

“Fr. Mark Scott, OCSO, presents here a series of chapter talks, the fruits of study and reflection on the Gospel of Matthew. Well versed in the scholarly study of the Gospels, his years of reflection on the text result in unexpected insights derived from both biblical and non-biblical perspectives, including the differences between Gospel narratives of the same event.”

—Martha Fessler Krieg, lay Cistercian associate and independent scholar

MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER SIXTY-SEVEN

Loving Jesus

Monastery Talks on the Gospel
According to Saint Matthew

Mark A. Scott, OCSO



Cistercian Publications
www.cistercianpublications.org

LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota
www.litpress.org

A Cistercian Publications title published by Liturgical Press

Cistercian Publications
Editorial Offices
161 Grosvenor Street
Athens, Ohio 45701
www.cistercianpublications.org

© 2023 by Mark A. Scott, OCSO

Published by Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever, except brief quotations in reviews, without written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, MN 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Scott, Mark A. (Mark Alexander), 1948- author.

Title: Loving Jesus : monastery talks on the gospel according to Saint Matthew / Mark A. Scott, OCSO.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Cistercian Publications, [2023] | Series: Monastic wisdom series ; no. 67 | Summary: "Originally given as Monastery Talks to his confreres, Mark A. Scott, OCSO, presents these commentaries to ecclesial communities and individual Christians focusing on the 'face' of Jesus provided in chapters four through nine of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew: loving Jesus"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022037616 (print) | LCCN 2022037617 (ebook) | ISBN 9780879070656 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780879070663 (epub) | ISBN 9780879070663 (pdf) | ISBN 9780879071943 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Matthew—Commentaries.

Classification: LCC BS2575.53 .S38 2023 (print) | LCC BS2575.53 (ebook) | DDC 226.2/07—dc23/eng/20221130

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022037616>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022037617>

I am pleased to dedicate this book to the honorable monks of New Melleray Abbey, Peosta, IA, who heard these talks in their original oral versions and who inspired a lot of them.

If he had not loved his enemies, he could not have had
any friends, just as he would have had no one to love if he had
not loved those who were not.

Saint Bernard, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 20.2 (CF 4:148)

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Abbreviations	xi
Author's Note	xv
Preface: Reading the Gospel	xvii
Monastery Talks	
1 On Matthew 4:12-13	3
2 On Matthew 4:13, 16	8
3 On Matthew 4:17	15
4 On Matthew 4:18	20
5 On Matthew 4:18-22	24
6 On Matthew 4:23-25	30
7 On Matthew 5:1-3	35
8 On Matthew 5:3-11	41
9 On Matthew 5:11-12	44
10 On Matthew 5:11	47
11 On Matthew 5:13	52
12 On Matthew 5:14	57
13 On Matthew 5:17-18	62
14 On Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18	67
15 On Matthew 6:7-8	71
16 On Matthew 6:9	76

17	On Matthew 6:9-10	82
18	On Matthew 6:11-12 I	85
19	On Matthew 6:11-12 II	89
20	On Matthew 6:13 I	92
21	On Matthew 6:13 II	97
22	On Matthew 6:20-21	102
23	On Matthew 6:22-23	107
24	On Matthew 6:25	112
25	On Matthew 6:34	116
26	On Matthew 7:1-5	121
27	On Matthew 7:6	125
28	On Matthew 7:7-14	130
29	On Matthew 7:24-27	134
30	On Matthew 8:1-3	138
31	On Matthew 8:5-13	143
32	On Matthew 8:14-15	147
33	On Matthew 8:16	150
34	On Matthew 8:18-22	154
35	On Matthew 8:23-26	159
36	On Matthew 8:28-9:1	163
37	On Matthew 9:1-8	168
38	On Matthew 9:9-13	172
39	On Matthew 9:10-13	177
40	On Matthew 9:14-15	182
41	On Matthew 9:16-17	188
42	On Matthew 9:18-26	193
43	On Matthew 9:27-31	197
44	On Matthew 9:32-37	201

Acknowledgments

To Thomas X. Davis, OCSO, abbot *emeritus*, and the monks of New Clairvaux Abbey, Vina, California, I give thanks more than I can express for proposing and supporting my studies at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome. Several people read and commented on this book in its early stages: Dom Paul Mark Schwan, OCSO, and Dom Thomas X. Davis, OCSO, both of New Clairvaux Abbey, Vina; Deacon Charles A. Bobertz; Oliver Coughlin; Sister Katherine Doyle, RSM; Sister Gail Fitzpatrick, OCSO; Linda Harrington; James Koewler; Roger Lipsey; Teresa Mahon; Nick Majesky; Darla Bedford Moe; and Sister Nancy Lee Smith, IHM. To you, thanks for your friendship, encouragement, and honest feedback. As executive editor of Cistercian Publications, Marsha L. Dutton, PhD, has with kindness, tact, persistence, and Christian graciousness rescued the text from many blunders in grammar, logic, and syntax. For much of the clarity the book may have, readers can join me in giving thanks to Dr. Dutton.

