

Synod Sermon September 2009 Bishop Allan Ewing

“Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

Matthew 13.52

This somewhat obscure verse from Matthew’s gospel offers us a keen insight into Matthew the evangelist and the community of which he was a part; and a profound insight into what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

I had the joy of being introduced to New Testament Greek by Laurie Murchison. Laurie was an eccentric priest par excellence. His loves were his dogs, his pipe, the psalms, church music, and biblical languages. He was not troubled by housekeeping or the concept of regular clean clothing, and he was much loved.

In those hot January days he would lecture us in Greek by getting us to read a play from Aristophanes (the Frogs, which was a surprisingly bawdy choice for theology students), or by reading passages from Mark. Once we thought he had died in front of us; he stopped talking, eyes seem to glaze then close, and his head fell slightly to one side. For at least a minute we sat there, eight or ten us, breath suspended as we wondered what to do, One of us rose to tentatively touch his still body when the eyes popped open and he continued reading from the point in the middle of the sentence when he had ground to a halt.

Later we learnt the psalms by listening to vinyl LPs of settings of a psalms he particularly liked.

Part of Laurie’s eccentricity still lives on within me. When we were reading Greek he insisted that we should pronounce the words as modern Greeks would do - even though koine Greek is an ancient language for modern Greeks.

Laurie was convinced that we should be able to speak this ancient language in a way that could be understood by Greek speakers today. His reasoning was that whilst they may not understand the meaning of the words, they would at least recognise the words as their language. For Laurie, in so many ways resident in the old, this new was important. People should recognise even if they could not understand.

As a well-established non-linguist what this has meant for me is that the way I learnt to say words is academically isolated and never seems the same as people trained in other places. What it really means is that I am never confident that I will be able to say Greek words in a way that others will understand me.

Which matters today because I want to talk about two Greek words.

In Matthew 13.52 Matthew talks of the scribe being trained or disciplined, the word for which is *mattheutheis*. (Math-tef-tais) Which is also a pun of the word *Matthaion*, (Mat ai on) the evangelist's name.

Matheutheis, *Matthaion* - no wonder I usually steer clear of greek words. However they might be pronounced - it does seem to be an intentional pun.

So is this the writer of the epistle putting himself into the text? Is Matthew telling us that he is a trained and disciplined scribe of the kingdom of heaven?

I believe so, and this thought becomes more compelling when the structure of the whole gospel is considered.

A bit of lecturing here, I'm afraid. This time about the concept of Chiasmus. Chiasmus is a kind of style of writing that balances thoughts, leading to a key

passage in some way. Thought (a) leads to thought (b) which leads to thought (c), and then the reader is reminded of the relationship to thought (b) and so to the connection between thought (b) and thought (a) repeated.

It's a bit like Russian dolls. Start with thought (a), inside that is thought (b), and inside that is thought (c) - the treasure perhaps.

Matthew didn't invent this ancient structural style, but he did embrace it. Throughout the Gospel there are examples of chiasmus; and at least two recognised scholars have suggested that it is possible to see the whole of the gospel as having a chiastic structure.

It's worth outlining how this works.

The outer layer is the first concept; The birth and beginnings of chapters 1 -4 matching death and rebirth in chapters 26 to 28

The next layer (russian doll if you like) are the blessings, and entering the kingdom of chapters 5 -7 matching the woes and coming of the kingdom of chapters 23 - 25

The third layer is the Authority and invitation of chapters 8 - 9 matching the authority and invitation of chapters 19 - 22

The fourth layer is where the mission discourse of chapter 10 matches the community discourse of chapter 18

The fifth layer, the rejection by this generation in chapters 11 - 12 matching and contrasting with the acknowledgement by disciples in chapters 14 -17

And finally, as a central concept, the parables of the Kingdom of chapter 13, of which 13.52 is the key verse.

I've laboured all this, because I want to say that this verse, 13.52, is a centre for the gospel, a centre where the evangelist appears, both as pun and as an example of the scribe who is trained for the kingdom of heaven.

This is not some cameo appearance by Matthew, some small conceit. This is not the equivalent of Alfred Hitchcock who appeared, often in silhouette, in each of his films. A clever little thing to say. 'I made this.'

Listen again; 'every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'

This is a dramatic statement, the evangelist places himself at the very centre of the gospel account; not as an extra, but as a key player - for a key purpose

The evangelist wants the readers to know some things about who they are in the midst of the good news of Jesus Christ.

