

Study Guide 4: Matthew 14-18

Completing the Ministry in Galilee

In the previous study guides we have focused on the themes found in Matthew's gospel. With these chapters we will look more closely at structure. As indicated in "Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew study guide (an article in the "Gospel of Matthew Background Lent 2020" file), the core of the gospel alternates narrative (or story segments) with discourse (teaching segments).

The narrative carries the overall story along, prepares the reader for future events, provides a rough chronology and traces the geographic movement of Jesus and his disciples.

In the five discourses which Matthew places between the narrative segments, the teaching of Jesus is concentrated and presented thematically. When we read Matthew in the blocks of narrative and discourse identified by the study guides we gain a more comprehensive view of Jesus than we would get by listening to the much smaller portions read at Sunday Mass.

Final actions in Galilee: A wide ranging ministry, Matthew 14-17 (4th Narrative)

Following the teaching about the parables, Matthew resumes the story of Jesus's ministry in Galilee (Matt 13:53). He weaves together episodes of reaction and rejection by the religious authorities with the performance of signs by Jesus which convey his identity to the Disciples.

Matthew begins with two episodes which foreshadow what is to come. Jesus is rejected by the people of Nazareth illustrating the truth that a local person is never recognized as a prophet. Even more ominous is the report of the death of John the Baptist, which serves as a foreshadowing of Jesus's own passion.

Nevertheless, Jesus continues to act with power in his ministry of compassion: He feeds the 5,000. (Matthew's Jewish-Christian audience will connect this act with Elisha's miraculous feeding of the hungry in 2 Kings 4:42-44.) Jesus heals the sick who sought him out. He walks on water. (This is not simply a "nature" miracle, it is a sign that Jesus's power and authority extends to nature.) The disciples recognize the divinity of Jesus, foreshadowing a later more general recognition.

Chapter 15 begins with an example of the criticism Jesus experienced at the hands of the Pharisees over the interpretation of the Law. The lack of understanding by the Pharisees is followed by a demonstration of faith by a humble gentile woman. Jesus resumes his compassionate works of power by continuing to heal the sick and feed the hungry.

Chapter 16 begins with two more incidents illustrating the opposition to Jesus by the Pharisees and Sadducees who have the audacity to ask for a sign. Matthew makes it very clear in the preceding chapters that Jesus has repeatedly demonstrated his power and his identity. The chapter continues with key questions whose answers summarize the reaction to Jesus and his signs: "Who do people say that the Son of Man (Jesus) is?" is aimed at the "crowds" or the non-committed. They identify Jesus with John the Baptist or Elijah or

one of the prophets. “But who do you say that I am?” is aimed at the disciples, and Peter provides the answer: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Matthew is pointing out that Jesus has succeeded in conveying his true identity as Son of God to his disciples. This goes well beyond the political or military Messiah the Jewish people were expecting. The understanding of the disciples receives a dramatic confirmation in the account of the Transfiguration (Chapter 17) in which the Father identifies and expresses his pleasure with the Son.

Just prior to and then immediately after the Transfiguration, Jesus tries to prepare his disciples for the coming passion that he will suffer. These events form a climax to the ministry of Jesus in Galilee and conclude Matthew’s third narrative.

Life within the Christian Community: Matthew 18:1-35 (4th Discourse)

In chapter 18 Matthew presents the teaching of Jesus on life within the Christian community, the precursor of today’s church. Matthew uses the Greek word *ekklesia*, meaning *assembly or congregation*. It is this focus and emphasis on the emerging church that made Matthew, “the Church’s Gospel” and the first book of the New Testament.

The community, individually and collectively has the following characteristics:

- Complete trust and dependence on God
- A desire to resist sin at all costs
- A reaching out to “lost sheep”
- The importance of resolving issues among disciples
- A spirit of forgiveness (illustrated by a parable)

It is fitting that teaching on community concludes this portion of Matthew’s gospel, for the major focus has been on the fellowship of the disciples as the prototype of the Church.

Through Jesus’s words and actions, the disciples have come to understand who he is. It is not a complete understanding, which will only begin to occur with his death and resurrection, but it is sufficient to allow Jesus to begin his journey to Jerusalem and the passion.

Questions for reflection:

1. John told the truth to all who would listen and ended up dead. Why was John’s message regarded as dangerous by the political and religious leaders? How is the message of the Catholic Church regarded by our secular culture (the mainstream media, academics, scientists, those with no organized religious interests: the “nones”)?
2. Jesus says he was sent to the lost sheep of Israel yet he periodically interacts with members of the Gentile community. Why does Matthew include these stories?
3. Who do people **today** say that Jesus is? Consider the range of opinion from believers to non-believers.

4. How does the Transfiguration function as a closing episode to Jesus's Galilean Ministry?
5. Do we see the characteristics of Matthew's early Church in today's Church?

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