Abbreviations

- ACCS *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001.
- ACW Ancient Christian Writers
- CC 143 Gregory the Great. *Moralia in Iob*. Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 143. Ed. Marcus Adriaen. Turnholt: Brepols, 1979.
- CCC *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
- CF Cistercian Fathers Series, Cistercian Publications
- CF 4 Bernard of Clairvaux. *The Works of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux*, Vol. 2, *On the Song of Songs I*. Trans. Kilian Walsh. CF 4. Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1971.
- CF 7 Bernard of Clairvaux. *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Vol. 3, *On the Song of Songs II*. Trans. Kilian Walsh. CF 7. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976.
- CF 13 Bernard of Clairvaux. *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Vol. 5, *Treatises II*. CF 13. Washington, DC: Cistercian Publications, 1974.
- CF 54 Bernard of Clairvaux. *Sermons for the Autumn Season*. Trans. Irene Edmonds. CF 54. Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2016.

- CF 68 Bernard of Clairvaux. *Monastic Sermons*. Trans. Daniel Griggs. CF 68. Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2016.
- CF 83 Saint Aelred of Rievaulx. *Homilies on the Prophetic Burdens of Isaiah*. Trans. Lewis White. CF 83. Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2018.
- Coll *Collectanea Cisterciensia*
- Ded Saint Bernard, Sermons for the Dedication of a Church
- Dial Saint Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*
- Did *Didache*
- Dil Saint Bernard, *On Loving God (De diligendo Deo)*
- Div Saint Bernard, *Sermons on Various Things (De diversis)*
- DV Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (Second Vatican Council)
- GE Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exultate*
- LXX Septuagint (Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament)
- Mart Saint Bernard, Homily for the Feast of Saint Martin of Tours
- Mor
in Job Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob*
- NABRE New American Bible, Revised Edition
- NMA New Melleray Abbey, Peosta, IA
- OCSO Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance
- Oner Saint Aelred, Sermons on the Burdens of Isaiah

- OS Saint Bernard, Sermons for the Solemnity of All Saints
- RB Rule of Saint Benedict
- SC Saint Bernard, Sermons on the Song of Songs
- SME *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, On the Historical Truth of the Gospels (Pontifical Biblical Commission)
- Wars Josephus. *The Wars of the Jews*. In *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, translated by William Whiston. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1974.

Author's Note

Most of these talks were prepared for my brothers of New Melleray Abbey, Peosta, IA, when I was abbot there (2013–2020). New Melleray is a community of the Roman Catholic Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO), also known as Trappists. Like all monastics of the OCSO, the monks of New Melleray follow the sixth-century Rule of Saint Benedict (RB).¹

These talks were an attempt to “bring forth both new and old” from what I had learned about the kingdom of God² and about Scripture, as Saint Benedict, following Jesus, says that an abbot should do (RB 64.9; Matt 13:52). They are “monastery” talks. They were delivered by a monk to monks in an exclusively monastic context. They reflect a monastic way of reading and thinking. But because monks are thoroughly human, I know that people with other backgrounds will easily translate to their own circumstances what is offered here. As “talks,” they retain in their printed form something of their original oral tone.

The talks are on chapters four through nine of the gospel according to Saint Matthew. The gospel unit Matthew 4:12–9:35 seems to be Matthew’s introduction of Jesus, Son of David (Matt 1:1) and

1. For New Melleray Abbey see <https://newmelleray.org/>; for the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance see <https://ocso.org/>; for Saint Benedict’s Rule for Monasteries see <https://archive.osb.org/rb/>.

2. The phrase “kingdom of [the] heavens” is used in Matthew’s gospel thirty-one times, the phrase “kingdom of God” four times, and the phrase “kingdom of [my, your, their] Father” four times. The three phrases refer to the same reality. It would be worth it to ask the reason for using three similar but different phrases to talk about the same thing, but it is a question that I will set aside in these talks.

