

THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

When a couple get married, there is so much to learn. Not so much the immediate and obvious things — favourite foods, musical tastes, good ideas for holidays, and so on. There are deeper things that make each one of us mysterious and deeply special. The rich store of memories and mental associations. The older family history: stories told and retold, sorrows quietly aching in the background, tales of an exotic cousin here, a tragic uncle there, an aunt who wrote books or a great-grandfather who was cheated in business. Such stories shape our imaginations. They condition our reactions to new situations. When you join someone else's family it takes time to learn how all this works for them. Often you can only make sense of what someone says or does up front if you get in touch with the older, deeper stories that shaped them from their earliest days.

Matthew, writing his gospel, wants to help his readers to learn the great stories of the family into which they have come through their faith in Jesus Christ. Many of his readers were probably Jewish already. That made some things easier, others harder. He is telling the story of what happened within living memory — here, the story of John the Baptist getting people ready for Jesus — but he is also helping them to get in touch with the older, deeper stories of God's ancient people. Like all early Christian writers, Matthew is eager to explain how what has happened in and through Jesus is what the ancient stories had been pointing to all along.

He's already begun to do this in the first two chapters. There's the great long family tree right at the start, of course. But there are also the times when he has pointed back to the ancient scriptures to explain the meaning of the events he's describing. Now he takes this to a new level. He picks up one of the most famous prophecies in the Old Testament, and declares that it came true in and through John the Baptist.

The prophecy in question summed up the longing and the praying of Israel over the previous five hundred years. Israel had been overrun by foreign armies. The Temple had been destroyed. God himself, they believed, had abandoned his people because of their wickedness, and had left them to their fate. Even when the Jews returned from Babylon and rebuilt the Temple, there was a lingering, uneasy sense that there was more to come, that all was not yet well. So they told the story like this: one day God will come back to rescue us. He'll come back and take charge of the whole world, and everything will be right at last. The God in heaven will be king of the earth! That's what we're waiting for.

So when John the Baptist suddenly appeared, down near the river Jordan, telling people that 'heaven' was going to take charge on earth (that's what 'the kingdom of heaven' means), it's not surprising that everyone set off to find out what was going on. John was plunging people into the Jordan. He was re-enacting the far-off moment when the ancient Israelites first entered their Promised Land. This is it! This is what we've been waiting for! Sharp-eyed people, then and later, said: This is the man the prophet spoke about. He is the 'voice in the wilderness', getting people ready for God to come back.

If we grasp nothing more than this, Matthew would have done half his job. But there are two other things going on here which also shape the way he's going to tell the rest of his story. First, lots of people coming to John have to be warned not to take God for granted. They may be

Abraham's children physically, but God is doing a new thing. He is reshaping Abraham's family: sharp judgment on the one hand, an open invitation on the other. 'God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones!' This isn't the way many of them had been telling the story. It must have come as a shock.

TODAY

Gracious Lord, as your heavenly rule extends on earth, help us to know your story and live as your family.