

As we work our way through the Gospels, we become aware of other differences in the story, and even in the words in New Testament Greek to express what Jesus had said in Hebrew or, more likely, Aramaic. Even the Lord's Prayer reads differently in Matthew and Luke. (It does not appear in either Mark or John!) You might want to check this out by comparing Matthew 6 with Luke 11 – but be careful which English version you use, since some of the more recent English versions have brought the two versions into alignment!

And when the Lord's Prayer is translated into English, what a variety of versions there are! Raised in the Church of England of the first half of the twentieth century I was taught the good old Book of Common Prayer version, which precedes the King James' Version. I was taught to ask for the forgiveness of trespasses. My Scottish friends were taught to ask for the forgiveness of their debts. Then I ran into Baptists who were taught to ask for the forgiveness of their sins. Now, Matthew and Luke did not write in English – in any case there was no such language in their day! They wrote about something they called ὀφείλε (opheile), a word that has a wide range of meanings, including indebtedness, obligation and duty, across a wide range of human interactions and relationships.

Yet what did Jesus have in mind when he thought and spoke in Aramaic? I should like to think that he was tying it all in with his summation of the Law – “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy mind and with all thy strength, and thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” It is surely here where we so often fall short and need forgiveness and to offer forgiveness. Seeking forgiveness and offering forgiveness freely, these are daily – hourly – obligations and duties that fall upon all of us.

And then there are those words about not being led into temptation or of not being put to the test. Now, frankly, I have difficulties with these words! For a start these English words and phrases seem to contradict what we read in the Hebrew Scriptures, be it the stories of Abraham, Moses or many other characters. They also seem to be at variance with what we read in the Psalms – not least Psalm 23 – but other passages as well, including this morning's reading from Lamentations.

At the end of their Gospels, all three of the Synoptic evangelists have Jesus praying to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his arrest. He is praying

ON READING THE BIBLE

*Address delivered by the Reverend Father Bill Smith
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at Holy Faith Episcopal Church, Port St Lucie, on 17 February 2024*

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures:	Lamentations 3: 22-26; 31-33
Reading from the Psalter:	Psalms 108:1-6
Reading from the Greek Scriptures:	I Corinthians 15: 53-58
Reading from the Gospel:	John 10: 11-16

It really is a cause for joy to welcome the Daughters of the King of this Deanery of the Diocese of Central Florida back to Holy Faith, here in Port St Lucie.

This is a parish with a long tradition of Bible Study, and not just on a Sunday morning. Currently, our Priest-in-Charge, Father Rob, is leading a study each Thursday morning of the so-called Synoptic Gospels, those ascribed to evangelists known as Matthew, Mark and Luke, during the course of which the variations and differences among the three, as well as what they have in common, are carefully reviewed and considered. And this is important, since far too many Christians, of all traditions, seem to be unaware that there are differences, even among the Synoptists.

Let us take one instance as an example. We have just enjoyed the Christmas and Epiphany seasons. We have enjoyed the well-loved carols – but have we really compared the words of these carols with what it is that the evangelists had to say? Have you ever noticed how Matthew puts the birth of Jesus during the reign of King Herod and on a date at least two or more years before that King's death, which happened in 4 BC. According to this Gospel, Jesus was born in the house of Joseph a resident of Bethlehem no later than 7 BC, if not earlier? But Luke has Jesus being born to a man from Nazareth, who had had to go to Bethlehem from Nazareth for a census during the governorship of Quirinius, who did not take up that office until AD 6. We are talking of a difference of something like a decade and a half!

Then when we turn to the carols that we all love to sing, we see some more divergencies. Now, I am not suggesting that we change the words of the carols, but

we do need to be careful to sort out the differences between their words and the words of the evangelists.

Let us take just one example, again from the Christmas/Epiphany cycle of carols. Come January 6 – and even earlier if we have had Christmastide pageants – we are all too ready to sing, “We three kings of Orient are!” The carol is based on the story at the beginning of Matthew 2. Yet when we turn to Matthew chapter 2, what do we find?

First of all, Matthew does not describe these visitors as Kings! He does not use the conventional word for “kings” in the Greek of his day. (I am assuming that “Matthew” was indeed a man! His Gospel, like the other three, is anonymous.) Instead, he uses a strange term, “Magi”, and scholars still argue about the language from which this term came and so what it might mean. Secondly, Matthew does not tell us how many were in the group. That he uses a plural verb indicates that there were more than one – but how many more?

Thirdly, Matthew does not claim that they were all men! He wrote in Greek, which, like so many languages, uses masculine pronouns to describe groups of two or more, even when not all those in the group are male. Perhaps there were only two in the group; perhaps a man and his wife – or, dare I put it this way(?) – a woman and her husband!

Perhaps we should be thinking about an astrologer, a woman, who read the stars in order to tell someone’s future, a woman, like so many women we see in south Florida, even right here in Port St Lucie! One evening she saw a strange heavenly body rising in the east, the direction from which we might expect it first to appear, travelling westwards across the night sky. She divined what the “star” might mean, and then she persuaded her husband to travel with her from, my guess is, Yemen, the source of myrrh and frankincense, to visit this new-born king, as she described him. I am not saying this is how we ought to read chapter 2 of Matthew’s Gospel, but it is certainly no less a possible reading than that of “We Three Kings of Orient Are!”.

I like to think that the evangelists each wrote to a particular group, and that they couched their messages in terms that were meaningful to each of those groups, so that Matthew wrote for Greek-speaking Jews living in exile in Alexandria in Egypt, hence his emphasis on King Herod and on the stay of the Holy Family in Egypt.

about the cup that he alone can drink. And all three of the Synoptists have him praying, “Thy Will be Done”.

We are all going to face trials and temptations – that is all part of living in a world like the one we have polluted by our sin. But it is my experience that to cut our losses and run may be as big a sin as any! Surely what we need to be certain about is that, like a shepherd leading his flock through dangerous places to get to where the sheep and lambs need to be, that the Holy Spirit will be with us, not necessarily obviously so at all times, leading us to where we need to be in God’s design for the World and for us. And so, in my private prayer time, I say, “Lead us through Temptation”, for it is my experience that only God, our Father, has the Power, the Ability and the Authority to do that, just as Paul affirms from his own experience in our reading this morning from I Corinthians, and as Jesus is affirming in our Gospel reading.

I realized, learned, all this from reading the Bible carefully and then applying the lessons I have learned. This morning, I am encouraging you to become part of a Bible study group, coming to meetings with a mind open to the leadership of the Good Shepherd.