Beloved Son of the one Jesus would call Father (Matt 3:17; 26:39); because Matthew is the first thing to greet someone opening the New Testament, it is also the New Testament's introduction to Jesus. The teachings and stories in chapters four through nine are framed by notices that Jesus taught in synagogues, proclaimed the Good News, and healed (Matt 4:23; 9:35). In chapter 4:12-22 Matthew gives the biblical basis for Jesus' ministry and narrates the call of the first four disciples who will thereafter accompany Jesus. The talks follow the order of Matthew's gospel. Just as the gospel yields its ripe fruit when you read it straight through rather than skipping around, so too with the talks. Nevertheless, each talk pretty much stands on its own so that you do not need to read the talks in the order given here. The talks are numbered. When a particular talk refers to something in another one, I have supplied the number of that other talk.

Scripture quotations are generally from the New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE); in many cases, though, I have given my own translation or modified the NABRE.

As for methodology, I find it in what Gregory the Great says about his approach to the book of Job: *in hoc opera spiritali intellectui deseruire*, "I minister to the spiritual understanding," knowing, though, that "the spiritual fruit" is produced from the root of the truth [of language and] of history (*ex radice historiae ueritas producit*) (Mor in Job 6.2; CC 143:285). In my reading of the gospel I have been influenced by the historical approach of N. T. Wright and by the philological approach of the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, as represented by, for instance, Clemens Stock, SJ.

When I delivered these talks at New Melleray I had not read Eleonore Stump. When I was putting them together for this book, though, I had already read Stump's *Atonement* and was reading her *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. Time and again I discovered in the latter book elucidations of things I had said in the talks.

M. A. S.

Preface: Reading the Gospel

A tip about getting to know Jesus from the gospels: when the four canonical gospels, those New Testament texts commonly attributed to Saint Matthew, Saint Mark, Saint Luke, and Saint John, give more than one account of something in the life of Jesus, read all of them and not just one. We need to consider all of them together as well as each of them on its own, to get the truest picture of Jesus we can.

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (DV), of the Second Vatican Council (1965), says that the gospels present four faces of the same Jesus, while always telling us “the authentic truth” about him (DV 19).

Just a year before that conciliar document came out, the Pontifical Biblical Commission published its own document, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* (SME), “On the Historical Truth of the Gospels” (1964). SME influenced DV in a powerful way.¹

SME says that the evangelists, “each using an approach suited to his specific purpose,” recorded the events of the Gospel for the benefit of the churches (SME 13). They “selected those items most suited to their specific purpose” and “reported Christ’s deeds and words in varying contexts, choosing whichever one would be of greatest help to the reader in trying to understand a particular utterance” (SME 15, 16).

1. See James Chukwuma Okoye, *Scripture in the Church: The Synod on the Word of God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 72.

Vatican Council II's *Dei Verbum* affirms that the fourfold Gospel has from the earliest times been the canonical inspired Word of God for the Church: "Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit" the evangelists "handed on to us in writing the same message" that the apostles had preached: "the foundation of our faith: the fourfold gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John" (DV 18).

The four gospels, says *Dei Verbum*, "faithfully hand on what Jesus, the Son of God, while he lived among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation" (DV 19).

Let's try an experiment. Jesus goes to Galilee after his temptations in the desert (see talk #1). Each of the synoptic evangelists, Mark, Matthew, and Luke, tells the story in his own way (John is silent on both the temptations and the move to Galilee).

Mark says, "After John had been handed-over² Jesus went into Galilee" (Mark 1:14). Matthew says, "Hearing then that John had been handed-over he withdrew into Galilee" (Matt 4:12). Luke says, "And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee" (Luke 4:14).

Both Mark and Matthew connect the return to Galilee with the arrest (handing-over) of John. This link with John's arrest is unexpected. It comes out of the blue. Neither Matthew nor Mark has said anything yet about John being arrested. In those gospels we just met John, and he was at work preaching and baptizing (Mark 1:2-11; Matt 3:1-17).

But now in Matthew and Mark Jesus' move to Galilee is under the shadow of the arrest of John. Why was he arrested? Where is he? What does his arrest mean to Jesus, and what does it have to do with his return to Galilee? Mark and Matthew give us no clues at this point in their accounts.

For his part, Luke says nothing at all about John in connection with Jesus' return to Galilee, even though Luke alone of the three

2. In the Greek, this is one word, so I hyphenate the two English words when they are in the context of a biblical quotation.

has already told us, even before his notice of the baptism of Jesus, about the arrest of John (Luke 3:18-20). Only much later in their respective accounts will Mark and Matthew tell us about John's arrest, and when they do, it will be a flashback, for John will already have been killed. And whereas Luke says nothing about the actual death of John, Mark and Matthew will each give an unforgettable picture of it (Mark 6:14-29; Matt 14:1-12).

