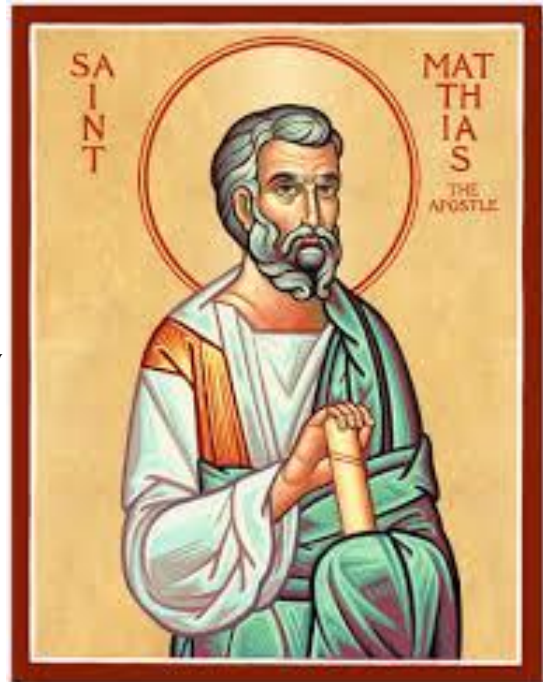


The Gospel, the Good News, according to Matthias

I can see the pink and yellow fingers of dawn coming through the barred window high up in my cell. Before too long the white walls of the cell will turn blood red, as the sun itself rises shyly above the horizon and shows off the bright colours of the day. But I will not see that today, for I hear the footsteps of the jailer coming from his house on the other side of the prison courtyard, to lead me to the place of my execution. Do I have any regrets as my life is about to end? Yes, I do. I have two. The first is that the Master did not see in me, did not find in me, enough to call me in to his inner circle. No matter how hard I tried, I was not quite what he was looking for. I have never known what it was that he did not see in me, that he did see in his closest friends, his apostles. And



the second regret? That those Apostles also saw or did not see something in me, for they did not immediately say, yes, good old Matthias, we will have him to fill the place of Judas. Instead they had a ballot to choose between me and Joseph Justus, whom we all called Barsabas, and I won it. I am glad that I did, but still, I have spent the rest of my life since then trying to make up for that undefinable something that I am not. I do not have any regrets about these last years of my life, and I will face the Master again today with confidence that I have been the best possible messenger to bring his words and ideas to these people. I do not have any more time to write any more, so I will leave this manuscript hidden in the cell. I know that members of the Christian community that I have built here will be able to find it, and smuggle it out, and will act as my witnesses to my love for the Lord Jesus Christ and his gospel, his good news. Amen.

Here begins the Gospel of Matthias

I was born the day that Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth came into my village, sat down at the village well and began to talk about Yahweh. I had regularly attended synagogue all my life, I had listened to the stories of Yahweh, but they had never touched me. They were the stories of our people in the past, stories which were guarded by an elite in Jerusalem, whose lives were so removed from my own life as a farmer, as to make them as near to gods as you could find on earth. They set out rules that we had to live by, but only they could afford the time and money to keep them. What good is it to me to keep Yahweh's rules when my donkey falls into a stream on the Sabbath and gets stuck. They said I should leave her there, and if, Yahweh willing, she was there after the Sabbath, then I could pull her out. I couldn't leave her there to suffer, nor could I risk her not being there at the end of the Sabbath, so I pulled her out, and dried her

off, fed her and stroked her until she stopped shivering from the trauma of what had happened to her. The Rabbi condemned me for breaking the Sabbath, but where was his compassion?

Rabbi Jesus sat and spoke to us of the love Yahweh has for us. He spoke about our relationships with Yahweh, not about relationships that were determined by rules set by someone else. My heart warmed to him, and his words caused something in me to open up, in a way that the readings in the synagogue had never done. When he talked about Yahweh he made him seem like the most gentle and kindly father, rather than a stern and unforgiving vengeful god. I wanted so much to believe in this vision of Yahweh, that when Rabbi Jesus asked whether anyone had any questions, I put up my hand, and at his enquiring look turned in my direction, I told him the story of my donkey, and asked what he would have done.

