

THE RECEPTION OF MATTHEW IN AFRICA

HJ Bernard Combrink
University of Stellenbosch

Abstract

The typical critical issues concerning the interpretation of Matthew do not occur that often in the reception of Matthew in Africa. The issues addressed are especially contextual matters such as liberation and the relevance of God's kingdom for society and politics. In the process attention is given to the relationship between Jesus and rural society, in inculturation in the context of Jesus and in Africa, poverty and oppression, martyrdom, dreams, the cosmic implications of the Gospel, marriage customs in Africa, the priestly commitment to the people of God in the local context, love and other values, the church and Christology.

1. Introduction

In two previous contributions (1994a & 1994b), the present author dealt with the reception and use of the Gospel of Matthew in South Africa during the last couple of decades as well as the more recent history.

The first study (c.f. 1994a:339) is an attempt to investigate which sections of Matthew have been used during the last few decades, by whom and how. It therefore focuses on the different kind of receptions of Matthew, as it is often said that it is usually the Gospel of Luke which is being used for the contextualisation of the Gospel.

One kind of reception is in the typical scholarly research being done in South Africa. Although many interesting shifts in the methodology can be documented from the Matthean research, it remains true that in this kind of reception relatively little contextualisation took place so far. Recently, a certain correction could be detected in this respect, and in different articles the South African context is clearly beginning to play a role.

In a recent dissertation attention is being drawn to the possibility of viewing the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew as an example of engaged literature. There are also other contributions dealing with issues such as the challenge of fugitives, the concept of comrade, the relevance of the beatitudes etc. Another genre of contribution in which contextualisation is also to be detected, is the Series on exegetical and hermeneutical guidelines for preaching.

Some of the most obvious forms of contextualisation has to do with the legitimising of or opposition to the policy of separate peoples and churches. But obviously more than this receives attention. Issues such as love and compassion, human rights, reconciliation, the permissive society and the ethical challenges of economic life, war and peace and love of one's enemies, violence, wealth and poverty are discussed. As could be expected, the same text(s) often function in different ways according to the context of the reader.

The second article (c.f. 1994b:169) deals with recent developments in Matthean research, mostly by members of the NTSSA. Initially, research on Matthew was influenced to a large degree by discourse analysis. Literary criticism and narratology also made an impact on the research, as well as speech act theory, pragmatics and rhetoric. Social scientific criticism also played a role, and the Sermon on the mount has also been read as *littérature engagée*. Recently the specific contribution of Matthew to Theology and Ethics also received attention. There is currently also a growing sensitivity to the South African and broader African context to be seen.

Against this background, it may be interesting to take a look at the reception of Matthew in Africa. It has to be conceded immediately that this contribution will inevitably be inconclusive due to various factors, amongst others the fact that communication between South Africa and the rest of Africa has only very recently been normalised. It has to be taken into consideration that this communication is very often not adequate. It should also be remembered that Africa in all its diversity is not easily encompassed, and that one should be careful to generalise too quickly on the basis of a limited exposure to a limited selection of material.

It is hoped that this article may be a contribution to further the interaction between New Testament scholars in Africa and abroad concerning the issue of the reception and contextualisation of Matthew in Africa. Felder also draws attention to the notion of 'cultural exegesis' and the fact that 'the Bible is the best handbook for multiculturalism, racial tolerance, and ethnic pluralism' (1992:364).

When one talks about the challenge to contextualise the Bible, it is usually done from the position of its exclusive and universally normative value for people living in quite different contexts and times. C S Banana made the controversial statement in April 1991 that the Bible should be rewritten in order to make it relevant to times and people living under circumstances different from the biblical ones. 'The interesting thing is that the discussion on 'rewriting the Bible' was not carried out in academic circles or in theological colleges but took place, so to speak, in the market-place' (Mukonyora 1993:x).

Amongst Biblical scholars it common knowledge that a process of rewriting can already be seen in the Bible itself. This can be seen for example in the manner in which Mark is being rewritten by Luke and Matthew (Lehmann-Habeck 1993:44). Thus the Gospel of Mark was re-written to serve the needs of other Christian communities in other geographical and cultural settings. This is a well accepted fact in New Testament research, but now certain conclusions are drawn from this such as that the Bible is historically and culturally conditioned in all the stages of its growth (1993:56).

It will be seen that the themes of inculturation and liberation are preoccupying African Christian theology today. The concern of African Christianity is therefore more and more that Africans need not reject their cultural heritage and identity in order to become a Christian (Schreiter 1991:viii).

