

INTRODUCING JESUS
THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF GOD
Matthew 3:1 - 4:16

Introductory Comment

Matthew now presents four portraits, each of which creates a perspective that is central to his understanding of Jesus. Together they prepare the reader for a proper reading of the gospel.

The opening portrait focuses on John the Baptist (3:1-12). Matthew continues to place Jesus in the context of the religious experience of Judaism. Now, however, Judaism has reached its climax, for John the Baptist is the Messianic herald.

The second portrait is of Jesus (3:13-17). Matthew concentrates on the intimacy of Jesus' religious experience. As we watch Jesus, Matthew wants us to see the action of God's Spirit at work in him. As we listen to Jesus' words, Matthew wants us to know that we are hearing the word of God.

While Jesus is God's son, he is also fully one with us in his humanity. Like us he was born of woman. Like us he suffered and was tempted. The wonder of his life was that, unlike us, he did not sin, but remained perfectly open and responsive to God. We see this in Matthew's third portrait (4:1-11).

Finally, Matthew sets the stage for Jesus' ministry in 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (4:12-16).

John the Baptist heralds the one who is to fulfil the Messianic hopes of Israel

Matthew opens with the expression ‘In those days’: the days in which God’s promises were fulfilled, the days when history reached its climax, the days when ‘the kingdom of the heavens has come near’. This last expression underlines Matthew’s special interest in the coming of the kingdom. In this way he continues the theme of Messianic fulfilment, developed in his opening two chapters.

Matthew wants his readers to see John within the context of the sacred writings. He chooses a text (Isaiah 40:3) from the opening passage of that part of the scroll of Isaiah that comes from an anonymous prophet of the final years of the Babylonian exile (550-539BC). Hearing of the victories of Cyrus of Persia over the Babylonian armies and witnessing the liberation which the conquering king was effecting throughout the crumbling Empire, the prophet in exile saw Cyrus as God’s Messiah, sent to liberate the exiles. He wants them to prepare for a journey like the one undertaken by their ancestors under the leadership of Moses. John the Baptist has a similar mission.

Matthew sums up John’s message in the one word ‘repent’. This is a translation of the Greek *metanoieô*: to change one’s mind. The way they have been accustomed to look at God, and life and religion, is not good enough. They will need to prepare their minds and hearts to see life differently, and to be open to the grace and the challenge of the new Moses who is coming to call them all on a journey to freedom.

¹ *In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,*

² *‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’*

³ **This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”’**

⁴ **Now John wore**

compare
Mark 1:2-4
Luke 3:2-4

clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

⁵ Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,

⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

John's clothing reminds the reader of Elijah: 'a hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist' (2Kings 1:8). Elijah was the great prophet acclaimed in the traditions of Israel as: 'a prophet like fire whose word burned like a torch' (Sirach 48:1). Legend had it that he did not die, but was taken alive by God into heaven:

A chariot of fire and horses of fire separated Elijah from Elisha, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.

– 2Kings 2:11

Hence an expectation grew that God would send him back to earth to herald the Messiah:

I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me ... I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.

– Malachi 3:1 and 4:5

Matthew wants his readers to see John the Baptist as the fulfilment of that hope. John baptised those who came to hear him while they confessed their sins. On the meaning of the word 'sin' see the commentary on 1:21. Matthew does not say that their sins were forgiven: that is something kept for the Messiah.

The word 'baptism' literally means being overwhelmed by or immersed in water. Naaman is cured of leprosy by being immersed seven times in the waters of the Jordan (2Kings 5:14). Judith immersed herself in purifying waters in preparation for the mission God had for her (Judith 12:7). Metaphorically it can be used for being overwhelmed in other ways as well. In the Greek version of Isaiah we read: 'anarchy baptises [overwhelms] me' (Isaiah 21:4).

John the Baptist challenged the people to go down into the river Jordan and to allow themselves to be immersed in the water. This was in order to dramatise what was happening in their lives and to help them realise their need for a saviour. It was from the chaos of the swirling waters that God brought forth the splendour of the heavens and of the earth (Genesis 1). It was through the waters of the Red Sea that the people had to pass to find freedom (Exodus 14:21-31).

It was customary to baptise Gentiles who converted to Judaism. John, however, is baptising Jews, asserting thereby that being a Jew is not enough. A complete purification is needed by all if they are to enjoy the new creation and the new redemption promised by God.

compare Mark 1:5-6

Matthew introduces ‘many Pharisees and Sadducees’. These represent the leaders of the Jews, those whom Matthew sees as being ultimately responsible for the rejection of Jesus and also for the continuing rejection of the Christian community. Throughout the gospel, they, along with the chief priests and scribes (2:4), maintain a position of unrelenting hostility to Jesus and to his revelation.

