clear that Jesus ever called himself a Messiah, though his followers must have done so.

It is telling that the gospels report that Peter hailed Jesus as the Messiah and was immediately exposed as having an understanding of messiahship which Jesus rejected (Mark 8:27-33). Jesus spoke of himself as embarking on a road to Jerusalem which would bring suffering and death, the very opposite of what Peter and most others would expect to happen to a Messiah. Hence Jesus' instruction that if they were going to think he was a Messiah they should keep quiet about it (Mark 8:30).

The claim that Jesus might be a Messiah figure, even if by force of ideas rather than by force of arms, leaked out and, as we know, Rome pounced and did what it did to other subversives: crucified him as a deterrent to anyone else having such ambitions.

This sense of danger linked with the hope of Messiah meets us in Matthew's gospel, not just at the end in the crucifixion, but also here at the beginning. It is why in the story Matthew depicts King Herod as wanting to kill the baby born to be "king of the Jews". Matthew tells the story not only in a way that recalls the killing of the infants by the angel of death in Egypt, but also foreshadows that, where Herod failed, Pilate later succeeded. In this way Matthew puts the cross into the Christmas story and also reminds us of the violence of that world.

The dreams of Joseph recall the dreams of the patriarch, Joseph, and the flight to Egypt recalls Israel's entry and stay in Egypt. During Israel's journey from Egypt they faced king Balak of the Amalekites who sought to destroy them, only to be warned against doing so by Balaam who made the prophecy about the star. These echoes are deliberate attempts to link Jesus to these ancient stories. Matthew will later go on to depict Jesus as like Moses – going up a mountain, not to receive a new Law, but to expound it.

Herod the Great died in 4 BCE and Luke also suggests that Jesus was born in Herod's reign (1:5). Later calculations were not sufficiently accurate, setting the year of Jesus' birth as the beginning of the current era, the year 0 CE. In substance it makes little difference. Herod's son, Archelaus, wanted to be a king like his father, but Rome refused and divided Herod's territory between his three sons, Antipater taking Galilee, and Philip, the land to the east and north. They were still ruling at the time of Jesus' ministry, but Rome deposed Archelaus for excessive cruelty in 6 CE and sent its own rulers in to govern Judea and Samaria, the best known being Pilate.

Our story has Joseph warned not to go back to Judea where Archelaus ruled, but instead to Galilee, where Jesus was brought up in Nazareth. A revolt at Herod's death in 4 BCE led to the destruction of nearby Sepphoris which was being rebuilt by Antipater when Jesus was a young man. He and his father may well have worked there in the reconstruction, indirectly profiting from the employment provided.

Luke's story is different at many points and worth a study on its own. Luke's census which brought the family to travel Bethlehem is awkward historically because his information must not have told him that it took place in 6 CE after Archelaus was deposed, thus 10 years after Jesus was born. Only in Luke do we find the Bethlehem shepherds, the singing angels, the stable and the feeder box. Only in Matthew do we find the magi, the star, and the escape to Egypt and settlement in Galilee. On Christmas cards we merge Matthew's and Luke's stories together. Luke assumes they already lived

in Galilee, but both know the story of Mary's virginal conception though telling it differently, and both identify Bethlehem, King David's town, as the birthplace. Such differences would not have bothered those who first heard the stories because they were familiar with the practice of making up such stories of famous people.

These stories are rich in symbolism and allusion and invite further legendary elaboration, fulfilled now every year in the traditions of the Christmas season, sometimes capturing their message, sometimes diluting it to the level of Santa fantasies. One good starting point is to realise that the Christmas stories are not really about a baby. They are about Jesus who meets us in his ministry.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Why do you think Matthew told the story the way he did?
3. In what ways do you think that in our community we can keep the Christmas stories connected to who Jesus was and is?

Session Three

Matthew 3:1-17 – Jesus and John the Baptist

At this point in his gospel, after adding two chapters about Jesus' birth, Matthew is back to where Mark's gospel started. He follows Mark's account but with some interesting innovations. Mark summarised Jesus' preaching with the words, "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news" (1:15). Matthew keeps this with just minor modifications: "Repent. For the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (4:17). Heaven's kingdom is just another way of saying God's kingdom. It does not mean heaven as a place. Matthew will later have Jesus speak of heaven's kingdom breaking through in Jesus' ministry.

The surprise, however, is that Matthew summarises John the Baptist's preaching in exactly the same way: "Repent. For the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (3:2). Only Matthew does this. While John and Jesus are not equal, they have the same message. The result is that Matthew not only has John sound like Jesus, but also has Jesus sound like John.