So that is one thing we can notice, that for Mark and Matthew Jesus' movement is under the shadow of John, even his early movement from Judea to Galilee after the baptism and temptations. For Matthew and Mark, Jesus' public career starts from the arrest of John, leaving unexplained, though, why Jesus stayed in Judea until John's arrest, and leaving us to figure out why the arrest should have had any particular and decisive significance for Jesus.

For Luke, the motivation for Jesus' return to Galilee has nothing to do with John. Something else is going on, someone else is motivating Jesus, and Luke makes clear who it is: "And Jesus *returned* in the power of *the Spirit* into Galilee" (Luke 4:14). For the third evangelist, rather than Jesus' seeing the implications for himself of the handing over of John, it is the power of the Spirit that moves Jesus, just as it was in Luke's account of Jesus going to the desert of temptations: "Full of the Holy Spirit, he *returned* from the Jordan and was led, *in the Spirit*, into the desert" (Luke 4:1).

So we have in the gospels three accounts of Jesus' return to Galilee after his baptism and temptations. The event is the same, but it is told in three ways that differ from each other.

A generally accepted story of how we arrived at the written canonical gospels is that first there was an oral tradition about Jesus, including liturgical preaching. That oral tradition was written down and edited to finally result in the canonical gospels. As Ben Meyer explains, "From the only point of view coherent with the faith-consciousness of primitive Christianity, there follows . . . the primacy for faith of the New Testament scriptures

themselves over a narrowly conceived” attempt to nail down “what really happened.”³

I am going to use Eleonore Stump here about a perceived problem with having more than one canonical account of Jesus, and a solution to that problem, because I think she says it very well. The problem is that sometimes there is “considerable variation” between or among the accounts, and such variation can result in real tensions and apparent contradictions.

The solution that patristic and medieval interpreters came up with is what we call “harmonies.” Those early interpreters, Stump explains, “agreed in supposing that all four gospel texts could and should be combined into one larger narrative; and they supposed that that larger narrative is told only in part, and only from one point of view, by any one gospel. . . . They took everything in all the gospels to be true; and then they tried to find a way” to put everything together to form a consistent narrative, a harmony.⁴

The gospels, says DV, give us “the authentic truth about Jesus” “under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit” (DV 19, 11), and that truth is in sharpest focus when we consider it from every point of view available to us.

Each of the four gospel portraits of Jesus is a good portrait. Each stands on its own. At the same time, because the four portraits are from different angles and in different light, it is worth looking at them all. In these Monastery Talks I focus on the “face” of Jesus provided by the gospel according to Saint Matthew: loving Jesus. There follows, then, something for the readers of this little book to do to complete what I have begun. If one or more of the other gospels tells the same or a similar thing, I give chapter and

3. See Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979), 74.

4. Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2010), 312–13. By pointing to medieval harmonies, I am not endorsing the creation and use of gospel harmonies. Better for today’s reader are synopses, for instance, Kurt Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985).

verse references to those accounts at the head of my treatment of Matthew's version, and it will be up to the readers to look at those other accounts.

Mark A. Scott, OCSO, SSL

January 6, 2022

Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord

1

On Matthew 4:12-13

(Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:14-15)

Sometime after Jesus' baptism and temptations in the desert, John the Baptist was handed over. Both Matthew and Mark say so.

Both evangelists use the verb "handed-over."¹ John was handed over. John is the passive subject of the verb, so even grammatically John undergoes a passion; he suffers something at the hands of someone else.

If someone says that John was handed over they are inviting us to ask, by whom? The answer is simple: by God, the only agent in the Bible who really matters. When you read the gospels you can be 99.9% certain that the real subject of a passive verb is God.

John is handed over. John is so totally an instrument of God that even when it comes to his being handed over to Herod no one is allowed to do it but God. Later Jesus will say the same thing about himself: "The Son of Man is about to be handed-over . . . and on the third day he will be raised" (Matt 17:22, 23). We ask, "By whom will he be handed over?" and we know the answer, and we also know the answer to the question, "By whom will he be raised?"

This is not just a manner of speaking. It has the weight of a Credo. It is the original, solemn, and enduring Christian faith. See Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, written before either Mark

1. See Preface, n. 2.

or Matthew wrote his gospel: "Righteousness," says Paul, "is to be reckoned to us who *believe* in the one who *raised* Jesus our Lord from the dead, [Jesus] who *was handed-over* for our trespasses and *was raised* for our justification" (Rom 4:24-25), and we understand, *handed over by God* and *raised by God*. This is the Christian faith, and the Christian God.

