



THE WONDER-WORKER OF SAINT MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

God has sent His word to the sons of Israel, giving them news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. . . . He went about doing good, and curing all those who were under the devil's Tyranny . . . (Acts 10: 36, 38).

The Messiah came to bring peace to the earth by delivering God's message of happiness to His people, but this harbinger of peace did not announce the advent of Spring with a song and then fly away; he announced the Spring, suffered the Summer heat, and alleviated the Winter cold: he not only preached the words of God, but performed His works. Words and works; teaching and action—both were included in the salvation plan of Jesus.

For his great sermon, Jesus went up the mountain. Unlike Moses, he did not spend forty days and forty nights there, but like Moses he did receive the tablets of law, and he then opened his mouth and gave God's word to the people. Jesus, after all, transcended Moses, for his promise was not the kingdom of Chanaan flowing with milk and honey, but the kingdom of the heavens inundating with happiness and joy.

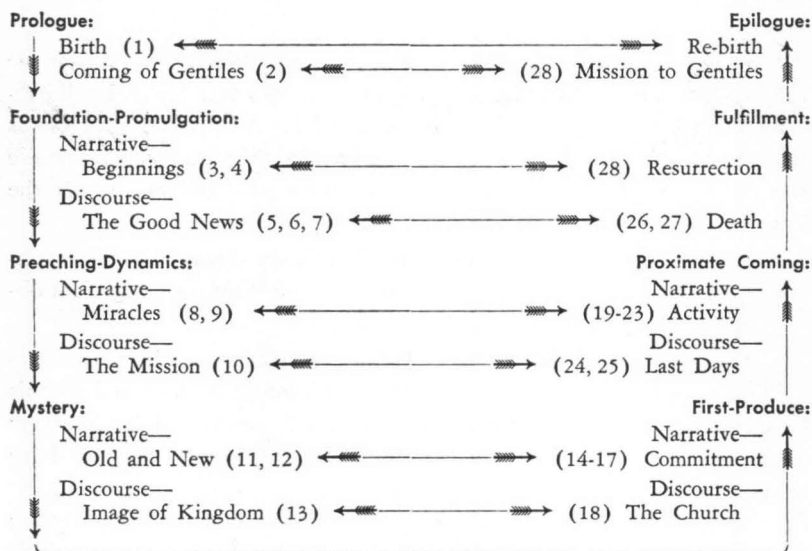
After preaching about his kingdom, Jesus came down from the mountain and performed his miracles both to bring to fulfillment the ancient observances and to give birth to this new kingdom.

The kingdom of the heavens! This is the subject of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew. The mysterious kingdom is described in this Gospel in magnificent fashion. The kingdom is considered by Matthew under five aspects: 1) the promulgation of the kingdom, 2) the preaching of it, 3) its mystery, 4) the first-produce of it, 5) its coming. These parts form the core of the Good-news. They are followed and completed by the account of Jesus' death and resurrection and they are preceded and balanced by the account of his birth and early years.

All the parts are marvelously connected to give us the life of Jesus in his words and works not in chronological moments but by logical divisions. Thus the infancy part of the story supplies information on the birth of our Lord with its descriptions of prophetic realizations; it also balances the resurrection account with its theme of new-birth. The intervening sections relate the program and plan of Jesus and his kingdom.

We see God's kingdom announced in the great sermon (cc. 5-7). To prepare for the great missionary discourse, which pictures the spreading of the kingdom (c. 10), the narration of events establishing Jesus' authority is placed before it (cc. 8, 9). Between the narrative sections which relate how the kingdom is rejected by this generation (cc. 11, 12) and acknowledged by the little ones (cc. 14-17), we find the sermon of the parables of the kingdom (c. 13). Following this are two more sermons and two more narration sections: the community discourse (c. 18) and the woes discourse (cc. 23-25); the narrative of the invitation (cc. 19-22) and the narrative of the death-resurrection episodes (cc. 26-28).

In schematic form the Gospel looks like this:



In the great mission-sermon of Jesus, the Twelve are told to cast out unclean spirits and to heal every kind of disease: heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils (10:1-8). With this great-spirited assignment given to the first men of the new order of things, Saint Matthew feels it necessary to portray the character of Jesus. Thus in Chapters Eight and Nine, Jesus' works and wonders are recorded. Ten miracles are arranged, if not squeezed in together, by Matthew all for the purpose of showing the magnanimous Messiah in control of all situations, a merciful leader inspiring full confidence, the masterful Son of God, the humble Son of Man.