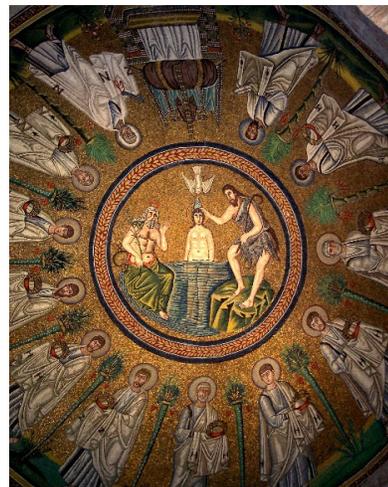
Using additional source material known also to Luke, Matthew portrays John as a prophet who warned of the judgement to come and of someone to come who would cut down unfruitful trees (3:10), separate wheat from chaff and burn the chaff (3:12). The effect of the heavenly voice at Jesus' baptism coming after John's predictions is that it identifies Jesus as the coming one, the coming judge.

Matthew even has Jesus repeat John's warning about unfruitful trees in the Sermon on the Mount (7:19). Thus, for Matthew, Jesus is the judge to come. Each of the five speeches in the gospel into which Matthew has assembled the sayings of Jesus ends with warning about the judgement. The best known is the judgement of the nations as sheep and goats, the climax of Jesus' teaching in Matthew (25:31-46). It gives a very severe look to the image of Jesus.

As the first gospel in the New Testament, Matthew set the scene for making the day of judgement and the horrors of hell so central in the Christian message over many centuries. Many preachers have made such threats the basis for trying to win disciples and warn sinners. Commanding people to love by threatening them has often been counterproductive.

Fortunately, there are other emphases in Matthew which head in a very different direction. There was already a problem in the fact that John announced that Jesus was the coming judge, because Jesus did not start by going about cutting people down and burning them like chaff.

Thus, Matthew even tells the story of John sending his disciples to Jesus to express his puzzlement at this. Was he really the coming one? (11:2-3). Jesus' response was to say: go and see what I have been doing, healing and helping and bringing good news to the poor (11:4-6). John needed a re-think. Jesus' priority was not cutting people down but building them up.



In his gospel, Mark had played with the idea of baptism to say that Jesus would baptise people in the Spirit. By that he meant that Jesus would bring God's Spirit like a cleansing flood into people's lives, bringing forgiveness and renewal.

Matthew and Luke knew a tradition according to which John said that Jesus would baptise with Spirit and fire. The fire is about judgement, but the Spirit is something much more positive. While Matthew retains John's emphasis on judgement, he paints a much more positive image of Jesus and his message.

One clue is in the exchange between Jesus and John, where Matthew is probably reflecting later embarrassment that Jesus submitted to John's baptism, seemingly making himself John's inferior (3:14-15). Jesus' response was to say that he wanted to fulfil all righteousness. That meant doing what was right, but in Matthew that righteousness or rightness had a wider meaning. For doing what is right for Matthew also meant being generous and caring. This is why he described Joseph as being "righteous" and therefore wanting to spare Mary the humiliation of a public trial for what he suspected was her adultery (1:19).

The Sermon on the Mount, the first of the five speeches which Matthew assembled to portray Jesus' teaching, has a lot to say about "righteousness", which really means justice or goodness. It begins with Jesus' promise of blessing to those who hunger for justice, whether for themselves or for others. He raises hope for the dispirited, the "poor in Spirit". He teaches that to keep God's Law, which he sees as the basis for judgement on judgement day, means to see that its highest priorities are about love. Not only loving God and loving your neighbour, but also loving your enemies. That is what is right, righteous.

Matthew follows John the Baptist in challenging people not to hide behind their status. What counts is not being a Jew, a child of Abraham, or a scribe or a Pharisee (3:9-10), or, as he later puts it, being a believer who can point to one's signs and wonders and sing, "Lord, Lord" (7:21-23), but whether you are a loving person, keeping the Law and its chief priorities. Indeed, in the judgement scene of the sheep and goats (25:31-46) what counts is kindness, helping the hungry and thirsty, caring for the sick and the prisoners, welcoming the stranger.

Matthew's gospel is therefore a rich mixture which puts love at the centre of how we are to interpret the Bible and Law, while sometimes employing methods which have undermined that message and served to encourage the fantasies of those who prefer vengeance and violence.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What do you think are the main differences between John and Jesus?
3. What is your experience of the threatening approach to teaching and preaching in the church?