Both Mark and Matthew link Jesus' return to Galilee with John's being handed over. The link is strong in Matthew but weak in Mark.

Mark says, "Now after John was handed-over, Jesus came into Galilee" (Mark 1:14). If there is a link, it is not a causal link but merely a temporal one. Mark simply locates Jesus' move to Galilee in relation to the time of John's being handed over.

Matthew is quite different: "Now hearing that John had been handed-over, he withdrew into Galilee" (Matt 4:12). Mark is not interested in whether Jesus knew about John's arrest. Matthew, though, puts Jesus' knowing of it in the foreground. In Matthew, the real connection between John's being handed over and Jesus' move to Galilee is in Jesus' own psychology: "Now hearing." It is Jesus' hearing that motivates the move.

We know that in the Bible hearing is more than just a physical sensation. "Hear, O Israel!" "This is my Son, my beloved; hear him," "The sheep hear his voice" (Deut 6:4; Matt 17:5; John 10:3). Saint Benedict conveys the full meaning of biblical hearing in the Prologue to his Rule: "Listen my son, receive, and bring to completion" (RB Prol. 1). To hear is at once physical, noetic, and moral; hearing includes both understanding and effective response to what is understood. So, hearing is *obedience* in the monastic sense of that term.

"Now hearing that John had been handed-over," Jesus saw the hand of God at work in John's fate and understood that that same hand rested on him. "It is probable," says Ben F. Meyer, "owing to the nexus between 'prophet' and 'violent fate' in contemporary religious tradition (cf. Luke 13.33), that the prospect of a violent death belonged . . . to [Jesus'] self-understanding from the start."

John's arrest, and especially his eventual execution by Herod, brought that prospect very close to home.²

And so Jesus went home to Galilee. Before he would do the martyr's work in Jerusalem, he would do the prophet's work in Galilee—assemble disciples, teach them, and proclaim a prophet's interpretation of the past, a prophet's indictment of the present, and a prophet's vision of the future.

"Now hearing that John had been handed-over, he withdrew into Galilee." That sentence in chapter four of Matthew reminds us of another in chapter fourteen (for in the world of Scripture you can remember things before they happen; that is why Christians have such a hard time in the secular culture; their timing is off). In chapter fourteen Matthew writes, "Now hearing, Jesus withdrew from there in a boat to a desert place by himself" (Matt 14:13).

We have the same pattern here as in chapter four. Jesus hears something and as a consequence withdraws. In chapter four we know what Jesus heard, that John had been handed over. The verse from chapter fourteen doesn't say what Jesus heard, so we have to look for it.

Earlier in chapter fourteen Matthew told the story of Herod's bizarre birthday party with the guests, the dancing girl, and Herodias's intrigue that resulted in the death of John, concluding with, "And John's disciples came and took the body and buried it; and they went and told Jesus" (Matt 14:12).

Then it says, "Now hearing, Jesus withdrew" (Matt 14:13).

So is the story of the death of John that John's disciples told Jesus right after they buried John's body what Jesus heard? But with respect to Matthew's developing narrative about Jesus, the account of John's death that Matthew just related is a flashback; with respect to Jesus' present in Matthew's story, John's death was not contemporaneous but in the indeterminate past.

2. Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979), 122, 252.

If, then, we say that what Jesus “heard” at this point in his life was the story of John’s death, and hearing that he withdrew to a desert place, then the rest of Matthew’s story about Jesus, including Jesus’ passion and death, would all be part of the same flashback. All the rest of the gospel story would have its starting point not with Jesus’ narrative present but with the death of John in the indeterminate past.

This time warp would create all kinds of narrative problems for the reader, and even theological ones; Matthew is too good a writer and a theologian to make a mistake like that.

So what *did* Jesus hear in chapter fourteen that moved him to withdraw? Listen to what Matthew recounts at the *beginning* of chapter fourteen. It takes place in Jesus’ present: “At that time, Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus; and he said to his servants, ‘This is John the Baptist, he has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him’” (Matt 14:1-2). Then Matthew tells the story of the death of John and the disciples burying the body and going to tell Jesus, all as a flashback.

Then, returning to Jesus’ present, Matthew says, “Now, when Jesus heard, he withdrew.”

What Jesus heard, then, was that Herod the tetrarch, who Jesus knew had put John to death in the past—because John’s disciples had told him—had now in Jesus’ present heard of Jesus’ fame and was thinking that Jesus was John raised from the dead.