Here is no Moses visiting Pharaoh's land with ten plagues. Although Moses' wonders are recorded to establish his authority before the great mission into the new kingdom, his production of serpents, blood, frogs, gnats, flies, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and death clearly contrasts with the works of Jesus. The Messiah's mission is to bring order to the chaotic conditions of nature, not to inflict chaos; his it is to restore health to diseased men, not to cover man's health with ulcers. Jesus brings light and life, not darkness and death.

While Saint John denotes the works (*erga*) of Jesus as signs (*semeia*), Saint Matthew calls them powerful acts (*dynamei*). Much has been said in the past about Jesus' miracles as extrinsic guarantees through which revelation is believable and much is said at present about them as proper signs through which revelation is given—the one tradition not in contradiction to the other. Thus in the consideration of the Matthean Gospel, the miracle is a force by which the kingdom of heaven *comes*; it does not merely *certify* its coming. God's kingdom has come to overthrow Satan's kingdom. The Good News which Jesus brings puts to silence the evil reports spread by Satan. The new kingdom breaks the chains of Satan's captives: the dumb, the blind, the paralyzed, the dead. The new order prepares to overcome the old disorder. From the temptation in the desert until the ninth hour on Calvary, Jesus' life is a stream of light penetrating the world of darkness, a dynamic force overcoming the power of hell.

Before examining the significance of each miracle, let us first look at the structure of Chapters Eight and Nine. The ten wonders are grouped: three+three+four. Between each division there are two sayings or lessons for those who want to be followers of Jesus. If Chapters Eight and Nine be considered separately, the format works out this way: five miracles+two sayings (c. 8) and five miracles+two sayings (c. 9). With this latter division a certain balance is noticed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Miracles:

The leper is immediately cleansed.

The centurion comes on behalf of his slave.

Jesus touches the hand of Peter's mother-in-law.

The two Gerasenes call Jesus the Son of God.

Jesus calms the disorder of the sea.

Maxims:

The son of Man has no resting place.

Let the dead bury the dead.

CHAPTER NINE

Miracles:

The dumb man is given speech to the amazement of the crowd.

The ruler comes on behalf of his daughter.

The bleeding woman touches the hem of Jesus' cloak.

The two blind men call Jesus the Son of David.

Jesus forgives the palsied man his sins, the disorder of his nature.

Maxims:

The men of the Bridegroom's company need not fast.

It is the sick who need a physician.

Three Miracles

The Leper: The leprous man, to be kept away and not to be touched with a ten-foot pole, is touched by Jesus not content to leave him even at arm's length. The leper is cleansed; he is given his health. Jesus preached from the heights; his lofty teaching was proclaimed, but the Master is not a man of words only; he is a man of works. To work he must come down from the mountain to the valley where the weak and unclean are. Jesus' kingdom opens its gates to the lepers and Jesus himself opens his arms to them. And since the Messiah came not to drag the Law and Prophets to destruction, but to bring them to perfection (5:17), he says to the purified man, "Offer the gift which Moses ordained."

The Centurion: Although the humble response of the centurion has provided us with a Communion prayer (Lord, I am not worthy . . .), still his significant position in the Gospel account is not by reason of his inspiring words, but by reason of his religious status. This *gentile* prompts our Lord to say, "I have not found faith like this even in Israel." The kingdom of God will gather its children not only from the loins of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but from the far off lands of east and west as well.

Peter's Mother-in-Law: Whether this episode declares that mothers-in-law are loved at least by Jesus or not, it supplies the occasion for the cure of many possessed persons brought to Our Lord in the evening. These

cures, according to Saint Matthew, fulfill the word of Isaiah (53:4), "He took our infirmities upon himself and bore our sicknesses." Jesus as the great wonder-worker is not the Suffering Servant described by Isaiah, although the great office of Servant is appropriately cited here by Matthew to keep the mission of the Messiah in the minds of those who hear the Gospel: the Master, although he exhibits great power over the infirmities which afflict mankind, must himself be inflicted in some way with the greatest of man's infirmities and the cause of all other infirmities, sin. If this person be admired for his wondrous control over Satan's kingdom, he must be adored for his humble submission to God's Will. Jesus here restores health and forgive man's sins; later he will endure suffering and die for those sins.