Rabbi Jesus never got a chance to answer, for several faces turned to me, and a man with laughing eyes told me a story of an altercation that Rabbi Jesus had had with a Pharisee over this very problem. The Rabbi, the Pharisee and a farmer were standing over a well from which could be heard the frantic braying of an ass. How it had got in the well no one could quite work out, the problem was getting it out. The Pharisee was insistent that it should be left until after the Sabbath, but Rabbi Jesus just said that the Sabbath was there to help people have the space to find Yahweh, not to punish a poor animal that was in distress and pain. So the Rabbi stripped off his robe, hitched up his undergarments, and climbed down the well. A rope was dropped down to him, and some of his followers cloaks. Speaking gently to the frightened animal he used the cloaks to pad the animal so that the rope would not cut in to him so much. At the top of the well his followers rallied around, and on the count of the farmer they began to haul the ass up out of the well. Willing hands reached out to help haul the poor animal over the wall of the well, and to untie it. More hands helped pull a now soaked, muddy and shit covered Rabbi back out of the well. It took several buckets of water to clean the ass, and even more to clean Rabbi Jesus. The villagers who had come to see what all the commotion was about rallied around to clean off his undergarments and set them out to dry. All of the cloaks had to be similarly washed as well. There was a general orgy of washing. The Pharisee who was home from Jerusalem for a few days just stood by opening and shutting his mouth like a newly landed fish, at the sight of all of these people knowingly breaking the Sabbath. That evening, at the Sabbath Meal, the entire village came together to celebrate the rescue of the Ass and the putting down of the Pharisee, who was not the most liked man in the village.

By the end of this story I had fallen in love with the vision of Yahweh that Rabbi Jesus was teaching, and I was determined to follow him and keep hearing more. I think I assumed that I would return home at some point, and would bring back to my life a way of living and loving Yahweh that was different to the one I had always been taught. I made arrangements for my animals and land to be looked after by my brother, and when Rabbi Jesus left the village the next day I went with him. Days

turned into months and months into years. We moved from place to place. If we were made welcome and the people were willing to feed the increasing numbers of us travelling with the Master, then we would stay for as long as it felt comfortable. If our reception was hostile, then we would move on quickly.

I was there on the day The Master was arrested, and I was in Jerusalem on the day he was tried and crucified and buried. I was there when the news came that The Master had risen from the dead and had been seen by the women of our group. I was at the bottom of the mountain when the three Apostles closest to him came down to say that Rabbi Jesus had ascended in to heaven to be with his Heavenly Father. I was there as one of the Apostles when the fires of the Holy Spirit came upon us all and lit us up from within giving us strength and courage to go out and preach the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Since that day I have been wandering the face of the earth preaching to the willing and unwilling. I have been seen in Cappadocia on the coasts of the Caspian Sea near to the port of Issus. I have been seen in Judea and in Aethiopia, in the region of Colchis (Now in modern day Georgia). Now I am here in this jail cell awaiting death.

Footnote

There is little factual information about Matthias. Even his name is not certain, as the chosen Apostle is also sometimes referred to as Tolmai. Like many of the Apostles there are a number of traditions regarding his death. There are claims that he died in Gonio (Apsaros) in the modern Georgian region of Adjara and that there is a marker in the old Roman Fort there telling of his death. The *Synopsis of Dorotheus* says "Matthias preached the Gospel to barbarians and meat-eaters in the interior of Ethiopia, where the sea harbour of Hyssus is, at the mouth of the river Phasis. He died at Sebastopolis, and was buried there, near the Temple of the Sun." Alternatively he might have been stoned and beheaded in Jerusalem, or he might have lived to a great age in Jerusalem and died peacefully in his sleep. You can take your pick. It is claimed that Matthias remains are interred in the Abbey of St. Matthias, Trier, Germany, brought there by Empress Helena of Constantinople, mother of Emperor Constantine, but according to Greek sources, the remains of the apostle are buried in the castle of Gonnio-Apsaros in Georgia.

There are surviving fragments of a 'Gospel of Matthias', and quotes from it in some of the Early Church Fathers. It was not chosen as one of the four canonical gospels, and was later dismissed as heretical, and as such has been lost.

The feast of Saint Matthias was included in the Roman Calendar in the 11th century and celebrated on 24th or 25th February. Later it was moved to May 14th to take it outside Lent and nearer to the day when he would have been chosen as an Apostle.