

## THE YEAR OF MATTHEW

The Lectionary follows a system called the semi-continuous reading of the Gospel. Each Sunday's reading takes up, more or less, from where the previous Sunday finished. This flow, however, is interrupted by the seasons of Lent and Easter.

Most commentators agree that Matthew's Gospel was written in Antioch in Syria between the years 80-90. Reading between the lines it is possible to identify some of the issues that were confronting Matthew's community as they reflected on the life and teaching of Jesus.

By the 80s we are already looking at the second generation of the early Church and the Christian community in Antioch was responding to both external and internal events that were shaping its life.

The single most important external event was the first Jewish war. The Roman legions had attacked and destroyed Jerusalem in 70AD. The loss was significant for both the Jewish community and the early Christian community in Jerusalem. In particular the Temple had been destroyed and so the Jewish leaders took an even stronger stand against dissent groups such as the Christians.

The early Christians in Jerusalem had already suffered persecution as Luke records in the *Acts of the Apostles*. By the 80s the mission to the Jews had collapsed as tension developed between the Christian and Jewish communities in Antioch. On the other hand Paul and others had been successful in their mission to the Gentiles or non-Jews.

It was a period of great change for the Church and Matthew's Gospel is seen as a response to the key issues facing the community in Antioch. In some ways it was a crisis of identity as the community tried to understand its mission apart from its Jewish heritage and its pagan neighbours.

Matthew set himself the task of "restating the tradition" by presenting a new synthesis of traditional material. Thus Matthew's Gospel presents Jesus as the fulfilment of the promise to the People of Israel.

But Matthew also understood that new wine requires new wine skins (Mt 9:17) and so he also included the new structures that were emerging in the community.

The Church can learn much from Matthew's synthesis of old and new as we continue the mission of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus in an ever-changing world.

*Paul Crowley*