2. Critical Issues

One has the impression that many of the literary issues currently on the agenda of NT research are not that central when references to Matthew occur. One for example seldom finds a sensitivity for Matthew as narrative or various opinions concerning its structure and what that entails for its interpretation. In this way the Sermon on the mount is perceived as direct evidence for the homiletic activity of the historical Jesus. In dealing with the homiletic paradigm which is so popular in African Christianity especially amongst evangelists and in most locally founded churches, Mugambi refers to Jesus portrayed especially in Matthew as the excellent preacher from whom everyone should learn, referring in this respect to Mt 5:7. 'It is recorded that multitudes would follow Jesus for days on end to hear Him preach, and they would neither get bored nor abandon Him in search of food' (Mugambi 1989d:154).

On the other hand there is a very critical stance and a clear distinction being made between the scriptures itself, and the Biblical teaching introduced by the missionaries to Africa.

Despite the centrality of the Bible as the frame of reference for the Christian faith, it appears that much of missionary activity in Africa has been only remotely related to the demands of the Gospel. For this reason, many African Christians felt and still feel obliged to follow the scriptures rather than the missionaries who introduced the Bible in the first place (Mugambi 1989b:i).

Nevertheless, the witness of Mt 5:17-20 concerning the unity of the Bible and the pivotal role of Jesus in fulfilling the Old Testament, is therefore acknowledged by Mugambi (1989b:5), while also underlining the importance of the exceeding righteousness required from followers of Jesus. The emphasis on the contextuality of a person's response to the Gospel is not to be seen in opposition to the very basic role of the Bible in Christianity. It is to be noted further that there is a sensitivity to the fact that Jesus and his disciples worked within the social context of their own ethnic community and in this respect reflect similar interests as in the socio-scientific approach (c.f. Mugambi 1989b:9).

From the reception of Matthew encountered thus far, it seems as if one could characterise it as a reading of the canonical form of the text, a reading *in front of the text* enabling the *ordinary reader* to make sense of the text of Matthew (c.f. West 1991:124ff).

3. Liberation and the Relevance of the Kingdom of God for Human Society and Politics

It has been mentioned already that the two themes apparently most prevalent in the African interpretation of the Bible at present, are liberation and the local context of the church in Africa.

Magesa recalls that it is at present widely accepted that it is the task of theology to explain the nature and means for the advancement of that biblical mandate of effective justice everywhere, at every moment of history (1989b:143). This is especially relevant in Africa where the category of politics, in its widest

sense, provides an appropriate entry into contemporary reality. In this respect he refers to Mt 7:12 where the law and prophets must be seen as referring to the 'justice-love' character of civilisation.

It is not strange that in discussing the issues relevant to the question of participation in the advancement of the liberation of Christ in Africa, and in the light of the failure to form and pursue concrete policies in favour of love-justice, reference is often made to the Sermon on the mount and texts such as Mt 7:21 (Magesa 1989:82f). It must nevertheless be stressed that human life is not only determined by the material, spatial and temporal dimensions, but also the attitudinal dimensions. This attitude refuses to see earthly concerns as ends in themselves. Here Mugambi [1989c:81] refers to Mt 6:33-34 as a warning against making material concerns an end in itself.

The real theological justification for the struggle in Africa for justice, human rights, and human dignity is to be seen in the humanity of God in Jesus. Referring to Mt 5-7 Magesa said of Jesus: '...He counselled understanding, humility, tolerance, care and charity....all this for the sake of mutual, holistic growth of all people and the perfection of creation' (Magesa 1989:88). As can be expected, reference is especially made to the Beatitudes where the ideals of Love, justice, reconciliation, sincerity and humility were ideals commended for anyone who would wish to inherit the kingdom of God. This is complemented by the challenge of Mt 5:13-20. Therefore the way of the cross and adherence even by human political systems to the ideals of the kingdom of God in accordance with Mt 6:7-15 is the only way in which love, justice and genuine peace could be realised on earth (Mugambi 1989c:89).

Magesa finds a deep respect with Jesus for the freedom of people to take decisions for themselves, his 'fundamentally 'democratic' spirit' (1990:93f). Texts from Matthew adduced to substantiate this are 4:18-20; 9:9 and even 19:16-22 where Jesus allows the young man the freedom to reject his call. When Magesa refers to the 'democratic or egalitarian attitude' of Jesus (1990:94), one must warn that terms such as *democracy* and *human rights* with their current connotations - which may also vary when used in different political models - should be used with great restraint.

The references from Matthew therefore treats the political implications of the Kingdom of God, but in a way which keeps some of the main theological accents of Matthew very clearly in view.

It is also clear that the reception of the Gospel by African women is also being given attention to. One of the examples referred to by Nasimiyu-Wasike in her treatment of the statements concerning women by Jesus, is Mt 5:28. From this reference she deduces that 'Jesus recognised women as persons in their own right and disapproved of anything that discriminated against women' (Nasimiyu-Wasike 1990:127). This reading does not testify to a reading behind the text or a reading against the grain of the text (c.f. West 1991:112f).

4. Contextual Theology

The reading in front of the text is taking place mostly with a clear view to the specific context of Africa.