The Pharisees (the ‘separated ones’) were a sect of laymen who carried on the tradition of the Hasidim, who, in the period of the Maccabees (c.167BC) resisted all attempts to allow Greek culture to corrupt Jewish traditions (1Maccabees 2:42; 7:13). At their best the members of the Pharisee sect were truly devoted to God and wanted to do God’s will in the least detail of their daily lives. They found God’s will in the writings of their sacred Scriptures which they scrupulously followed. The gospels make it clear, however, that many were blind to the surprising way in which God revealed his love and his will in Jesus. Jesus’ rejection of their understanding made him a threat which they were determined to oppose. In the experience of Matthew’s community it was the Pharisees who were mainly responsible for defending Judaism against what they saw as the inroads of Christianity. It is not surprising, therefore, that from the Christian perspective they came to symbolise those responsible for the rejection of Jesus and of the members of the Jewish community who chose to follow him.

In the absence of a king, the high priest played a central role in Judaism in the post-exilic period (after 520BC). During the period of Greek domination (333-167BC), the priestly aristocracy became largely secular in outlook and it was they who formed the nucleus of the group who benefited most from the conquest of Palestine achieved during the period of Jewish independence under the Hasmoneans (142-63BC). The name ‘Sadducees’, by which this party was known, probably goes back to Zadoc, one of David’s chief priests (2Samuel 15:24). They accommodated to the Romans after 63BC and had no sympathy with any group who took religion seriously in a way that might disturb their position of power and influence.

Matthew, here and throughout the gospel, is more interested in what these groups had in common: their opposition to Jesus. And so, at their first appearance, they are singled out for the prophetic denunciation of the Baptist.

7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism

compare Luke 3:7

7he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' **8** Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

10 Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to *carry* his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

compare
Mark 1:7-8
Luke 3:7-9,16-17

The Pharisees and Sadducees are like snakes trying to escape the fire of God's judgment. Orchards are cleared of trees that fail to bear fruit, and the trees are burned (compare 7:19). The wind separates chaff from grain. Useless trees and chaff provide fuel for the fire. So it must be for those who are making a show of repentance, but who fail to produce its fruit.

'Repentance' involves a change of mind and heart and a turning to God. Jesus' contemporaries were being summoned in every direction by those who promised them salvation. The Sadducees were calling them to fidelity to the cult and to tradition. The Pharisees saw salvation as coming from fidelity to God's will as expressed in meticulous observance of the Law. Another group, the Essenes, called for a withdrawal from the darkness of the world in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. The Baptist stood out against all these groups. He called for a new way of looking at life, a change of mind and heart, a new vision.

We are reminded of the words of Ezekiel:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

– Ezekiel 36:25-26

We could reflect also upon the exhortation of Isaiah

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice.

– Isaiah 1:16-17

Paul also speaks of the 'wrath to come':

waiting for God's Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus who rescues us from the wrath to come.

– 1Thessalonians 1:10

To grasp the significance of the expression we need to recall that God is love and that we are created to experience without distraction the intimacy of divine communion. It follows that all that is impure in us has to be burned in the fire of this love till nothing remains but love.

This is a painful process, and though it is initiated by God's love and has the purification of love as its goal, it is experienced as 'wrath'. Paul writes:

Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

– Romans 2:4-5

Part of us resists this purifying love and our resistance disturbs us at the core of our being. Suffering the effects of our sinful behaviour and of our resistance to grace, we project anger onto God:

Gather together, gather, O shameless nation, before you are driven away like the drifting chaff, before there comes upon you the fierce anger of the Lord, before there comes upon you the day of the Lord's wrath.

– Zephaniah 2:1-2

I will gather you in my anger and in my wrath, and I will put you in and melt you. I will gather you and blow upon you with the fire of my wrath, and you shall be melted within it. As silver is melted in a smelter, so you shall be melted in it; and you shall know that I the Lord have poured out my wrath upon you.

– Ezekiel 22:20-22

John's words are strong, like the words of the prophets we have just quoted, because he wants the people to realise that, while they may deceive themselves and may succeed in deceiving others, they cannot deceive God. Evil and its effects must be 'thrown into the fire' to be burned away. This purifying will be done by the 'more powerful one' whom John is announcing. The Baptist sees through the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. In this he draws on a long prophetic tradition:

These people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote.

– Isaiah 29:13

They did not obey or incline their ear, but, in the stubbornness of their evil will, they walked in their own counsels, and looked backward rather than forward.