Two Maxims: Two Volunteers

Two invitation-episodes are inserted here to indicate the nature of sacrifice entailed in following this caller of men. Jesus dubs himself the Son of Man—"The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Anyone might just as well take up with foxes and birds if he wishes to be concerned about resting places. The kingdom of God comes first. A man wishes to bury his father before he comes, but even this dutiful act of religion is given second place by the Lord to express exaggerated emphasis on exactly what discipleship means.

Three Miracles

The Storm: Bound for Tharsis, Jonah slept while the ship foundered in a great tempest. All the sailors trembled and only after they hurled Jonah overboard did the sea grow quiet. The sea raged; nature broke her bounds and exhibited her chaotic frenzy because Jonah tried to circumvent the Lord's plan for him. When Jesus and his disciples made their way across the Sea of Galilee a storm arose. Jesus like Jonah slept, but Jesus unlike Jonah did not seek to get away from the Lord. The Storm, symbol of chaos, is the sign of the disorder due to sin. The men who cause disorder are nevertheless afraid, so they cry to Jesus, "Lord, save us." And just as in Saint John's account the weeping man calls forth Lazarus from the tomb, so here in Saint Matthew's account the sleeping man calms down the raging sea. Although Jesus harshly rebukes his followers for their lack of faith, he does it only to inspire them to put their complete trust in him.

The Gerasenes: If the pharisees in v. 34 link Jesus with the prince of devils, the two demoniacs call him the Son of God. The Gerasenes

could ask help of no ordinary son of man, but cry aloud to the extraordinary Son of God.

The Palsied Man: To the palsied man, Jesus does not say, "Rise and walk," but "Your sins are forgiven." The scribes then say to themselves, "Blasphemy!" Reading their minds, Jesus says, *All right, which is easier—to cure the corporeal disease of a man or to forgive his spiritual disease? But have it your way (and I can do both). You, rise and walk.* Sin is disorder; sickness is a sign of that disorder. Thus the healing of disease is a sign of the forgiveness of sin, in the sense that Jesus has power over both.

Two Maxims: Two Reactions to an Invitation

At the call of Matthew, Jesus eats with Matthew's friends (publicans and sinners). The pharisees want to know why, and Jesus answers, "It is those who are sick who have need of the physician." Then John the Baptist's disciples come up and want to know why Jesus' disciples do not fast. There is no reason, they think, why the old order of things could not be stimulated with new energy, but Jesus tells them that the time is not here for fasting and mourning. The Messianic times are already here and the old wine-skins will not do. Jesus then adds another statement of his death and resurrection: "The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away . . . then they will fast."

Four Miracles

The bleeding woman: The outcast, bleeding woman is not outside the mercy of our Lord and her faith is so great that the mere touching of the hem of his garment brings her healing.

The dead girl: Jesus comes to the ruler's house and announces to the mourning flutists to make room for him, for the child is not dead, but asleep. In the new kingdom death is no longer death; it is sleep. Jesus takes the girl by the hand and *she rises*. All of his followers will rise when he takes their hand. This section prefigures the resurrection of the children of the kingdom through Jesus' resurrection.

Two blind men: "Son of David, have pity on us," the blind men cry out. They link Jesus to the great king and favorite of God. Jesus touches their eyes and they see. In chapter twenty, Jesus, upon leaving Jericho on his way to Jerusalem, encounters two blind men who persistently cry out to him. The two accounts are either doublets or balancing episodes, the one adding the note of perseverance to the other.

The dumb man: Then a dumb man is given his speech by Jesus and the multitudes are amazed; the pharisees however say, "It is the prince of devils that casts out devils." Here is the marvel and the point: the men of good sight can see Jesus only eating with sinners, whereas the blind see the Son of David. The men of learned speech can find nothing better to say than words of reproach, while the dumb praise their healer.

* * * *

The last verse of Chapter Nine records Jesus spreading the gospel of the kingdom and curing every kind of disease. Seeing the great crowds as shepherdless sheep, Jesus remarks that the laborers are scarce. This introduces Chapter Ten, the Missionary Discourse. The apostles will be sent out to do the things Jesus has done. Hence these great acts of power which Jesus performs to restore order to nature and to man call forth a response of faith from men. Not that the gospel-miracle produces faith [for it presupposes it—"Your faith has brought you healing" (9:22)], but rather that the miracle deepens and enlarges faith from an early confidence in the power of Jesus to a full belief in his person. Then faith enables men to act with Jesus' power, for Jesus sends out his apostles to preach the word of God and heal the infirmity of man and "to him who believes all things are possible" (Mk. 9:23).

—Albert Doshner, O.P.