4.1 Jesus and rural society

Although it is nothing new to note that Jesus in his earthly life was a rural dweller, this is done now in the specific context of 'drawing lessons' from this rural ministry of Jesus. It is underlined that according to Mt 4:23-25, Jesus began his public ministry in Capernaum. For Mugambi it is significant that according to the Gospel of Matthew, the first inaugural sermon, the Sermon on the mount, was given by Jesus not in the temple at Jerusalem, but in the countryside on a hill near the shores of Lake Galilee (Mugambi 1992c:92). Even though the different accents, even discrepancies, between the Gospels are acknowledged, it is found significant that the base of Jesus' ministry was in the rural areas, so different from much of church work in Africa today.

Without now entering into the debate over the geographical and social location of Matthew, it should be noted that the 'rural areas' of Lower Galilee were perhaps much more hellenized and urbanised than is reflected in Mugambi's remarks above. Towns and villages tended to be grouped together into market networks and associated with one of the free cities, a kind of city-territory organisation. It should also be noted that this urbanisation of Lower Galilee began already under Herod the Great. Upper Galilee, in contrast, had no free cities and was characterised by a non urban village culture (White 1991:230f). When considering the social situation reflected by the Gospel of Matthew itself, Kingsbury mentions as a point of agreement that the Matthean community itself has to be located in an urban environment in Galilee or perhaps more to the north in Syria (Kingsbury 1991:264). In fact, many urgent and stark urban problems of the first century are reflected in the Gospel of Matthew.

4.2 Inculturation in a particular context

In discussing the issue of the contextual nature of Christian theological reflection, Mugambi asks how local one should really go. This would depend on the degree of readiness among Church leaders and theologians 'to welcome and take seriously the particularities of context within a nation as significant factors contributing to the total mosaic of the universal Christian experience and expression' (Mugambi 1989b:22f).

When the superiority of western culture to African culture is rejected and one then opts to take local customs and traditions seriously, it has to be remembered that the Christian faith brings judgement on all cultural traditions. To show that the New Testament do not categorically condemn all traditional customs and that Jesus came not to abolish the Jewish law and prophetic tradition but to fulfil them, reference is made to Mt 5:17-48 (Mugambi 1989a:197). His references (1 Cor 7:19f; 8:8f) to the way in which Paul leaves the issue of cultural options open, are probably less debatable.

It is illuminating that the fact that the *place and milieu* of the question by Jesus to his disciples in Mt 16:13-20 is that of the region of Caesarea Philipi. This is an area where the god Pan was worshipped in traditional manner in a religious sanctuary. This episode of the witness of the disciples to Jesus as the Son of man is thus situated in a very meaningful context implying that the acknowledgement of Jesus can never be reduced to the sole criterion of cultural values (Pénoukou 1991:37).

There is, however, also the danger of the church detaching itself from the society in which they live and in this way becoming irrelevant to the needs of contemporary society. Referring to the challenge to the church to be the salt of the earth (Mt 5:13), it is stated that the fear of syncretism should not be made an argument for failing to be concerned and involved in solving the problems which confront contemporary society, as Christianity from its beginning sought to transcend particular cultures. 'If the Church refuse to be soiled by the world in which it lives, then it will be like salt which has lost taste (Matthew 5:13) (Mugambi 1989a:91).

In his discussion of the contextual nature of Christian theology, Mugambi refers to Mt 7:1-5 as a call to theologians to 'treat with respect and appreciation the interpretations of others, with the objective of a constructive contribution rather than destructive discouragement' (Mugambi 1989b:37).

The issue of inculturation in the New Testament, and on its relevance for the Church in Nigeria and elsewhere, particularly in Africa, has been discussed by Okure. She tries to establish relevant scriptural and theological principles to be able to adopt strategies for promoting authentic and effective inculturation (1990:55). The reference to Jesus as a Nazarene in 2:23 is taken by her to be an act of inculturation by Jesus within the framework of Palestine Jewish culture (1990:60).

On the one hand it is clear that Jesus was a Jew and even made use of Jewish concepts and ordinary activities as the medium for revealing and teaching about the Kingdom of God - c.f. Mt 13:3-51. But it is just as clear that He was critical of customs and ideas (15:1-20) and the Jewish religious leaders (Mt 23) (Okure 1990:63). In a pastoral letter bishop Kalanda also insists with reference to Mt 15:1-20 and 5:21 that Christians must be ready to abandon those parts of their culture, and traditional teaching of the elders contradicting the word of Jesus, or else there would be a real danger that He might be excluded from their lives and the life of their communities. 'It is a demand that is made of all people, who come into contact with Christ and his church...' (Kalanda 1989:85).