What moved Jesus to withdraw to a desert place was Jesus’ hearing of Herod’s hearing of him now, in Jesus’ present (Matt 14:13, 1). Herod, who had killed John in the past, now had his attention on Jesus in the present, and that fact had consequences for Jesus’ future. So, as Jesus had done in chapter four after hearing that John had been arrested, at 14:13 he again withdrew.

Matthew says, “Jesus *withdrew* into Galilee” (Matt 4:12). What do you want to say when you use the word *withdraw*?

Although Matthew says, “withdrew *to*,” the word *withdraw* implies a starting point as well as a destination. A withdrawal *to* is also a withdrawing *from*, and you withdraw *from* a place or a

situation because you sense that there is a threat of some kind that you want to get away from.

If you read the gospel of Matthew from the beginning, when you come to 4:12 you will already have encountered withdrawal twice. The Magi, “warned in a dream not to return to Herod, *withdrew* by another way to their own country” (Matt 2:12), and Joseph, “hearing that Archelaus” had replaced his father Herod as king and “warned in a dream, *withdrew* to the district of Galilee” (Matt 2:22).

So while Matthew says that Jesus “withdrew to Galilee,” we have a subliminal sense that Jesus is also withdrawing *from*, and not just from a place, but also from something threatening *in* that place. We know what that threat is: it is the threat contained in the fact of John’s having been handed over to—having been arrested by—Herod, the threat of the fate of a prophet of Israel now rolling quietly toward Jesus.

And finally there is the word itself, *withdraw*. In Greek it is *anachoreo*. The noun is *anachoresis*, the state of withdrawal, and from it we get the English word *anchorite*.

A core monastic and Cistercian practice is what we call “separation from the world” (see Constitutions OCSO 29). “Separation from the world” is the ancient monastic ascesis of *anachoresis*, withdrawal. It is a practice that must always have its starting point in the gospel and in Jesus’ own *anachoresis* in the face of a mortal threat, and as a way of best using the terrestrial time available to him for fulfilling his work as both prophet and martyr.

O, that I had wings like a dove to fly away and be at rest.
But it was a dove that rested on you.

On Matthew 8:1-3

(Mark 1:40-44; Luke 5:12-14)

Jesus “taught as one having authority,” and his authority evoked a response: amazement—“the crowds were astonished” (Matt 7:28-29). Saint Matthew tells us that after his account of the Sermon on the Mount.

Authority and amazement. You might say that the crowds recognized Jesus’ authority in their response of amazement.

It is like love or desire. You encounter someone and find in response that you have fallen in love, and in that response you recognize that what you encountered is desirable.

The scribes of Jesus’ time had authority that came from position, tradition, and expectation, but they did not evoke amazement. Jesus did, and in their response to Jesus the crowds recognized real authority. Recognizing, they followed him: “When Jesus came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him” (Matt 8:1).

“And then a leper approached [and] did him homage” (Matt 8:2).

In the Old Testament there are four stories about people who have leprosy. The first is in Numbers. Two of the stories are in the Second Book of Kings, and the last is in the Second Book of Chronicles.

In Numbers, Miriam, Moses' sister, is struck with leprosy.¹ It was the Lord who did it. It would take a long time to defend the Lord for striking Miriam with leprosy—which he says was like spitting in her face and she'd just have to put up with the shame—so I won't try (Num 12:9-15).

In Second Kings Naaman is the army commander of the king of Aram. Naaman was highly esteemed, respected, and valiant, "but . . . [he] had been struck with leprosy" (2 Kgs 5:1).

The other story in Second Kings is about four anonymous Israelites who had also been struck with leprosy (2 Kgs 7:3). You have to like these guys. They are companions in their misery. They sit by the city gate begging, but it is useless because famine has gripped the land, and anyway the city, Samaria, is under siege by the Arameans. They say, "Why should we sit here until we die? If we decide to go into the city, we shall die there, for there is famine in the city. If we remain here, we shall die too" (2 Kgs 7:3-4). So they decide to defect to the Arameans.

When they get to the Arameans' camp, though, they find it deserted. Because of a trick the Lord had played, all have fled the camp and left their belongings behind. So these four guys take advantage of the situation. They go into house after house and eat and drink and then carry off whatever they can of value and return for more.

After a spree of looting, though, they say, "We are not doing right. This is a day of good news, and we are keeping silent" (2 Kgs 7:8-9). So they go back and report what they discovered to the palace in Samaria.

Second Chronicles tells about Uzziah. He became king in Jerusalem at the age of sixteen and reigned for fifty-two years. Maybe it was too long a run, for after a while "he became arrogant to his own destruction" (2 Chr 26:16).