– Jeremiah 7:24

Looking back and claiming to belong to Abraham is not enough. Indeed, as the Baptist says (using a play on words that is obvious in Aramaic, though lost in translation): 'God is able from these stones (abanîm) to raise up children (banîm) to Abraham'. John knew that his contemporaries were suffering under all kinds of oppression. They were in danger of seeking release by following the false directions pointed out by some of their religious leaders. He knew that their only hope was to place their trust in God and, like their ancestors, to prepare for the journey on which God would lead them. What was needed for this journey of liberation was 'the one who is coming', the 'more powerful one' (see 12:29). He would overwhelm them, but not simply with water. He would immerse them in the Spirit with which he himself was anointed.

John the Baptist

The fire is the fire of judgment. It is also a fire of love (Psalm 50:3). Nothing can quench this fire (see Isaiah 66:24) till all is purified. How often we find ourselves struggling to find direction in a 'wilderness'. Tracks that we once followed now seem to go nowhere or are swept away, and we find ourselves in a trackless waste. Loves that once sustained us have proved fickle and have gone. Worst of all, our own sins return to haunt us and we are faced with our powerlessness to find direction and freedom. This happens to us personally. It happens to those we love and to communities that are significant to us.

Matthew is inviting us to not lose hope but to realise that the desert can also be the place where a new life can be found and a new creation can begin. The prophet Hosea understood this when he had God say: 'I will now allure her [Israel], and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her'(Hosea 2:14).

'Confessing our sins' like the people of Judah, we too can prepare to encounter the one who is stronger than we are, the power and gentleness of whose Spirit can speak tenderly to us and call us to journey with him to a deeper meaning and a fuller freedom. Jesus was intimately connected with the history and the hopes of his own people. Saint Paul says: 'In him [the Son of God, Jesus Christ] every one of God's promises is a Yes'(2Corinthians 1:20).

If Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises made to Israel, he is also the fulfilment of the promises made to any and every people. This was Paul's belief and Matthew shares it. What, then, about the promises which God has made to us, personally and through the history of the people from whom we come? The promise made us when God imagined us into life with those unique and unrepeatable qualities that are ours; the promises made whenever anyone has responded to God's inspiration by mediating God's love to us; the promises that are made to us as the gift of life opens up for us with every new day. For all the insufferable pain he experienced, the author of the Book of Lamentations could still write:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.'

The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.

– Lamentation 3:22-25

The one to whom we look for forgiveness and healing, the one to whom we look to find direction when we have lost our way, is the one whom our souls recognise. We are made for God and Jesus attracts us because in his person he fills our senses with the perfume (the 'chrism') of God. We can share his life and his grace, and become, as Paul says, 'the aroma of Christ to God'(2Corinthians 2:15); but only when we have allowed Jesus to baptise us with his Spirit.

Can we dare the desert journey? If we are not yet ready for it, let us still read on, for Jesus presented to us by Matthew may well so attract us that we will find ourselves captivated by him, and unable to resist the grace of companionship which he offers us, however high the cost might appear.

Jesus is declared Son of God at his baptism

In the opening chapter, we stressed the importance of reading the text as poetic drama. This, Matthew's first portrait of Jesus, is a perfect example. The picture it gives us of Jesus is one which Matthew wishes to remain before our eyes throughout the gospel. Thus we would expect it to be striking, as indeed it is. The Spirit that brought about Jesus' conception (1:18,20), here anoints him as the Messiah and commissions him to fulfil God's promises.

The scene begins simply. John's baptism has just been described as a 'baptism for repentance'(3:11). Matthew states that Jesus came 'to be baptized' by John. From the beginning of his entry into public life we see Jesus mixing with sinners and choosing to identify with them. In seeking baptism, Jesus too must have been looking for a new heart and a new mind: a new vision of how he and his contemporaries might break free from sin. He himself — so those who knew him tell us — was sinless, but he certainly felt the weight of sin all around him, and, as we shall see, he closely identified with those who were its victims.

Jesus must have often experienced the burden of helplessness as he found himself confronted with the despondency, pain and distraction surrounding him and the emptiness of the religious forms that left people in their sin and in their misery. The intimacy of his own experience of God must have led him to believe that there had to be a better way. Hearing of John, he left his home town of Nazareth and joined the pilgrims who listened to John's preaching and accepted his baptism.

This baptism proved to be a turning point in Jesus' life. We know virtually nothing about him prior to this day. After it he became a preacher and a healer and an extraordinary witness to love as he gathered disciples around him and began a movement that was still growing at the time Matthew wrote his gospel. To portray the significance of that day, Matthew uses language drawn from some of the most powerful passages of the Old Testament.