Concerning inculturation in particular African contexts, Okure draws attention to the fact that while tribalism often imprisons and impoverishes, divides society, discriminates against and excludes some people, Jesus came to liberate, gather together, reconcile all people to God and to one another in his own person (with reference to Mt 12:30). 'Allegiance to Christ and succumbing to tribalism are, thus, mutually exclusive' (Okure 1990:74). And with reference to the life-style of Jesus, which was clearly counter-cultural with regard to the exercise of authority and power, Mt 23:1-12 and its criticism of the religious leaders is again alluded to

in order to remind bishops with Vatican II of their obligation to a simple and humble life of service' (Okure 1990:77).

It is clear that Okure makes use of the critical element in Matthew to warn against an incautious adaptation to the cultural context, but she nevertheless underlines that 'whatever has been inherited, but is neither *a sine qua non* for salvation, nor biblical revelation, nor the heritage of Tradition and the authentic teaching of the Church may be dispensed with, if it can be replaced by something culturally more meaningful and more evangelical' (Okure 1990:77).

The issue of the religious value of traditional African religions is another hot issue associated with the question of inculturation. In discussing the issue whether adherents to traditional African religions are saved through them, Kalilombe refers to Mt 28:19-20 and Christianity's uniqueness as God's final salvific self-revelation in the light of the urgency of Christ's 'great commission' (1990:130).

While dealing with issues concerning the church and non-Christian religions, Kalilombe sees in Mt 5:13-16 an indication of the church's destiny to be a sacrament, a visible and effective sign in the world of the presence of the Kingdom or reign of God. 'The other religions should be seen, not so much as an adversary or a threat, but as the field within which the Church's witness makes the good grain grow and bear fruit a hundred fold, while the tares are being pulled out and burnt' (Kalilombe 1990:141).

4.3 Poverty and oppression

A well known issue in third world countries is the enormous problem of poverty. The refrain of God's solidarity with people in poverty and in suffering can be heard from around the globe, especially if that poverty is the direct consequence of exploitation and oppression (Mugambi 1989c:96f.). Most theologians also assume a correlation between poverty, exploitation and oppression. In this context reference is made to Mt 5:1-12 and according to Mugambi (1989c:97) the Beatitudes should be considered as a whole, and understood in relation to Lk 4:16-21 and the passage which Jesus read from Is. 62:1-2.

In a discussion of Roman Catholic positions on poverty, reference is made to the evangelical counsels based upon the words and the life example of Jesus Christ (Okoye 1989:380). Referring to Mt 10:37 he sees as one of the characteristics of evangelical poverty that one should give priority to Him above everything and everyone one holds most dear, including one's family. This must be accompanied by a total trust in God's providence, as in Mt 6:25f; 10:9-10. In the light of Mt 19:16f; 27:57f religious poverty is brought into relationship with the African culture (1989:45).

It is furthermore interesting that Mt 5:38-42 can sometimes be abused by oppressors by implementing this saying to keep their victims in their oppressed situation. In such a case the question would be whether the teaching of Jesus has any relevance at all for the people in the oppressed position? To this Mugambi (1989c:101) replies that Jesus came to liberate the oppressed, but that God remains the ultimate judge. But according to him Mt 5:6 entails that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness have to show their solidarity with those in need

of justice and contribute towards the realisation of a more just and a more humane society. Another text from the Sermon on the mount (7:21) is quoted in the context of discussing 'The WCC Programme to Combat Racism (PCR)' and it is stated that the struggle against oppression is a struggle from which the churches ought not to and cannot detach themselves (Mugambi 1989c:116).

4.4 Martyrdom

The reception of Matthew is sometimes also brought to bear on the fact that Africa also had its martyrs. When referring to the Uganda martyrs of more than a century ago, Ddungu linked the martyrs of Namugongo to Mt 5:11 (1989:243). Interestingly, martyrdom is then related to holiness with reference to 2 pericopae in Matthew where the faith of gentiles are commended by Christ. 'It is clear that through this very fact, God is pointing out to us that holiness is for all, starting from Christ's lay faithful. The lay faithful should be proud of the fact that according to the Gospel, those who impressed Christ most with faith, were lay people: such as the Roman centurion (Mt. 8:10-12) and the Canaanite woman (Mt. 15:22-28)' (Ddungu 1989:244).

In this respect one may ask the question whether the manner in which holiness is here referred to, is not also very specifically determined by the denominational context of the interpreter.

4.5 Dreams

In the light of the abiding importance of dreams in Africa, one might even perhaps say that African tradition throughout the continent regards dreams as prophetic (Shorter 1978:281). On the whole the experience in Africa has been that missionaries were intolerant with reference to the value of dreams and dream-telling. Against this background it is understandable that one finds a sensitivity for the references to dreams as divine premonitions in Mt 1:20; 2:12; 2:13; 2:22 as well as 27:19, challenging the reader to take this seriously in the light of the New Testament references.

