

Teaching in their synagogues

by Adrian Graffy

The gospel reading for the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, the *Sunday of the Word of God*, invites us once again to hear the Gospel according to Matthew. We begin our systematic reading of Matthew. We do not begin with chapter 4 verse 1, for the first 11 verses consider the *Temptation of Jesus*, and are reserved for the First Sunday of Lent.

We begin at 4:12, in which Jesus leaves Nazareth and moves to Capernaum. Matthew uses Isaiah 8:23-9:1 as a fulfilment citation: 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, Way of the sea beyond Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people that sat in darkness have seen a great light.' This is a magnificent use of the prophetic text, with the twin emphases: the coming of the good news to the 'Galilee of the nations', to the peripheries of Judaism, interacting with Gentiles; and the light in the darkness theme, beloved of Luke (Simeon's *light for the Gentiles* in Lk 2:32) and of John's prologue (*light shining in the darkness, and the darkness unable to overpower it* in Jn 1:5).

The preaching of Jesus begins with the call to repentance and the statement that 'the Kingdom of Heaven' is close at hand (4:17). This first stage of Jesus' ministry is solemnly introduced by the evangelist with the words 'From this time onwards Jesus began his proclamation: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.' The calling of the first disciples, Peter and Andrew, James and John, in 4:18-22 follows.

We thus reach verse 23, which we are going to consider in some detail. The verse speaks of the *threefold ministry* of Jesus. 'He went round the whole of Galilee **teaching (didaskon) in their synagogues, proclaiming (kerysson) the good news of the kingdom, and curing (therapeuon) all kinds of disease and illness among the people**'. This verse is important as a programmatic summary of the activity of Jesus. In 9:35, the summary is repeated as we again read of Jesus '*teaching (didaskon) in their synagogues, proclaiming (kerysson) the good news of the kingdom, and curing (therapeuon) all kinds of disease and illness*'. We have an 'inclusion' which suggests that if we read the material within the inclusion, the teaching of Jesus in chapters 5-7, and the healings he worked in chapters 8-9 you have a substantial account of the ministry.

Returning to 4:23 we note that the order in which the activities are listed is somewhat surprising. The first words of Jesus in his ministry have already been read in 4:17. They are identical to the words of John the Baptist in 3:2 'Repent,

for the kingdom of Heaven has drawn near' (*metanoete engiken gar he basileia ton uranon*). Jesus is sent to preach the good news of the kingdom of heaven. Why then is the first action of Jesus mentioned in v.23 that of teaching, and 'teaching in their synagogues'? Matthew does of course lay heavy emphasis on Jesus as teacher. And after this summary verse we will be immersed in the most extensive of the five discourses which are such a fundamental part of Matthew's gospel.

The first discourse, the Sermon on the Mount, is about 'doing justice', the *dikaioisynē* which needs to surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20).

The fifth and final discourse in chapters 24-25 has its focus on the future and the end, on the proper use of 'talents', and on 'justice' too with judgement given for the justice people have done or omitted to do.

The second discourse (chapter 10) concerns the present reality in the evangelist's day, the mission to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (10:6).

The fourth discourse (chapter 18) considers the life of the community. It is arguably here, in the detail of daily commitment, that the teaching of Jesus is most urgent: seeking out the lost, settling differences, forgiving.

The central discourse, chapter 13, the parable discourse, shows that the 'scribe of the kingdom' is able to bring out of his storeroom 'new things as well as old' (13:52). Five great speeches of Jesus assembled by the evangelist, but not one given 'in their synagogues'.

These five masterpieces of teaching are designed by the evangelist to reflect the five books of the *Torah*, the instruction given by Moses and the teachers of Israel. As the teaching of *Torah* is adapted in Deuteronomy, so early Christian teachers adapt the message of Jesus to the new realities of mission and community. But none of these five speeches was given 'in their synagogues', as suggested by the summary in 4:23.

All five discourses are solemnly introduced. Jesus generally sits in order to teach, but not on a seat in the synagogue. In 5:1 he sits on the mountainside, in 13:1 by the lakeside, and in 18:2 it seems that he puts a little child on his lap. His audience is first of all 'the disciples'(5:1), but the crowds are also present (7:28). In chapter 10 the mission discourse is clearly for the disciples. But in 13:2 he addresses 'large crowds' and then in private the disciples (13:10). In 18:1 he seems to teach the disciples in private, and in 24:1 they are the recipients of his teaching about the future and the end. Clearly Jesus is not teaching 'in their synagogues'.