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

14 John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'

15 But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented.

16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

17 And a voice from heaven said 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

compare
Mark 1:9-11
Luke 3:21-22

Jesus' Baptism

The introductory dialogue between the Baptist and Jesus shows John's self-effacement, but also his submission to God's will once it is made clear to him. In this dialogue we hear the first words spoken by Jesus. It is significant that he speaks of 'righteousness', and of 'fulfilment': two important themes of Matthew's gospel.

The whole of this prologue has been about fulfilment. Matthew has already described Joseph, through whom Jesus became part of the religious tradition of Israel, as a 'righteous man' (1:19). 'Righteousness' (see also 5:6,10,20; 6:1,33; 21:32) refers to the carrying out of God's revealed will. It is based on profound listening to God's word, a humble attention to what is heard and a faithful carrying out of God's will. Righteousness is possible only because of the grace of God's enabling Spirit, the Spirit which comes down from God and alights on Jesus; the Spirit with which Jesus is to baptise.

Jesus' experience at his baptism marked the beginning of the new creation, and he who stepped out of the river was indeed the new Adam, as Saint Paul tells us (1Corinthians 15:22, 15:45; Romans 5:12-21). Matthew demonstrates this truth by recalling, in a few brief phrases, the swirling chaos of the primeval waters, the Spirit of God hovering over the waters, and the creating word of God that breaks the silence (Genesis 1:3). A secondary motif is that of the crossing of the Red Sea. Matthew speaks of the heavens being 'opened to him'. God is revealing the word that is to bring about the redemption of the world.

For a long time, the Jews felt the lack of prophets to speak God's word to them as he had in times past (Daniel 3:28). Nowhere is this more poignantly expressed than in the cry of those who, spurred on by the hope of returning from exile in Babylon to the Promised Land, had given up everything only to find themselves living among a people who had largely lost faith. Their cry is included in the scroll of Isaiah:

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ...
From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him ...
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.
Your holy cities have become a wilderness ...
and all our pleasant places have become ruins.
After all this, will you restrain yourself, O Lord?
Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?

– Isaiah 64:1-12

God's answer to that cry was to send the fullness of his creative Spirit down upon Jesus and to consecrate him as his Messiah. But what kind of Spirit was it that Jesus had so abundantly? A reading of the prophecies of the Old Testament might have led us to expect the Spirit of the Messiah to be that of a warrior who would rid the world of sinners. We might have expected it to be compared to a roaring lion, or to a fire scorching a forest, or an axe laid to the root of a tree! But such was not the Spirit that characterised Jesus. We are told that it was 'like a dove'. One thinks of Noah's ark and the dove that brought the first signs of new growth on a world that had succumbed to the deluge (Genesis 8:11). One might think also of the following ode from the Song of Solomon:

My beloved speaks and says to me:
 'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;
 for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.
 The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come,
 and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.
 The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom;
 they give forth fragrance.
 Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.
 O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff,
 let me see your face, let me hear your voice;
 for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely'.

– Song of Songs 2:10-14

In spite of the image of God so often presented by many of the religious leaders of his day, Jesus knew that God's voice was 'sweet'. He knew that the face of God was 'lovely'. His prayer to hear that voice and to see that face was heard in a remarkable way at his baptism. Jesus' questions were answered and the answer confirmed in him that spirit of gentleness and peace that his disciples found so attractive and so convincing (11:28-30; 12:18-21).

To capture for his readers the essence of Jesus' experience, Matthew drew on the thirty or more years of prayerful reflection of those who had watched Jesus closely and had come to know him intimately. We can assume that Jesus had known a special intimacy in his prayer from his childhood. His practice, even as an adult, of calling God 'Abba', a word he would have used as a child in speaking to Joseph, would seem to indicate that. On the day of his baptism, however, he was to experience this intimacy in such a way that it caused him to choose not to return home, but rather to go out to share with others what he had come to know.

When the king was consecrated the assembly proclaimed the words: 'You are my son; today have I begotten you' (Psalm 2:7). This cry had not been heard since the consecration of the young king Jeconiah during the siege of Jerusalem in 598BC. Now, six hundred and thirty years later, it is God who declares that this Jesus is his Messiah, his son. But what kind of a Messiah is he to be? This will begin to emerge in the following scene, but is already indicated in the words which follow. They remind us of the words God spoke to Abraham when he seemed to be calling for the sacrifice of his only son, Isaac: 'Your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love' (Genesis 22:2).