1. The Hebrew word is a participle of a verb with a passive sense, meaning "to be struck [with leprosy]." In two of the stories it is the Lord who is the implied active agent of the verb.

At one point Uzziah wants to take over the priests' job in the temple; when the priests stand up to him, Uzziah gets angry. He is holding the thurible at the time, because he wants to do the censuring, so there is a nice connection between the hot thurible and Uzziah's anger. As a result of his outburst the Lord strikes him with leprosy.

Even so, and in spite of his arrogance and anger, Uzziah seems to have left a good memory: "He did what was right in the sight of the Lord" (2 Chr 26:1-4), a pretty good thing to say about a king. When Uzziah died, even though they said, "he had been struck with leprosy," they buried him with the other kings (2 Chr 26:23).

In these four cases of people with leprosy we note that the afflicted persons are not identified with their affliction. You could even say they were victims: they all had been *struck with leprosy*. The leprosy is one thing, the person another; the condition does not define the person.

On the contrary, at least in the case of Naaman and that of the four Israelites, the affliction helped create the occasion for the person's virtue to become evident. In Uzziah's case, even though the leprosy was a punishment for his acting out a defect of temperament and character, neither his acting out nor the punishment for it obliterated his deserved good reputation. In the case of Miriam, it was his own reputation that the Lord should have worried about. The people patiently waited till she was cured. She suffered no shame and served forever after as a reminder that leprosy could be cured (Deut 24:9).

For all these persons maybe their leprosy was like the "thorn in the flesh" and the scourge of Satan that Paul said he was afflicted with. It was the way for them to learn that God's "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 2:9).

Matthew 8:2 says that a leper approached Jesus. The leper goes unnamed. But later in the gospel of Matthew there is a leper whose name we are given. He is Simon of Bethany. Jesus visited his house just before the Last Supper and the passion, and it was in Simon's

house that a woman approached Jesus and poured expensive perfume on Jesus' head (Matt 26:7). "Simon the leper" is how Matthew identifies this man (Matt 26:6).

It makes you ask, what leper?

In the gospel of Matthew there is only one leper Jesus has met before he goes to Simon's house. It is the one identified as a leper in Matthew 8:2, the one who "approached [Jesus and] did him homage" as soon as Jesus came down from the mountain after the Sermon on the Mount. It is reasonable to conclude, then, that when Matthew identifies Simon of Bethany as "the leper" it is this leper that he is referring to, the one whom Jesus touched with his hand and made clean (Matt 8:3).

Is Matthew identifying Simon with his disease when he calls him "Simon the leper"? Taking the same line as the Old Testament's presentation of people with this disease, maybe not. Rather, he is simply saying, "This Simon is the leper I told about that Jesus cured." Matthew would be identifying Simon not by Simon's former affliction but by the memorable gesture on the part of Jesus that took the affliction away.

Even so, it is possible that Simon still thought of himself as "Simon the leper" in the same way that someone sober for forty years identifies herself as Sarah the recovering alcoholic. She knows that on some level she must always identify with her illness, because if she forgot where she came from she would be presumptuous and ungrateful, and she would lose the sense of where she still needed to go.

If she forgot where she came from and how she had arrived where she was now, she would be likely to return to that painful place.

So if Simon forgot that he was once "the leper" and that Jesus' hand, his body summarized in five fingers, had touched and cleansed him, it would be a forgetting, the consequences of which were dreadful to think about. As it turned out, ever since then whenever this gospel has been proclaimed, what Jesus did for Simon the leper has also been told in memory of him (Matt 26:13).

And so with us. If we are grateful and amazed, let us recognize the source; then we will not be presumptuous but rather forbearing and patient with our brothers.

On Matthew 9:18-26

(Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:40-56)

Don't use old wineskins when it is a question of new wine; use new ones, and it is a question of new wine (Matt 9:17; #41).

Matthew follows the account of Jesus' parables about the patch and the garment and the wine and the wineskins with two stories about Jesus and females, one young and one apparently older. Matthew embeds one story within the other like wine in a flagon showing us that the two stories need each other.

Jesus is saying these things about the patch and the garment and the new wine and the wineskins when a certain official comes. It actually says "one official." The official worships Jesus and announces that his daughter has just died. "But," he continues, "come and put your hand upon her and she will live" (Matt 9:18).

This one official's announcement to and request of Jesus are made simultaneously with Jesus speaking his parables about the patch and the wineskins. The daughter has just died, literally, come to an end. She is like an old torn garment. "Come, lay your hand upon her"; but no one lays a patch of new cloth on an old garment or puts new wine in old skins. This official is pushing Jesus, challenging the implied promise of his parable: "You can repair the ruined garment; you can make my dead daughter live by giving her new wine."