4.6 Cosmic implications

It is noteworthy that in the reception of Matthew the cosmic implications of the Gospel are also noted. In this respect Mugambi refers to Mt 6:25-30 and says: 'In His teaching, Jesus referred His followers to nature and reminded them that God sustains not only history, but the cosmos as a whole...' (Mugambi 1989d:143). Although it is true that so often in the past this pericope has been domesticated and its uncomfortable emphasis on the priority of justice and the Kingdom of God neglected (c.f. Luz 1985:374), it is important that in this reading of the text a sensitivity to these cosmic issues can be detected.

4.7 Bible translation

Obviously the process associated with the reception of Matthew in the African context, can also be traced with reference to problems of Bible translation. Not

that this is only relevant to Matthew, but some interesting aspects which can be of relevance for the reception of Matthew as such, may be looked at.

In this respect, confer also the contribution on *Translating or transforming - receiving Matthew in Africa* in this issue (Combrink 1995a)

4.8 Marriage

The relevant texts from Matthew (19:1-9) are often discussed in connection with issues relating to monogamy and polygyny in West and East African polygynous societies (c.f. Agbasiere & Zabajungu 1989). According to Akiki Bantu communities still question the Biblical precepts concerning marriage, since Bantu marriages have never been strictly monogamous nor strictly indissoluble as the Christian ideal has it (c.f. Akiki 1978:369). These requirements were often bypassed by adopting marriage types of elopement and trial marriages. With a view to the uncertainty concerning the exception of Mt 19:9 (a single act of adultery or a single lapse or persistent unfaithfulness), Akiki observes both a rigid and a relaxed interpretation among Bantu preachers.

According to Akiki the church has not really succeeded in entering the thought world of the people of Africa which resulted in the Biblical precepts concerning marriage being circumvented. 'Despite what Christianity has to say, many Bantu today find it difficult to tolerate a marriage where there are no children or love' (Akiki 1978:370). A marriage is like a feast prepared by a king for his son (Mt 22:1ff).

In the light of statements which had been made that marriages were becoming a growing cause of the disintegration of Roman Catholic communities in Africa, Boivin declared marriage a liability rather than an asset and suggested that the 'Christianization' of polygamy and divorce might be the remedy for the church (1972:18f). Yet he maintains that in the light of Mt 5:48 Christ's message on marriage is that 'the relationship that exists between husband and wife should reflect and reproduce the relationship that exists between God and man' (Boivin 1972:23). Thus the uncompromising fidelity in marriage is new only in that it repeals exceptions made in the Mosaic Law, but it is not new as such: it has been God's will from the beginning.

A Roman Catholic scholar questions the validity of the typical precept/counsel distinction, for which the classic text usually referred to is Mt 19:16-22. Even though this text may not be able to sustain the doctrine of precept/counsel, he is of the opinion that Mt 19:11f can (Greeley 1975:170). Yet he has to admit that in the light of the broader context 'a counsel in the technical sense' is also improbable.

4.9 Christology

It is significant that in a discussion of Christology the issue of the *credibility* of Christ is raised as basic to all discussions in this respect. Christology has implications not only for effective evangelisation, of presenting Christ to the African world as truly its Lord and Saviour in a convincing manner, but also for the praxis of faith of the followers of Christ. It is the question not only of witnessing to Christ, but it is the question of how this witness can be embodied in

our lives. Referring to Mt 7:21, Mugambi says: 'Even more important, it is the question of how this conviction can be lived out' (Mugambi & Magesa 1989:xiv).

In a discussion of the threefold office of Jesus Christ as prophet, priest and king, Waruta (1989:42) refers to Matthew's characteristic comparing and contrasting of Jesus with Moses and the Old Testament prophets, also recalling 13:57 as an indication that Jesus also viewed himself as the prophet. It is clear that the role of prophets is a very important aspect of African independent Christianity as this is one of the dimensions of religious life by which the independent churches have succeeded in making the Christian faith relevant in the daily life of African people.

In the light of the importance of the king in African religion, Waruta (1989) links the expressions in the New Testament where Jesus is presented as potentate to this dimension of the African heritage. Without giving any attention to the specific role of Matthew in this respect, he does refer to titles such as the Son of Man, Son of David (c.f. Mt 20:29-34).

In another contribution Manus (1991) underlines the relevance of the phenomenon of African sacred kingships with a view to understanding the Gospel of Matthew, and especially the last pericope of the Gospel, from this perspective. Manus correlates his critical reading of the text with his contextual perspective and the way this leads to an emphasis on the mountain as a possible method for contemporary evangelisation and communication in Africa, the value of 'divine kingship' for Christology and the correlation of the Matthean Christian community with a believing Small Christian Community.

It has to be taken into account, however, that the theme of kingship is presented in an ironic mode in Matthew. Jesus is a king who is rejected, he is the ruler who finds his greatness in his function as servant (Combrink & Müller 1991:43). The story of the King of kings in Matthew must enter into dialogue with the stories of the 'sacred kings' of Africa.