Jesus' Baptism

The words used here by Matthew to describe the intimacy of Jesus' communion with God are taken from the opening words of the first song of the Servant of the Lord, a servant through whose suffering the people would find redemption. The song is worth quoting at length for it captures the essence of Jesus' baptismal experience as understood by Matthew:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice ['a just verdict'] to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth a just verdict.
He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established a just verdict in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it:
I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.
See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

– Isaiah 42:1-9

This ancient song expresses an essential dimension of Jesus' mission in the years between his baptism and his death, as he gave himself to open people's eyes to the wonder of God, and to liberate them from the darkness and captivity that is the lot of those who fail to make connection with God and, therefore, with themselves and with the world. Human ignorance, pride, insecurity and fear had distorted religion. Jesus set about declaring God's 'verdict' on humankind, a surprising verdict, and one welcomed by Jesus' disciples as 'good news'. What was it? It is expressed in the opening words of the above poem, transformed by Matthew into the even more intimate 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'. Matthew retains the statement in the third person. He is offering it to his readers for their acceptance in faith.

We have been prepared for this moment by the account of Jesus' conception (1:18-23). Here, however, for the first time Matthew explicitly speaks of Jesus as God's Son: a theme which is central to his presentation of Jesus (11:27; 16:16; 17:5; 26:63; 28:19). The intimacy experienced by Jesus during his Nazareth years was the intimacy of one whom God was 'taking by the hand and forming'.

Only now, in his early thirties, is Jesus ready for his mission to preach, teach and heal. Only now is he ready to challenge his contemporaries by taking the side of the poor against their oppressors. He had been waiting on God; or rather God had been waiting on him for the moment when his heart was broken enough, open enough, to receive the fullness of the Spirit that his Father was wanting to pour out upon him.

The moment comes at the Jordan river when Jesus is overwhelmed by an experience of himself as being in a special way the son of the God whom he has come to address as ‘my dear Father’ (‘Abba’). He knows himself as loved and delighted in by the Transcendent One for whom he yearns.

That the song from Isaiah expresses the essence of Jesus’ mission will become obvious from the remainder of the gospel. It is important to note here that Jesus recognises that his experience is not simply meant for himself. Yes, he is the beloved son of God and God does delight in him. The following scenes will make it clear that Jesus realises that this experience is one that is meant for everyone. The verdict passed by God on the people of this broken and discouraged world is that each and every person is a son or daughter of God, and that the God who creates us does, indeed, delight in us. The idea is not new: ‘The Lord takes pleasure in his people’ (Psalm 149:4).

What is new is the intimacy of this delight as seen in the life of Jesus, and the way in which Jesus drew others into this intimacy. True, the delight does depend on our response. Taking delight means enjoying a sharing of life that is offered and accepted. God’s delight is in being with us. If we choose to reject God’s offer, God does not and cannot force his love. Hence the call for faith: we must believe in God’s love. Hence the call for repentance: we must turn to God and open our hearts to receive his love. As the author of the Letter to Hebrews says, quoting from Habakkuk 2:4:

My righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.

– Hebrews 10:38

When we shrink back from communion with God, we harm ourselves and others. God wants to delight in us as a father or mother delights and he continues to offer his love unconditionally to us. Jesus comes to realise that the reason for much of the sin in the world and for the despondency that he has witnessed is that people do not know how deeply loved they are. He is determined to tell them so and convinced that God is sending him to demonstrate God’s love to them. It is this determination and this conviction that provided the energy behind his public ministry. Jesus wants others to know what he has come to realise so powerfully on the day of his Baptism. He wants, as John has already promised, to baptise them, as he has been baptised, with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' Baptism

If we have been baptised, the grace offered Jesus at the Jordan has been offered to us. For some, this came as a result of a personal commitment resulting from a journey of faith. For others, baptised as infants, it happened because of the love of parents and the welcome of the Christian community. In every case, baptism is a gift, coming not as a result of anything we have done but from God's gracious love.

Baptism is something God does in overwhelming us with his love, pouring out his Spirit upon us, and entrusting us to the community which believes in his Son Jesus. We are born innocent but, like a fish in a polluted river, we are born into a world of sin. Obviously, baptism does not free us from being affected by the oppression caused by sin any more than it freed Jesus. It does, however, make it possible for us to do as Jesus did: to say No to sin and Yes to the love offered us by God. It does so by welcoming us into the community of faith which keeps alive for us the memory of Jesus and mediates to us his redeeming love.