Session Four

Matthew 4:1-11 – Options in the Outback

While Mark gives just two verses to reporting Jesus' spending 40 days in the outback exposed to Satan, living with the wildlife and being nourished by angels (1:12-13), both Matthew and Luke knew a story which filled out that event with vivid imagination (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). People embarking on important tasks had to confront the options and have their mettle tested. Telling the story of Jesus, had, therefore, to show Jesus doing the same.

Mark's brief version sounds like Jesus is going back to the Garden of Eden to face the test of his obedience. But Matthew's and Luke's version puts him into a situation like that of the people of Israel on their way from Egypt to the promised land where Israel's traditions depict the nation as regularly failing the test. Matthew, who deliberately colours Jesus' story with Israel's ancient stories, links the 40 days to the 40 years of Israel's wandering wilderness journey, and has Jesus succeed where Israel failed and cites Israel's scripture to resist the devil.



Storytellers loved threes. So here we have three temptations. They begin at the end of Jesus' stay, rather than during it, as in Mark, because this best suits the report that Jesus was hungry. Israel complained of hunger in the wilderness and God eventually sent manna. Surely Jesus could help himself in a similar way: magic, make stones into bread. Could he? Perhaps Matthew and his listeners thought he could, perhaps they didn't.

In any case Jesus rejects the suggestion. The response, that people were not to live by bread alone, but by words coming from the mouth of God, could have been met with the answer: then, do both. Underlying the negative response, however, is a pointed rejection not of meeting one's natural needs, but of not letting that need be a distraction and, more importantly, of not seeing his agenda as to being a magician.

The option to play the magician, joining the marketplace of competing miracle workers, seeking recruits with ever more fantastic magic shows, meets a solid "no" also in the second temptation. Perform a stunt. Jump unscathed from the top of the temple. The story has the devil do what believers would later also love to do: find a Bible passage to justify your plan. If not literally, at least figuratively, Jesus would have come crashing down to earth, had he embraced that option.

Matthew knows of believers who majored in the marvellous and has Jesus confront them:

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²²On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' ²³Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers'. (7:21-23)

Paul does so, more gently, in writing to believers in Corinth who were just like that – proud of their charisma. It prompts his wonderful words in 1 Corinthians 13, which begin,

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing (13:1-2).

This style of magical faith was and still is widespread and popular. We find the author of the Gospel according to John needing to make a similar point:

When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴But Jesus on his part did not believe in them, because he knew all people ²⁵and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone. Now there was one from the Pharisees, called Nicodemus ... (2:23 – 3:1).

Nicodemus believed Jesus was from God on the basis of his miracles and Jesus told him he needed new birth if he wanted to see and understand what Jesus was about (3:2-3).

The final temptation offers Jesus power. Again, had Jesus agreed, the result would have surely been an embarrassing dead end, but Jesus resists. The desire to have power over others, to have everyone do what you want, is deeply ingrained as an option in most of us and we usually learned this option in our infancy. I want all the toys! I want everyone to centre themselves in me! I want you all to do what I want!

Some people's understanding of God is derived from this model. God, then, is self-centred and self-obsessed, not loving at all. In the human community it takes the form of egocentricity and power-mongering, typical of some rulers and politicians as Jesus noted (Matthew 10:25). It reveals itself also at many other levels, almost anywhere where people have authority and power and decide that it is there for them to use for their own advantage. It is also there in images not only of God, but also of Jesus, especially where his earthly suffering is portrayed as just an interim phase to qualify him for the honour and glory we all crave. Then the resurrection by implication reverses all his values of lowliness and love.

The irony of this temptation is that Matthew portrays Jesus as meeting with his disciples after his resurrection and declaring that God had indeed given him all authority, but this was not in order to compensate for his humiliation and satisfy his ego's will to power and glory. It was to have him reconstitute his mission of love and now extend it to all nations, making them learners (disciples) of the message he had taught, baptising them, too, to join the community called to be good news in the world (28:18-20).

In the era of Christian beginnings Jewish hopes for change produced a range of movements, some military, some prophetic, but nearly all of them sought in some way to re-enact Israel's history. That usually entailed gathering in the outback, the wilderness, and then crossing the Jordan. The Jesus movement was no different and it is therefore highly probable that not only John the Baptist, but also Jesus followed this path.

Matthew and his tradition imagined well what might have crossed the mind of Jesus. Beneath the colour and fantasy of conversations with the devil are real options which remain alive and well in the church and the community today.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. In what ways do you see the devil's values expressed in these temptations reflected in how some people think of God?
3. What matters most when people have power? Should they pretend they do not have any? Is power a bad thing? How are God and Jesus models of how to use power?