Other contributions typify Jesus with reference to Mt 23:8 as the initiation chief in the light of his fulfilment of the project basic to any initiation tradition: 'that of leading a human candidacy to the full, authentic dignity and worth of children and siblings in the community of human beings' (Sanon 1991:96).

Another traditional title attributed to Christ in Africa, has been *Chief*. In discussing the question why this has happened, Kabasélé refers to attributes such as hero, Chief's Son, Emissary, Chief by Reason of Strength, Chief by Reason of Generosity, as well as other qualities that the Bantu demand of their chiefs: generosity, wisdom, and the spirit of conciliation among human beings. Another important attribute is *presence*, availability of the chief to his people. With reference to Mt 1:23 Kabasélé says: 'Jesus is seen as the one who is present, Emmanuel, the shepherd who abides with the flock. He is generous in the distribution of his gifts: he satiates the hungering crowd beyond its expectations' (1991:111). Another reason would be the fact that one is chief by reason of the ability to reconcile. A chief had to be a 'cinkunku-who-gathers-the-hunters.' With reference to Mt 5:38ff and 18:21ff Kabasélé says:

When the Bantu hear the Gospels and notice that Jesus opposes the spirit of vengeance, that he preaches forgiveness of offences, and that his last injunction before his death is love and union, they readily bestow on him the traditional title of '*cinkunku*-who-gathers-the-hunters,' or of '*mortar*-who-gathers-the-grinders.' These are titles that attach to Ancestors and chiefs, those reconcilers par excellence (Kabasélé 1991:112).

There can be no doubt that Kingship is an important theme in Matthew, as well as an appropriate view of Him. It is, therefore, ironic that the most explicit references to Jesus as King is to be found in the context of opposition and enmity where his kingship is rejected.

Besides the shame, dishonour and opposition, there is also a reversal of status in stall for Jesus as King. According to Ps 110:1 God Himself will ascribe prominence to Israel's King, and vindicate him over his enemies. This is then fulfilled in Jesus, as can be seen from the use of Ps 110 in Mt 22:44, as well as in the combination of Ps 110:1 and Dn 7:14 in 26:64 at Jesus' trial.

Although opposed and dishonoured during his earthly life, Jesus by his parables and his own parabolic lifestyle challenges the kingdom myths of his contemporaries. The reality of the Kingship of God and Jesus (as metaphor) can be imaged in many other ways than in the metaphor of kingship alone. It must also be emphasised that despite the continuity between the kingdom in Israel's and Jesus' symbolic world, the distinctiveness of the kingdom in Jesus' symbolic world should be acknowledged. This has obvious implications when dealing with the contextualisation of the kingship of Jesus in Africa.

Another important reading of Matthew with a view to its Christology, is from the perspective of African women. They are not only sensitive to matters related to the liberation of women. A woman's reading of Matthew takes note of Jesus' sensitivity to the harmony and beauty in nature according to Mt 6:28f. Nasimiyu-Wasike also refers to the healings of Jesus, e.g. Mt 9:27-29 to underline the importance of the Christological model of *Christ the healer* which is also very close to the reality of Africa (1990:133).

4.10 Priestly commitment to the people of God

In a pastoral letter issued by the Bishops of Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia to their priests and to their seminarians in training for the Priesthood, the bishops expressed their concern for a genuine and vigorous priestly commitment to the people in the current context.

In this pastoral letter the bishops often refer to Matthew with reference to what is expected from a committed priest and seminarian. Texts such as Mt 5:13-16; 10:26, 31-33 are called in mind concerning their calling to represent God to his people and vice versa (Bishops 1971:157). Mt 25:40,45 is also used to remind the priest of his task to animate, inspire and guide many other activities of his community which are required to make of the concrete human situation a society worthy of God's children. In the work of the priest, living in solidarity with the people of a village, Christ's solidarity with the poor continues (c.f. Giblin 1976:147).

True to a very central concern in Matthew, 9:36 is alluded to when the priests are urged to be lovers of the people, keenly interested in their ways of thinking, their walks of life, their problems and their joys, to identify totally with them (Bishops 1971:164f). Referring to Mt 10:7-10 they urge: 'What we need then, above all else, even while looking for adapted ways of serving, *is the will unreservedly and totally to live for the Kingdom* taking shape in our fellowmen and in society as it is and grows, without looking for anything else' (Bishops 1971:162). True to Mt 6:33f one should realise that such a commitment entails a basic sense of insecurity as we shall never be sure what will be asked of us next or what will be our next contribution. They are called to give themselves to the service of the people without reserve - c.f. Mt 25:14-30.

In the light of Mt 23:2-12 they are furthermore reminded not to look for a status or a privileged condition in the priesthood, and with reference to Mt 18:19f they are urged to forge a greater unity among all the members of the 'presbyterium' (p160) in a spirit of mutual trust and forbearance.