The official “worships” Jesus. It is a spontaneous gesture on his part, probably not so much humble as just true, and really the most important of the three gestures he is said to have performed: “Coming, he worshiped him, saying.” Earlier Jesus told Satan that he should worship God alone, and the magi do just that when they worship the child Jesus in Bethlehem (Matt 4:10; 2:11).

When the official says that his daughter has died and then says, “but come . . . and she will live,” Jesus rises (Matt 9:19). In succession we hear the words *died*, *will live*, and *rising*. The entire Gospel and every part of it is the New Wine of the Resurrection, the unshrunk cloth, the untorn garment.

Then Jesus and his disciples follow the official, a twist, since it has been others who followed Jesus and his disciples, a twist not so much true as humble.

He had said, “She has just died, but come.”

“But come.”

“But.” Isn’t everything of the New Wine in that one word, *but*?

But is different from *so*. “Six-pack of Bud, eight dollars; jar of peanuts, two; so that’ll be ten bucks.”

But the Gospel’s perspective is different, like Jesus following an official, a twist not reasonable—“these are the facts, so,”—but merciful—“these are the facts, but.” “Six-pack of Bud, eight dollars; jar of peanuts, two; but, hey, it’s Thanksgiving, right? Just have a good holiday.”

The official’s *but* is the difference between defeat and thriving, between death—she “just died”—and life—“she will live.” *But* is the seamless garment, the new wineskin that is there to receive the New Wine. It is the faith that contains joy, the hope that invites participation.

What kind of people are we—*so* people, or *but* people, resigned to facts and their embedded fate, or inspired by mercy and grace?

“And rising, Jesus and his disciples followed him.” The Risen Lord with his church is at the service of those whom the facts of death render helpless but not hopeless. In the *but* is the faith that constrains God to humble himself and follow. “Jesus followed . . . him,” the twist that is the pattern of all ecclesial leadership, even

monastic leadership; the leader following the led wherever their need will lead. It is the New Wine. It is loving Jesus.

Jesus follows, and someone comes up behind him, a woman hemorrhaging for twelve years. We can say that she is an old wineskin cracked and leaking. The official's daughter has just died; this woman is dying. But—"If I but touch his garment I will be saved" (Matt 9:21)—and she does touch it, silent as the dead can only be in relation to the living, touches his untorn garment, his resurrection body.

Maybe to the Jewish Christians Matthew wrote for, the twelve years of the woman's illness represented Israel with its twelve tribes, their Jewish heritage that was wasting away with nothing to stop the hemorrhaging except the secret unspoken thought, "If only I could touch his garment," God's very self, the garment of glory that filled the temple in Isaiah's vision (Isa 6:1, Hebrew).

"And coming from behind she touched the hem of his garment" (Matt 9:20).

Turning and seeing her, Jesus calls her "Daughter." If the bleeding woman is Israel, Jesus affirms her claim of divine election by adopting her as daughter: "I passed by and saw you struggling in your blood, and I said to you in your blood, 'Live'" (Ezek 16:6); "Awake, awake! Put on your strength, Zion, put on your glorious garments, Jerusalem, holy city. . . . Loose the bonds from your neck, captive daughter Zion! For thus says the Lord: For nothing you were sold, without money you shall be redeemed" (Isa 52:1-2).

So Jesus says to the woman, "Courage, daughter, your faith has saved you" (Matt 9:22). Saint Paul will say in Romans, "God is one and will justify the circumcised on the basis of faith and the uncircumcised through faith" (Rom 3:30). And the woman was saved from that very hour, cured in an instant in contrast to the twelve years of her life draining away.

Then Jesus comes to the official's house and finds the scene of mourning, a scene simultaneous with the rejoicing and festivity we can imagine around the woman who was just saved. It is the difference between a *so* mentality marked by commotion and a *but* mentality marked by silent waiting. Contradicting the official

who said the daughter had died, and contradicting clinical fact, “She did not die; she is sleeping,” says Jesus, while ordering the *so* population to “Go away.” They do, with ridicule (Matt 9:24).

The clinical fact does not change, just the name given it, refusing to the fact the power to define itself: in the presence of Resurrection, death is sleep. Death is final; sleep is transitory and restorative.

“He came and took her by the hand, and the little girl arose” (Matt 9:25), and that is the Good News that continues to spread through the land (9:26), the New Wine flowing.