

Sermon for the First Sunday after the Epiphany, January 8, 2017
Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A: Isaiah 42:1–9; Psalm 89:20–29; Acts 10:34–38; Matthew 3:13–17

Augustine of Hippo thought Mark’s gospel was an abstract from Matthew,¹ though I’m sure many thoughtful readers over the centuries must have realized this made no sense. As Raymond Brown pointed out: why would Mark leave out things like Jesus’ birth and the Lord’s Prayer or decide to include Jesus saying, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”²

I think the history of preferring Matthew, not only to Mark, but also to Luke and John, has everything to do with the history of how one verse in Matthew was understood: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my *ékklḗsia*, my church”—a better translation would be my “gathering of people.”³ The historic lectionaries of Western Christians preferred Matthew to Luke, John, and Mark.

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 164.

² Mark 10:18.

³ Matthew 16:18; See Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “*ékklḗsia*,” 303–4.

Jesus' baptism was never the gospel lesson on a Sunday or feast day in Pre-Reformation England. Pre-Vatican II Roman Catholics never heard it either. But beginning in 1928, Episcopalians heard Mark's story of Jesus on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany.

But there was at least one notable exception. When it came to telling the story of Jesus' baptism, Mark's story of Jesus baptism was used. Matthew and Luke's stories just weren't used for the Eucharist until the three-year lectionary began to be used on Advent Sunday in 1970.

These are the words of Mark, but not the only words of Mark, that would prove to be a theological problem for the other evangelists and later Christian writers:

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."*⁴

⁴ Mark 1:9–11.

Again, in Mark there is no birth story. Jesus is told he is God's Son as he comes up out of the water and the Holy Spirit descends on him.

Luke declines to say directly that John baptized Jesus, but he says Jesus was baptized after all of the other people were baptized.⁵

In John, Jesus is not baptized at all. In one place John says Jesus baptized people and in another that it was only Jesus' disciples who were baptizing.⁶ Jesus' words to Nicodemus about being born again of water and the Spirit to see the kingdom of God was the historic gospel for the Sunday after Pentecost, which became Trinity Sunday in 1334. But the English kept the lessons related and continued to keep these less for Trinity Sunday when the Prayer Book came along in 1549. Of course John's Jesus, the Word made flesh, had no need to be baptized for repentance or to be born again.

So, to Matthew. The Revised Standard Version translates Jesus' response to John, his first words in

⁵ Luke 3:21–22.

⁶ John 3:26; 4:1–2.

Matthew's gospel, as "Let it be so."⁷ These words are familiar to us, but in the Greek text Jesus uses just one word.

He commands John to do it. He says, " 'Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then [John] allowed him."⁸

But there's more. "Let it be" as a translation of the command form of this verb is found in the standard Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament, but almost as a footnote at the end of two columns of small, dense print. Besides "allow," "give way," or "permit," the verb's primary meanings are actually "to let a person go" or "to pardon."⁹

John was baptizing with water for repentance.¹⁰ Matthew may have thought he was dealing with the problem of Jesus' baptism, but instead he was teeing up his narrative for more debate. How could

⁷ Matthew 3:15.

⁸ Matthew 3:15. *New American Bible, Revised Edition* (2011).

⁹ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. "ἀφίημι," 156–157.

¹⁰ Matthew 3:6, 11.

“Emmanuel . . . God with us”¹¹ need to be baptized? How could the one called in Matthew ‘Savior’ because he will save”¹² need baptism?

What seems most significant to me about Matthew’s narrative here is not the question of whether Jesus needed to be baptized, but Matthew’s clear statement that when Jesus began his ministry, he was in charge. Jesus was “ ‘Emmanuel’ . . . (which means, God with us).” Jesus told John what to do, and John obeyed him. As Professor Ulrich Luz points out in his commentary, in Matthew, righteousness, that is, being in the right relationship with God, and obedience to God go together.¹³

When Matthew’s Jesus calls his first disciples, he uses this same imperative verb form. He tells Simon and Andrew, “Come after me.”¹⁴ I think the words of Matthew’s Jesus invite us to consider what God’s call to each of us is. Perhaps better, from the perspective

¹¹ Matthew 1:23.

¹² *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version, Expanded Edition*, ed. Herbert May and Bruce Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 1172 n.

¹³ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 144.

¹⁴ Matthew 4:19. My translation.

of Matthew's Jesus, would be to ask how God may be showing us today the ways of righteousness and obedience?

John the Baptizer associated righteousness with repentance. John the Evangelist associated it with belief in Jesus.¹⁵ Luke's Jesus came "to seek and to save the lost,"¹⁶ but he's also about the work the Spirit will do in his name after his ascension to the Father.¹⁷ In Matthew, it is right for Jesus to be baptized, just as it is right for those who are baptized to live out their lives as children of God, as sisters and brothers in Christ.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁵ John 1:12

¹⁶ Luke 19:10.

¹⁷ Luke 24:49.