In a message by the Catholic bishops of Uganda concerning AIDS, the members are called to act courageously and with confidence with a view to Mt 28:10. Quoting Mt 25:34-36 the bishops stated that the challenge of AIDS is to reach out supportively to those who are suffering. 'It is only by so doing, that we can be effective witnesses of God's love...' (1989:292).

4.11 Love and other values

It is not necessary to argue the fact of love as one of the most central values in the Christian faith. With reference to Mt 11:28-30; 7:21-23 and 25:31-46 the concern for those in need is illuminated as central in the message of Christianity despite the typical reaction of all humans to be concerned primarily with friends and relatives and not with strangers. It has to be realised that one has to guard against the prejudice that the African heritage is devoid of any positive values, as in traditional African teaching there is also a typical concern for the stranger and the needy. This has to be kept in mind in communicating the Christian faith (Mugambi 1989a:139).

But the reception of the love command according to Matthew is just as clear. The love command of 5:44 is seen in the light of the melting power of the love at the cross which is able to bring reconciliation God and men and between fellow human beings. This is illustrated by a case of inter-ethnic fighting in a girls' secondary school, where witnessing to this love of Jesus resulted in reconciliation and the seeking of forgiveness (Kinoti 1989:69).

The central issue of service is introduced when Mt 10:40-42 and 20:25 is quoted by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference in 1989 in calling their members to a change of spiritual attitudes, and a commitment to the good of one's neighbour, being willing to 'lose oneself' for the sake of the other, rather than to exploit him or her. The challenge is to serve him or her instead of oppressing him (Zimbabwe Bishops 1990:57).

Another central value underlined in the reception of Matthew, is humility. In discussing the Revival Movement, it was noted that there is a danger of leaders

trying to by-pass Calvary. Referring to Mt 10:39 Kinoti states: 'Following the example of Jesus the Brethren must be willing to be 'worms': to be humbled, to die to self-interest so that rivers of living water may flow through them to a thirsty world' (Kinoti 1989:70).

In an effort to deal with issues of violence, Mugambi (1989b:45) refers to Mt 5:19 and relates entrance into the Kingdom of God with working consciously for peace. One cannot refrain from noting that this is a very strained use of this text. In a pastoral letter one finds a remarkable appeal by bishop Kalanda to the people of Karamoja in the light of the escalation of violence. In calling on his people to treat even their enemies irrespective of race or ethnicity with love and kindness, he quotes the obvious Mt 5:43-48 (Kalanda 1989:79). Even the use of violence as self-defence should be relinquished in the light of Mt 26:52f (Kalanda 1989:80).

4.12 The church

The perspective of women plays a role in the discussion of the role of women in church ministry. According to Nasimiyu-Wasike the church in Africa has been forced by legitimate and important questions by women to rethink 'the roles of women and men in the Church, family and society and to examine attitudes which ascribe inferiority to women' (1990:57). She discovers overwhelming evidence of the importance of women in all areas of Jesus' ministry.

She refers to the role of women in the ministry of service (8:14f), they participated in the ministry of being empowered by God to carry (with reference inter alia to 9:18-26), they came to Him for intercession and to worship Him (15:22-28), they were the first resurrection witnesses and partook in the ministry of the apostles (28:1-10) (cf Nasimiyu-Wasike 1990:59).

One could remark that the texts in all the Gospels in which women are mentioned are mentioned without any sensitivity to other specific Matthean issues involved. Yet there is a clear grasp of the radicalism of Jesus' position against many of the ingrained traditions and customs of his society.

Another dimension of the life of the church in Africa, has to do with the problem of crisis-identification and the response of the church to the crises. In this respect reference is made to Mt 7:1-5 as condensed teaching by Jesus on this issue. It is a normal trait in humans to discover the crises in other peoples' lives, before admitting to the depth and reality of our crises. 'We tend to console ourselves by bailing other people from their minor crisis, before we have even admitted the depth and gravity of our own crisis' (Mugambi 1989b:54). So often outsiders have told Africans about the crises of Africa, without Africans always understanding the situation in the same way. The crucial issue is now how Christians are to react to these challenges. It is to be welcomed that a text such as this has been read not only in an individual manner, but with reference to the church as manifestation of the Kingdom of God (cf Luz 1985:380). The reaction of the church has furthermore been related to Mt 7:21-23 and 25:31-46. 'It is *not* what Christian Churches *preach*, that counts, but what they actually *do*, that bears witness to our commitment as Christians' (Mugambi 1989b:57).

5. Concluding Remarks

In recent years the tension between the work of Biblical scholars and the reception of the Bible in the church has received more and more attention. Besides, as has been attested in the contributions under discussion, the ordinary reader wants to know how the interpretation of the New Testament affects his life in Africa.