For Matthew, the writer and the community cannot sit outside of the gospel... they have to be found in the midst of it. the people of God are engulfed, inundated, baptised by the gospel.

And to live in the gospel is to bring out of this treasure what is new and what is old.

Matthew does this. He brings out the old... 61 times, he returns to the Hebrew scriptures in telling the gospel story, 8 times Matthew relates Jesus life to the

Hebrew scriptures, emphasising that the scriptures are fulfilled in Jesus. For Matthew not one letter, not one stroke of a letter is to pass away.

Yet Matthew proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ, a gospel where the poor, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, the peacemakers and the mourners are the ones who are blessed. This is the radical difference of the gospel, the new is happening.

The old can be contradicted, compassion extended... you have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. Here old is replaced by new.

Matthew offers this treasure which is the gospel of Jesus Christ as both old and new; not simply one or the other, but together, old and new intermingled and inseparable.

Old and new can no more be separated than the flesh and blood of Portia's passionate speech, they are inter-dependent parts of the whole.

But some old is laid aside, it was said... but I say to you... this is new order, good news

And Matthew is careful, out of the treasure comes first new, then old, in the weighing of old and new it is the new which gives the interpretive key, not the old.

This is Matthew's good news; a treasury of new and old, and the people of God, fully embedded in the gospel. Jesus is not a new gospel but the fulfillment of God's promises.

New and old, inseparable parts of God's promise

Matthew presents an incarnational vision for the people of God; as Christ is incarnate in the world, so too are the people of God to be incarnate in the world; meeting the needs of the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned. But before this the people of God are to be found at the very heart of the gospel, for it is being incarnate in the gospel that brings the commitment to God's creation.

The people are urged to live an incarnational life; they should understand themselves as being totally in the world and totally in the gospel. And it is from the treasure of the gospel that new and old flow.

I believe that Matthew's vision is the Anglican church's vocation. We are called to be an incarnational body of Christ, centered in gospel, present in the world, drawing from the gospel both new and old.

To read Matthew Chapter six, where time and again the followers of God are urged to act in private and be discrete in public, seems the epitome of the life of many Anglicans. Not for many Anglicans are there the public extravagances of trumpets accompanying caring, declamatory public prayer in the market place and shriven fasting... this is a private thing, between God and me. So much is done in the secret, between God and the individual; too much to be honest. And it must be admitted that some parishes have elevated the matter of not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing to an art form

But the Matthean nature of the Anglican church is not to be found in a gentle interpretation of one chapter alone. Like Matthew's scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven the Anglican church today seeks to bring out both new and old.

This does not make for a comfortable journey, for the confrontation of new and old brings God's people to a place of great tension and crisis. Confronted with a possibility of either this or that the Anglican church yearns for both. Not as an act of whimsy without resolve, but as a conviction that everything of the good news of Jesus Christ must be wrung out of the old before it can be discarded, and the flavour of Jesus Christ must completely permeate the new before it can be embraced.

It is a joyful privilege to be part of a church which embraces what has been as well as what might be, but it is also a place of pain.

In this place we have heard and seen great words and acts of courage and determination as the ordained ministry of women has been insisted on. A determination driven by the conviction that this new is fully of Christ, that it is an integral part of the gospel. And tears and muted cheers have met in this place; joy and grief intermingle in the treasury of new and old.

And in this place and in our synods we grapple year by year with new and old, with some matters still too hard for us. Different sexual orientation is recognised in the wider community, present in the people of God, and forbidden in the ordained leadership. This is a place of constant pain and grief, where new and old clash in great disquiet.

The temptation is to let go, to choose old or new and take the consequences. This temptation to resolve the crisis, to slice through the gordian knot of apparent indecision and make a final decision looks beguilingly simple from a distance.

But life, and gospel, are too complex for such crass measures.

We must not let go of the old until every part of the essence of the gospel has been harvested, We cannot fully embrace the new unless the new is God breathed in its very substance.

The genius of this Church's God given vocation is to sit in the mess of difference and irresolution. We insist on a constant dialogue between scripture, tradition and reason, between evangelical, catholic, and charismatic, between urban, regional and rural; between developed nations, developing nations, and losing nations. We insist that Christ will not be limited to one view, one interpretation only. This is the treasure of the gospel entrusted to us, and we, scribes all, must bring from this gospel both new and old.

Why? That's simple,

That all the world might know that Jesus is the Christ, and that through him there is life for all.