The sign of the end of each discourse is marked with a shared formula adapted to the content. 7:28 'when Jesus had finished these words'. 11:1 'when Jesus had finished instructing (*diatassein*) his twelve disciples'. 13:53 'When Jesus had finished these parables'. 19: 1 we read again 'When Jesus had finished these words'. And in 26:1 a solemn conclusion not only of the fifth speech but of the teaching ministry 'When Jesus had finished all these words'. We are already beginning the Passion Narrative.

How are we to explain the reference to synagogues in 4:23, and particularly the phrase ‘their synagogues’? In Mark 1 Jesus heals the demoniac in the synagogue in Capernaum and his fame spreads. Luke also has his version of this healing (4:31-37). Luke places the visit to Nazareth before this, with the reading and teaching of Jesus in the synagogue (4:16-30). Jesus is initially acclaimed, but the mood changes. Luke places together two extreme reactions to Jesus: adulation, and violence. This is a clear example of ‘teaching in the synagogue’, but it is overwhelmingly in Matthew that the phrase ‘their synagogues’ occurs repeatedly (4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54), reflecting the break there has been by his time of writing between Christians and their Jewish roots. This is a reference probably inserted by the evangelist after the fall of the temple in Jerusalem to emphasise the distance between the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth of Jewish tradition and those who remained Jews *tout court*. The basic story of the ministry of Jesus, over which the five discourses have been superimposed, reflects the developing split, the parting of the ways.

In the discourse about mission Jesus sends the disciples to proclaim the kingdom (*keryssein*) and to heal (*therapeuein*) (10:7), but not to teach. He emphasises that the disciples are indeed ‘disciples’ (10:24-25), and are not ‘above their teacher’ (*hyper ton didaskalon*).

In Matthew chapter 22 the term ‘teacher’ (*didaskalos*) is used in addressing Jesus. As different groups attempt to trick Jesus, they use the title in a sarcastic way. ‘Teacher, we know you are an honest man.’ (22:16) But their intention is ‘to trap him in what he says’ (22:15)

In his accusations against the scribes and Pharisees, though he upholds the teaching of these religious leaders, Jesus points to their failure to practise what they teach. It is in this context that he makes the claim to be the one ‘teacher’ (*didaskalos*) (23:8) and the one ‘instructor’ (*kathegetes*) (23:10). Christians proclaim Jesus as the one teacher, the one from whom all true teaching originates. At the outset of the Passion Narrative, in all three synoptic gospels, Jesus again claims for himself the title of ‘the teacher’ (*didaskalos*) (26:18, Mk 14:13, Lk 22:11). He sends the disciples to prepare the Passover, telling them to go into Jerusalem, and tell ‘a certain man’ ‘the teacher (*didaskalos*) says: My time is near. It is at your house that I am keeping Passover with my disciples.’ Jesus is still the teacher. He will teach them at the Last Supper, in Gethsemane and throughout the Passion.

In the final chapter of the gospel Jesus makes clear that the role of teacher is to be taken over by the disciples after the resurrection. Now that the teaching of Jesus is complete, and has reached its climax in the lesson of death and resurrection, those told not to teach earlier in the gospel (10:7), and that they have only one teacher (23:8.10), now themselves take on this role. They are to ‘make disciples’ (*matheteusate*) of all nations (28:19), and then explicitly that it is now they who are to ‘teach (*didaskein*) people to observe everything he has commanded’ (28:20).

In the final verse of the gospel, 28:20, it is the word ‘teach’ that claims attention (*didaskontes*). It is the view of this evangelist that, with Jesus the teacher taken from them, the disciples must now teach. He had suggested in 4:23 that Jesus’ primary role was to teach: ‘He went round the whole of Galilee *teaching* (*didaskon*) in their synagogues, *proclaiming* (*kerusson*) the good news of the kingdom, and *curing* (*therapeuon*) all kinds of disease and illness among the people’. As the Christian community is established after Jesus’ death and resurrection the primary duty of the followers of Jesus is to take up and to continue his work of teaching.