

“Why Matthew? Why Immanuel?” Mt 1:18-25

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20 But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 23 “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). 24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.”

Today our Gospel reading told us about the birth of Jesus Christ. About how it did happen, about how Mary was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit even before she came together with Joseph. How Joseph reacted to it and about angel’s intervention by means of dreams.

All of this is so mysterious and intriguing. How did it happen, what can we know about it, how did Matthew know about it, etc. But I would propose that today, as we meditate upon Jesus’ birth and how Matthew describes it, we would ask a little different questions. About the gospel according Matthew and about Immanuel. [2x]

We have our Bibles. Here they are, in all pews, in all our homes. Nicely bound together. Open them and you see the Old Testament. Then you go forth and you see the New Testament, and whichever Bible you open... what do you see, which of the gospels is the first? Yes, the gospel according Matthew is the first.

Let me ask, why is the gospel according Matthew put as the first in the New Testament? Why not Mark, why not Luke, why not John? Have you thought why is it so?

So often we are too lazy even to read what God is telling to us. To read it ourselves, to read it to our children, to meditate upon the words of God. But it is important for us not only to read the texts of Gospel accounts, but also to think why they are arranged in a certain way.

For this is God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit speaking to us. Speaking words of life. The most important words. So, why then Matthew is the first and not Mark, or John, or Luke? Let’s look how each of evangelists begins their Gospels. Let’s start with Luke.

Dear doctor Luke tells that he has gathered the material for his gospel account from eyewitnesses [!], and has put it together so that his friend Theophilus, and also we can have certainty that everything happened exactly the way it is described. He goes on by setting his account in its historical situation and proceeding with events shortly before Jesus birth.

What about John, beloved disciple of Jesus? John introduces his gospel account in a really universal scale. John describes the divine origin of the Word, of the Word who became flesh for our sake. Who dwelled among us. Then he introduces John the Baptist and then other events beginning with Jesus baptism.

What about Mark? Mark introduces his gospel account entitling it “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” What Mark is saying, that this is how this event, all that Jesus, the Son of God did for us, begun. Then he proceed telling about John the Baptist, baptism of Jesus and Jesus ministry.

So what is Matthew’s difference comparing with the other three evangelists? How does Matthew begin his gospel account? “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” (Mat 1:1) Then follows the list of Jesus ancestors, and then we get to our today’s text “Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.” (Mat 1:18)

Back to our question – why is the gospel according Matthew the first in our Bibles? The answer is - for it connects the events of the New Testament, the events of Jesus life to this much larger narrative, much larger story of entire Bible, which begins with the creation and ends with new heavens and earth.

Matthew identifies Jesus as the Christ, the son of David and the son of Abraham. Why the son of Abraham and the son of David? As we can read in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, Abraham was chosen to be a father of the nation and he had this incredible promise that by his descendent, one very particular descendent all the families of earth will be blessed. All the families, all the nations, including us, including you and your family.

David, the famous king of Israel, received another promise, that God Himself will establish the throne for David’s son. This throne, His Kingdom will remain forever. David’s son was this long awaited Messiah, this Christ, for whom believers of the Old Testament time where waiting.

You see, Matthew begun his gospel account by stating that this man Jesus from Nazareth, about whom He is writing, is the same one, the same promised Christ. Matthew traced Jesus genealogy from Abraham through David till Jesus father Joseph.

Thus the gospel according to Matthew continues the same story as the Old Testament. It brings together God’s promises and their fulfilment. With his brief

introduction Matthew shows that what entire Old Testament was anticipating, now is fulfilled in life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That the New Testament continues to tell the same story of God Creator dealing with us.

That's why gospel account according to Matthew is the first. To show the unity of entire Bible. To show God's faithfulness. As apostle Paul wrote "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all..." (Eph. 4:5-6) This much about the gospel according Matthew.

But in today's reading there was one more very important link with the Old Testament, with the big story of the Scriptures. This one is very important for us. It reveals who is this man Jesus from Nazareth: "They shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). (Mat 1:23)

Remember, in the beginning, the Lord God was together with us, each of us is created in His image and likeness. Adam spoke with God face-to-face. They conversed, chat, did things together. We can't imagine exactly how it was, but one day we will experience it again.

After the Fall this communion between God and man was destroyed. When sin came into this world, it made this fellowship impossible. We have several testimonies in the Bible where the Lord reveals a little of His holiness and people, the best among us, fall on the ground from fear, from shame, from unbearable burden of our own sin.

As the Lord Himself said to Moses: "For man can't see me and live." (Ex. 33:20) It is not God's whim that doesn't allow us to be together, it is the very incompatibility of sin and God's holiness that destroys us is His presence.

After the Fall, we began to live as if we were gods ourselves. Living according our own desires. Corrupting ourselves and hurting those around us. When we are born and live we have only deep and obscured notion that there is someone or something higher. Sometimes we even try to erase this notion.

How much do we care about this 'someone higher'? Sometimes out of curiosity we search for something mysterious, some divine being or reality. Sometimes we are born in cultures which teach us that there are certain spiritual realities, and we accept these ideas even without questioning them. Sometimes we are told that matter is all that there is, whatever illogical it sounds.

The bottom line is, we neither can, nor desire to restore these relationships with our Creator. Basically, we don't care. We prefer to live as gods ourselves. That's our deepest desire.

It is so different with God the Father. He was disappointed when the Fall happen. He came up with the solution. He promised to restore what we had broken.

Already thousands of years ago He promised that He will again dwell among us. To do it, He established the Divine Service, so that He can come to be among us and bless us. To bless you. That's why we are here, - to receive His blessings, for only He knows what each of us truly need.

But then, He sent the message about something even more wonderful. He said that He will come and dwell among us as one of us. This is the same prophesy which we heard in today's gospel reading. "You will call His name Immanuel, that is, God is with us."

God promised that He will send us Saviour, son of Abraham and the son of David. He said, that this One will be called 'God with us'. Namely, that this Saviour, will be God Himself. Creator becoming creature. The infinite one becoming finite. The eternal one coming in time. God dwelling among us.

This is the message of our today's gospel reading. About God fulfilling His promises. Coming to us. But that's not all. The gospel according Matthew begins with God coming to us, with the birth of Immanuel. Do you know how it ends?

The last words in Matthew's gospel are words of Jesus Himself. Do you know what He said after His resurrection and right before ascension? "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ... And behold, *I am with you always*, to the end of the age." (Mat 28:18-20) Jesus didn't just come to be with us for a short while. God still is with us, He is with us *always*, till the end of the age.

How? When He comes to us in a way He promised. He is with us, when we are baptized, when we listen to Him, to His words, as we read and meditate upon them. He comes to us in the Divine Service and He invites us at His table.

Here... here He is present and He is our host, we are His guests. Here He gives us something we can't receive anywhere else – forgiveness, good conscience, protection against the evil one, the Holy Spirit, and more. This is the feast which has begun here, but which will go on forever. And you are invited guests...

Even if we don't care much about God, He care for us, He cares for you with all that He has. That's why He never stops speaking to you, and is ever present among us. Immanuel. God with us. God with you.

Amen.