In baptism God pours out upon us that Spirit which was enjoyed by his Son Jesus. It is God's pledge to us of God's enduring love. Adult baptism highlights the necessity of our personal acceptance of the gift. Infant baptism highlights the fact that what we are receiving is sheer grace and not anything we can earn of ourselves. At some time, all of us, whether gradually or suddenly, need to make this gift our own. We need to respond to God in personal gratitude for the delight God has in us. The recognition of this will bring about in us what it brought about in Jesus: a wholehearted response to God's call for us to go out to others in a mission of love directed and energised by God's Spirit.

Those of us who have not been baptised may experience a desire to know what Jesus knew on the day of his baptism, and to join with that community of people who, while constantly struggling with sin, know that there is forgiveness, and believe that God does indeed delight in us. The following call, found in the Isaiah scroll, can be read as a call to follow the attraction of our heart in drawing close to Jesus:

'Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant.

– Isaiah 55:1-3

Jesus our brother, tested like us in the desert

In this portrait Matthew is ensuring that we do not misunderstand what it means for Jesus to be the beloved son of God. To be loved by God and to respond to this love as Jesus does means to want to be part of God's concerns. God loves the human race and so wants to pour his Spirit out upon us in the wilderness where we find ourselves as we journey to our promised home. It is the same Spirit who has just come down upon Jesus who leads him into this wilderness. Jesus is totally immersed in our human condition and so is challenged to face squarely the evil that he encounters there.

When we are tempted by evil, so often we fail the test. He remained sinless, refusing to be distracted from the obedience which, as a beloved son, he willingly gave to his Father.

Jesus had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect ... Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

– Hebrews 2:17-18

We have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

– Hebrews 4:15

The 'wilderness' with its lack of order was thought of as the dwelling place of demons. The people of Israel were tested there for forty years:

The Lord made them wander in the wilderness for forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the Lord had disappeared.

– Numbers 32:13; see 13:25; 14:34

'Forty' is symbolic of a generation, a lifetime. As the gospel makes clear (16:1; 19:3; 22:34-35), Jesus was tested, as we all are, right through to his death. He was never free from the struggle that is the lot of every human being.

The desert is a place of testing. It is also a place of special intimacy.

I will now allure Israel, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.

– Hosea 2:14

Surely the Lord your God ... knows your going through this great wilderness. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing.

– Deuteronomy 2:7

¹ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

³ The tempter came

compare
Mark 1:12-13
Luke 4:1-2

Jesus is tempted

The number forty symbolises a life of struggle. It symbolises every person's journey to the mount of God (see Elijah in 1Kings 19:8). It symbolises also a time of prayer, as when Moses spends forty days and forty nights in communion with God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:17-18; 34:28).

People in New Testament times were very conscious of the spirit world — those forces of good and evil that influence our human existence, but that lie beyond our control. This is still true of many cultures today. If some of us imagine these forces in ways other than as angels and demons, it remains true that God's grace is mediated to us in many mysterious ways, and that we too find ourselves influenced towards good and towards evil in ways that lie beyond our comprehension.

The key message for us in this passage is that Jesus' mission was to defeat evil in all its manifestations by the power of the Spirit of love that graced him so convincingly at his baptism. This conflict and Jesus' victory is a theme which permeates the whole of Matthew's gospel.

Matthew dramatises the testing of Jesus by drawing on catechetical material that had been developed within the Christian community as a result of reflection on the classical temptations of Israel in the wilderness. A precedent for this can be found in the Book of Deuteronomy, which Matthew quotes at the conclusion of each of the trials. There, we are reminded:

Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart.

– Deuteronomy 8:2

Matthew has already presented Jesus as living in exile in Egypt, just like his ancestors (2:13-15), and as having to pass through the waters, just like his ancestors (3:13-17). Now, just like them, he is tested in the wilderness. However, whereas they failed the test, he remained sinless. Through his being tested, we find what is 'in his heart'.

We have just been told that Jesus is the beloved Son of God (3:17), the one on whom the Spirit of God has alighted, the Messiah designated by God. The question arises: What kind of Messiah is he? What does it mean for Jesus to be God's Son?

The first test of the Israelites in the desert occurred just after they had passed through the waters of the Red Sea. They experienced hunger and were tempted to go back to slavery where at least they were assured of food (The account can be read in Exodus 16). Reflecting on this failure, the writers of Deuteronomy concluded:

He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

– Deuteronomy 8:3

Jesus has come, as he said, to ‘fulfil all righteousness’ (3:15). There is a hunger that goes beyond the hunger of the body: it is a hunger for God. It is this hunger that Jesus experiences, and it is this hunger in people that he has come to satisfy. We cannot do this by our own power, but only through trust in God (see 6:11) and by living ‘by every word that comes from the mouth of God’.

