

1] St Matthew's Gospel is truly an inspired piece of writing; his work, although carefully and artfully constructed, is not his own invention. As a proper, orthodox and truthful apostle, he is handing on in written form, the holy tradition of the witnesses of who first knew Christ.

2] He is writing particularly with the first Jewish Christians in mind, for naturally, Christ's first disciples were drawn from His own people, the Jews. It is the same audience for whom St Paul wrote the letter to the Hebrews: people who would have a clear knowledge of the religion of the Old Testament and the central place of the worship and sacrifice centred on the temple at Jerusalem.

3] At the beginning of his work Matthew presents us with the Christ whom, in His own person, relives the entire experience of the ancient Hebrews. As we heard again in His genealogy, just before the feast, He is born a descendant of Abraham; born in the line of the prophesying David whom we commemorate this day. Like Joseph the patriarch, he is taken to Egypt, and the Innocents are slaughtered at His birth, just like those whom Pharaoh killed in the days of the child Moses. He is called out of Egypt and in time is baptised, entering the River Jordan, just like the children of Israel entering the promised land under Joshua. He then gives the true meaning and interpretation of the old Law in His Sermon on the Mount, fulfilling the commandments which Moses the God-seer received on Mount Sinai.

4] Perhaps since the early nineteenth century, western biblical scholars have often argued that Matthew has invented this whole narrative. The stories of Christ's birth in particular, they have suggested, were made up in order to fill a gap in the biography of Jesus of Nazareth. They reasoned that Matthew (*or whoever the writer actually was...*) had built the story of the Nativity using the books of the Old testament prophets which, obviously, he knew well. This is why those scholars like to date all the New Testament books long after the actual life of Christ, in order to give time for this make-believe and tale-spinning to evolve. Incidentally, however, the letter

to the Hebrews still speaks of the Jerusalem temple as a living institution, so it must have been written before 70AD.

5] Clearly, the Orthodox Church, with all due respect, regards such human reasoning with a great deal of scepticism, whether we interpret the Bible under the inspiration and charism of the Holy Spirit according to Holy Tradition, or whether we use the self-same historical methods of academics and scholars.

6] St Matthew did not invent his birth stories of Jesus; rather, he faithfully passed on what he had received or knew himself from the Tradition of the Apostles. It is true, he inserts all the way through, quotations from the prophets. He introduces them into the text with the same kind of formula each time, such as: *'This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet...'*

7] But here's the trick! Read chapter two of the gospel once again, this time leaving out those prophecies. You will see that it flows much more smoothly as a piece of literature. In other words, Matthew is giving us the story of Christ's birth, from the point of view of Joseph the Betrothed of the Mother of God, just as he himself, Matthew, had received it in the tradition.

8] This is the story that Matthew's own early Christian congregation of Jewish converts had received it, perhaps originally preserved through Joseph's own family line. After all, James *the Brother of the Lord*, of the self-same family, whom we also commemorate this day, was the leader and bishop over the first church congregation in Jerusalem, whilst the other apostles spread the gospel abroad in the Roman Empire.

9] It is into this narrative that Matthew inserts the prophecies, reading and understanding them backwards, as it were. This, after all, was what Christ Himself had taught His apostles; this was the great spiritual discovery of the early Christians: to find the fulfilment of what had been prophesied in the past in the very life of Christ Himself. Hear again the words of Christ in St Luke's gospel, after His resurrection:

*‘Then He said to them, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.” And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.’ [Lk.24:44-45]*

10] It is as if, for the first time, the apostles understood the Scriptures, that is, the Old Testament. They had heard them in the Synagogue all their life, but now they realised what they were actually about. As St Paul writes to the church at Corinth *‘Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.’ [2 Cor.3:15-16]*

11] And we too are of those who have *turned to the Lord*, as at our baptism, when we or our sponsors faced West, the darkness, to reject Satan, and then to the East, towards the light, that we might turn to Christ.

12] What this means for us is that we can trust the scriptures of the New Testament as a true witness of the Apostolic Tradition. From a purely literary point of view, Matthew’s stuffing of his story with those intrusive prophecies might indeed interrupt the flow of his narrative. But his intention is not, primarily to add even more to the great store of world literature: he is an evangelist; his aim is to spread the true gospel; he’s not aiming for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

13] Those Innocents who suffered at Christ’s birth echo, indeed, those who perished when Moses was born, for they too were caught up in a greater narrative: the story of our own salvation, the universal message of our redemption by God; not random events of mere chance but the foreknowledge of God, His providential purposes for all Creation. And if you will believe still further, the Antimension Cloth on the Holy Table here, has a small part of the gathered relics of the Holy Innocents, sown into the fabric. They like us, sharing Adam’s nature, but unlike us, knowing no sin, have been redeemed from Death, whilst Herod the Tyrant leaves this earth in the year 4BC, still ensnared by the world, the flesh and the devil.

14] It is Holy Tradition that holds and preserves the message of the Gospel proclaimed in and by the Orthodox-Catholic Church of Jesus Christ. We have received that inheritance, a living part of which is the Holy Scriptures themselves, the writings that bear witness to what the apostles had seen, lived through and taught. Let us read them, let us learn and study them; let us know them well, for we can trust them. Let us follow the course of readings according to the lectionary, in company with all devout Orthodox people: they bear witness to Christ who is our salvation. Christ opened the minds of His apostles to understand the Scriptures, and through them and the teaching of the Fathers, we have inherited the way of understanding them according to the mind of Christ. For, as St Paul tells us, he did not receive the gospel from man, nor was he taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For us that might not have been on the road to Damascus but the same truth lies open to us whenever we turn to the Lord.