Francis Schüssler Fiorenza deals with the split between the expert historical and the popular interpretation of scripture. He advocates that the interpretive process has to incorporate the *de facto* reception of the Scriptures within the Christian communities as this will make a significant difference to the interpretation of the Bible (1990:367).

There is a growing recognition that the way in which the guild of scholars have been dealing with the text in fact excludes many actual readers and inhibits our accountability to those whose lives are affected by our exegetical work, a process in which readings which are not like ours, are often excluded as illegitimate (Patte 1993:62).

By redirecting our critical focus away from the text *per se* and toward the reading of the text, we shall not only better understand what we have been doing all along as we were reading and talking about our reading but also gain new sensitivities that should enable us to read in new ways and achieve new insights (Fowler 1991:1).

In our preliminary survey of readings of Matthew in some African contexts, we have seen that the emphasis is indeed to a very large degree on issues of liberation and inculturation. In this respect the use of Matthew in Africa witness to a sensitivity - partially at least - to what was called for by Smit from his South African Biblical colleagues in his 1990 articles.

It is striking that certain sections of Matthew figure time and again in the contributions discussed. Although there is a danger in generalising, it could be said that especially the Sermon on the mount, Mt 10, the concluding section of Mt 25, and other key pericopae such as 11:28-30; 19:1-9, 16-22; Mt 23 figure in the discussions. It is also interesting to compare some of these readings with the reception of the same texts in the South African context where some of these texts were sometimes interpreted in a totally different manner (Combrink 1994a & b).

It has been noted already that all the current critical questions are not reflected in these readings from Africa. This is in a certain sense similar to the conclusion of Upkong and Riches in the Bible in Africa, Asia and Latin America group of the SBL (1993) that the use of the Bible in Africa is fundamentalist because in traditional African society authority is accepted without questioning (Bird 1994:330). It is also widely assumed that the Bible should serve the user's needs. Bird also remarks that in all three continents the Bible is being studied almost exclusively as a Christian book and with religious aims.

More attention is clearly given to the *why*, instead of only concentrating on the *how* of the interpretation. In this respect one can also recall the strong defence for reading the Bible as a document of religious communities by Fowl and Jones. This implies that one needs more and different skills, habits and

dispositions than which are usually associated with professional biblical scholars (Fowl & Jones 1991:1-2).

Phyllis Bird raises another relevant issue with reference to contextual hermeneutics which is rarely recognised or addressed, the question of *overlapping and multiple contexts* (1994:324). From the survey above, it is not that evident, but something of the multiple contexts in which the same text can function, is manifested.

Another aspect to be taken into consideration, is the issue of *whose text* we are dealing with. This is relevant not only with a view to the context of the production of the text (Bird sees the text as a product of a patriarchal society and an androcentric text), but also the context of the reader. In the survey above it became evident that in Africa there was a reaction against interpreting the New Testament and Matthew only as the missionaries' text, and that there are also clear signs of a growing feminist reading.

Finally the sensitivity to the context of the reader places the issue of the authority of the text on our agenda. The form of the text is multivocal and pluriform in character, a highly selective record of a community's conversation about the source and purpose of life. This conversation of particular communities nevertheless requires 'that questions of individual and communal identity and destiny be given a universal thrust' (Bird 1994:334). The multiple contexts of the Bible need not compromise the authority of the Bible as authority is a relational concept. 'Authority is exercised in a community and is always contextual' (Bird 1994:335).

Yet the authority of the Bible needs individual confirmation. The authority of written Word is always an authority of communication deriving from its ability to instruct, convict, inspire. Christians are not free to derive their own meanings from scripture, they are bound to the community who created and continue transmitting the Bible. This does not entail simply a repetition of past formulations of meaning, but an engagement with scripture meeting us in our own place and language and need (Bird 1994:337).

One should acknowledge, however, that a contextual hermeneutics entails an ethic of risk. One has to realise that contextual hermeneutics entails a commitment to a particular context, although one must also concede the partiality of such a commitment. This partiality of commitment necessitates the need to enter into dialogue with others (West 1993:136). Once one agrees to the necessity of dialogue, the painful reality of our disagreements is underlined again.

What is at stake is the integrity of interpretation of the New Testament in South Africa and Africa. It has become apparent that there are different interpretive communities reading Matthew, sometimes in a diverging manner. In such a situation one can either ignore such readings, or as a second option deem certain readings to be superior to other. But there is a third possibility, that of listening, conversation, dialogue (Smit 1994a:281). When this way is chosen, one has further to take into consideration the unofficial interpretive culture reflecting the influence of society beyond the reader and the author. Although this is a very obvious reality, we nevertheless tend to ignore this fact and the important implications flowing from this (Smit 1994b:309ff).

In giving attention to the reception by different interpretive communities of Matthew, we are hopefully entering a dialogue in which all concerned will be willing to listen to one another and in which our common understanding of the Gospel of Matthew, whose message is so relevant to so many communities in Africa, will be enriched.

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