Every word! Jesus has just heard beautiful words: God has said that he is God’s Son, that he is loved, and that God is delighted in him (3:17). But in sharing our human condition Jesus, like us, will hear painful words that will cause him sorrow and demand of him all his courage and trust.

Here he tells us that we must listen to *every* word that comes from God, placing our trust in God in the dark as well as in the light, in agony as well as in ecstasy. Matthew wants us to watch Jesus doing this throughout the whole of his life among us, throughout the ‘forty days and forty nights’ in which he shares with us our journey in the desert of this world towards the promised land of full communion with God.

It is from his many experiences of deprivation, when all he could do was remain trusting in God and obedient to the Spirit that guided him — experiences dramatised here in the first trial — that Jesus could say: ‘Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also... Do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’... Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well’(6::21,31,33). Jesus taught his disciples to pray for the bread which they really needed: the bread from God that comes to us each day as we journey: ‘Give us this day our daily bread’(6:11).

**and said to him,
‘If you are the Son
of God, command
these stones to
become loaves of
bread.’**

**⁴ But he answered,
‘It is written, “One
does not live by
bread alone, but
by every word that
comes from the
mouth of God.”’**

compare Luke 4:3-4

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,

⁶ saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."'

⁷ Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."'

We come to the second test. Having been fed with the manna, the Israelites presumed they had a right to expect from God whatever they wanted. They demanded that God prove that he cared for them by meeting all their needs. Experiencing thirst, they demanded water. They failed to believe in God. In spite of this, God satisfies their thirst as he has satisfied their hunger. As Paul says: 'What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?' (Romans 3:3).

In response to God's command, Moses strikes the rock, symbol for God, and water gushes forth for the people to drink (Exodus 17:6). However, because the people failed to trust God:

He called the place Massah ('trial') and Meribah ('contention'), because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

– Exodus 17:7

Reflecting on this event, the authors of Deuteronomy concluded:

Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.

– Deuteronomy 6:16

Matthew shows us Jesus passing through the same test and showing us how to remain faithful. The scene changes from the wilderness to the 'Holy City'. Jesus has just declared that he lives from every word that comes from the mouth of God. The devil presents him with one such word, from Psalm 91:11-12 (Matthew 4:6). Should he not presume on this word, place his trust in God and hurl himself down from the towering heights of the temple wall?

Jesus resists this temptation. To trust in God is not to trust that God will adapt to our demands. Rather, it is to trust that the well upon which we draw will never run dry and that God, in wisdom and love, will always satisfy our thirst in the place and time and manner which he knows best. As one author puts it:

It is courage that makes saints, and courage is nothing more nor less than trusting in the grace that comes from above, and that is always present. For in our trials and sufferings, God is always there, like the space that surrounds a bird.

The third temptation alludes, once again, to the Book of Deuteronomy which concludes with Moses on the mountain looking out over the Promised Land. He hears the promise of God:

I will give it to your descendants. I have let you see it with your own eyes.

– Deuteronomy 34:4

Already in the Book of Deuteronomy we have been told the only way to enter and stay in that intimate communion with God of which the Promised Land is a symbol. It is the way of obedience, the way of love:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

– Deuteronomy 6:4-9

The authors of Deuteronomy go on to give the following warning:

When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you – a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant – and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.

– Deuteronomy 6:10-13

Jesus' mission has a universal scope, so Matthew takes us to a 'very high mountain' where Jesus is shown 'all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour'. Jesus has already said that he will carry out his mission by trusting God on God's terms. But is there an easier way: a way that avoids having to struggle with darkness? Jesus has come as the 'more powerful' one (3:11), to defeat evil, and he refuses to avoid the conflict. 'Away with you, Satan' finds an echo later when Jesus says to Peter: 'Get behind me, Satan' (16:23). Peter, like the devil in this scene, is tempting Jesus to avoid the cross.

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour;

⁹ and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

compare
Mark 1:13
Luke 4:5-13

Jesus is tempted

At the close of Matthew's gospel, we see Jesus again on a mountain. Having completed the forty days and forty nights of his journey, having battled with the powers of darkness, and having conquered evil through his obedience, he is able to say: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'(28:18). What the devil offered, God has given. How Jesus, the beloved Son, inherited this authority, and how he, as God's Messiah, has established the kingdom of God is the subject of Matthew's gospel for which he is preparing the stage.

Jesus' victory was something for which he had to struggle. He shares the weakness of our human condition and the trials that all of us face in our desert journey. Jesus, however, listened to 'every word that comes from the mouth of God'. We are ready to listen now to him as he shares many of those words with us, and as we watch him live a life of obedience and of love under the guidance and with the enabling power of God's Spirit. God's angels do bear him up.

