

## Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 9, 2020

### The Holy Eucharist

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year A: Habakkuk 3:1–6, 17–19; Psalm 27:1–7; 1 Corinthians 2:1–16\*; Matthew 5:13–20*

The text of today’s appointed gospel lesson, in Greek and in English, begins with the second person plural pronoun, you—or in my childhood in Virginia with a Georgia grandmother, you-all. If February 2, the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple, had not taken precedence over the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, we would have heard the beginning of what we call the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was sitting on a mountain<sup>2</sup> with the crowds and with his disciples<sup>3</sup> speaking to “the poor in spirit . . . those who mourn . . . the meek . . . those who hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . the merciful . . . the pure in heart . . . the peacemakers . . . those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.”<sup>4</sup> His words about the “happy”—a better but not perfect rendering of the Greek here than the English word “blessed”<sup>5</sup>—

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:1–7:29.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:1.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 7:28.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:3–11.

<sup>5</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 190.

concluded these words about the persecuted, “Happy are you when they insult you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil things against you untruthfully for my sake. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven. Just so did they persecute the prophets before you.”<sup>6</sup>

In my homily last Sunday, I quoted the late Father Raymond Brown’s last book, *An Introduction to the New Testament*—published in 1997. He summarized the-then scholarly opinion about the date it was written: the year “85, give or take five to ten years.”<sup>7</sup> For Matthew he wrote the years “80–90, give or take a decade.”<sup>8</sup> (I met Father Brown only once, very briefly. I suspect he was smiling as he wrote about these dates.)

Brown counted himself among the 80% of scholars who think “the unknown canonical evangelist was a Jewish Christian”—and not a Gentile Christian.<sup>9</sup> None of the gospels names its author. In the course of the second century, the names by which we call their authors were given to these texts. The possibility that a

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<sup>6</sup> Translation: Luz, 185

<sup>7</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 226.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

Gentile Christian named “Marcus” may have written Mark may have the greatest probability that a second-century tradition about a first-century writing is true.<sup>10</sup>

One reason scholars opt for Matthew being Jewish is the sense that few educated Gentiles would be so knowledgeable about not only the Hebrew and possibly Aramaic languages but also about the Hebrew Scriptures and practices of first-century Judaism.<sup>11</sup>

If you recall that Paul’s earliest letters are dated to 50 or 51 for the First Letter to the Thessalonians and the second oldest, Galatians, dated to 54/55, one can see Matthew struggling in what was, by his time, a Christian world where Gentile Christians outnumbered Jewish Christians. One might ask, were Jesus’ words, “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them,”<sup>12</sup> really a part of his first sermon we have from Matthew?” More than a third the way in Luke’s gospel, we hear Jesus say, “The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and every one enters it violently. But it is

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 158–161.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 5:17–18.

easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one dot of the law to become void.”<sup>13</sup>

In the middle of Matthew, to conclude what scholars call his third sermon, the Sermon in Parables,<sup>14</sup> we read, “And [Jesus] said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’”<sup>15</sup> I am not alone in thinking, Matthew himself, whatever his name was, was himself a “scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>16</sup>

One might say that Luke’s largely Gentile community and Matthew’s largely Jewish community already knew of persecution and the terrible suffering that anyone in Israel during the Great Jewish Revolt would have known during Rome’s reconquest. We certainly live in a time where the active persecution of Christians by totalitarian governments and countries ruled by Islamic law exists.

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<sup>13</sup> Luke 16:16–17.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, 172.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 13:52.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 208.

A couple of weeks ago, when Brendon Hunter and I attended the Active Shooter and Stop the Bleeding Training, I think I was the only person in the room wearing a clerical collar—I'm pretty sure I spoke to a Lutheran and a Presbyterian pastor. During a break a man made his way to me, thinking I was a Roman Catholic. "No, I'm an Episcopalian." It didn't save me from a conversation afterwards about us not being faithful to the Bible because we don't discriminate on the basis of gender, gender identification, sexual orientation, race. We do a very few things based on age—Sunday School for children.

More than once I have used this story from Matthew to rescue me. It comes just before Jesus begins his sermon on Mission to the Twelve. "[The Pharisees] said to [Jesus] disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' . . . [Jesus replied] 'Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." ' »<sup>17</sup>

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

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<sup>17</sup> Matthew 9:11–13.