So much of our life is spent in a desert. We are made for God and, as Saint Augustine prays: 'Our hearts are restless till they rest in You'(Confessions 1.1). Yet God remains transcendent, beyond our direct grasp. Everything is graced, for the God who loves us is always inspiring us to respond in love, and giving us his Spirit to enable us to do so. But how difficult it is to keep believing this and to avoid the distractions that promise us a more immediate fulfilment of our longings! In our desperation we want to be out of the desert, and we are tempted to build oases for ourselves that distract us from the journey. However, that is all they can do, and they do so at the cost of our failing to move on.

So it is that the Spirit of God keeps leading us, too, into the desert, so that, in coming to know the power of God's love that nourishes us with the bread from heaven (Exodus 16), and quenches our thirst from the only spring that can satisfy us (Exodus 17), we will come to know ourselves as we really are. The great sin is the sin of relying on ourselves rather on the One who is the source of all that we are and have.

Jeremiah saw this when he gave expression to God's complaint:

My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

– Jeremiah 2:13

Our longings are infinite, our capacity without measure. We are made in God's likeness, and are capable of being transformed by God into 'the image of his Son'(Romans 8:29). Let us face the reality of the desert, and dare the journey, believing that it is God's Spirit that is leading us into it. Like Jesus, we will experience whatever comfort God knows we need and even if all seems dark there will be nothing to distract us from seeing the true light that shines in the darkness guiding us to our goal.

Jesus withdraws to the Galilee of the Gentiles

In establishing Galilee as the setting for Jesus' public ministry, Matthew goes back to Isaiah who speaks of the northern part of Israel which was annexed to the Assyrian Empire in the last third of the eighth century BC, Zebulun and Naphtali first, and afterwards the area divided by Assyria into three provinces: Du'ru, the 'Way of the sea' around the port of Dor, Gal'azu, the district on the east side of the Jordan in the area of Gilead, and Magidû, the territory of the Nations, the main city of which was the fortified town of Megiddo. The Aramaic for territory is 'Galilee'.

Reflecting on the terrible devastation suffered in this region, Isaiah looks forward to the time when God will restore it. I have taken the liberty of choosing a translation other than the NRSV, to capture better the power of Isaiah's imagery:

He [a nameless refugee] wanders across it [a nameless land], oppressed and hungry and in his starving condition he becomes desperate and curses his king and his God as he turns his face upward. Downward to the earth he looks and there is anguish, darkness, swirling oppression, confused gloom. For there is no glimmer of light for an oppressed land. At the time a beginning of humiliation of the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali led afterwards to a worsening of oppression in the Way of the Sea, in Trans-Jordan and in the Galilee of the nations.

– Isaiah 8:21-23 in the Hebrew text

The rest of the text is from the NRSV:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shone. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy... For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with just decrees and righteousness from that time on and forever.

– Isaiah 9:2-6

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.

¹³ He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali,

¹⁴ so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles

¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.'

compare
Mark 1:14
Luke 4:14a

Jesus in Galilee

Modelling himself on the throne names which kings were given to express the special charism with which God was anointing them, Isaiah declares that the Messiah will be called 'Wonderful Counsellor' (one who shares in the power of Yahweh to work wonders, to establish plans that can lead the people to recognise Yahweh's way and to discover his will as revealed in his word); 'Mighty God' (one who is filled with the numinous power of God, and so stands safe against external enemies); 'Everlasting Father' (the divinely appointed protector of God's land); 'Prince of Peace' (he will establish the land in security, prosperity and political stability, because of the wholesome state of mind of the people, based on their obedience to God's revealed will). The Messiah will establish the kingdom of God by 'just decrees' and 'righteousness'.

These northern areas were Hellenised under the Seleucid rulers throughout the third century BC, and in the First Book of Maccabees Galilee in the second century before Christ is portrayed as predominantly Gentile. The Jews who lived there tended to be regarded as 'the lost sheep of the House of Israel' (10:6; 15:24) by those who lived in Judah and considered themselves purer, being less open to the corruption of non-Jewish influence.

Matthew wants to stress the fact that Jesus chose to carry out his ministry among these Jewish immigrants, being one of them himself. Matthew's first mention of Nazareth was when Jesus' parents went there from Bethlehem in response to a divine revelation warning them to avoid Herod's son, Archelaus (2:22). In choosing Galilee for his ministry, Jesus is being led by God's Spirit, for the Gospel will eventually encompass Gentile as well as Jew — a theme already noted in the prologue (1:5; 2:1-12,22-23).