

## **Their Pattern and Their King: The Gospel of Matthew as a Model for Christian Formation**

### *1. Introduction*

The Gospel of Matthew is the most influential and important Christian document ever written. I always like to begin with a non-controversial claim!! However, let me try to prove my twin assertions – first that Matthew is the most influential Christian text ever written, and second that it is the most important.

In terms of influence, it is perhaps possible to quantify some of the ways that the Gospel of Matthew has been of greater influence than any other Christian writing. The four gospels that became the canonical gospels tended to circulate as a collection in a single codex or book in the early church – very occasionally with Acts attached. The arrangements of these four texts differs between the standard order we know, and the so called Western order, with Mark and John switching positions. It appears that latter order was intended to place the two gospels written by apostles before the two written by followers of the apostles. Yet, regardless of these different orders a constant feature is that the Gospel of Matthew always stands first in any collection of the four gospels. Later when the full collection of New Testament writings was assembled, the Gospel of Matthew always stood in first place. Other examples of the influence of the Gospel of Matthew can be seen in the frequency with which early Christian writers of the patristic and medieval periods cite various Christian authors. In various lists of citations, the Gospel of Matthew outstrips other Christian texts as the one most cited by later authors. However, you might feel these ancient examples are not compelling. So let me draw on a piece of incontrovertible evidence. One which I hope nobody here will question. In the lectionary of Scottish Episcopal Church (so you can see I am now appealing to the highest authority in Christendom) the Gospel of Matthew is the most frequently read of the gospels, with Luke a close second, then there is a significant gap to John, with Mark in a distant fourth (that will teach Mark not for not including birth stories or resurrection accounts!). Well for those and for many other reasons, a compelling case can be made that the Gospel of Matthew has been, and in all likelihood will continue to be, the most read Christian text. However, does that make it the most important?

To answer that question, let me ask another. Does anybody here perhaps agree with my very radical proposition that Jesus of Nazareth might just happen to be quite a significant figure in Christianity? If that is not too ridiculous a claim, then I think that the importance of Matthew's Gospel can also be demonstrated. Matthew is not quite the longest of the four gospels, that honour goes to Luke with 1149 verses compared to Matthew's 1068. However, the Matthean version of the story of Jesus has typically become the framework of the gospel story. Perhaps this is because many readers encounter Matthew as the first gospel they read. So consequently the portrait it offers of Jesus becomes both normative and formative. The distinctive features of the Gospel of Matthew are therefore sometimes seen as standard, and other gospel accounts are refracted through a heavily Matthean lens. It is for these reasons that it is important to gain a clear understanding both of the distinctive elements in the Matthean account, and then to reflect on the impact that Matthew's account of the life and ministry of Jesus has exerted on subsequent generations of Christian theology, piety, artistic expression, and liturgical practice.

There are many distinctive elements of the Gospel of Matthew, without which an overarching and perhaps a rounded portrait of Jesus would be impoverished. Matthew is one of two canonical gospels to have a birth account. However, only in Matthew does one find the visit of wise men from the east, the slaughter of the innocents at the hands of the

malevolent Herod, and the subsequent flight into Egypt. For theologians interested in the ethics of Jesus, the primary source has long been the Sermon on the Mount. While various parts of that sermon are found dispersed in Luke's Gospel, Matthew alone presents Jesus as situated on a mountain while he teaches the crowd in this extended discourse. The figure of Peter takes on greater, although debated significance in the Gospel of Matthew. Only in Matthew's account does Peter attempt to join Jesus in walking on water, and only in the first gospel is Peter declared to be the rock on which the church is built and it is to him that the keys of the kingdom are entrusted. This enlargement of interest in the figure of Peter was generative for the evolution of an ecclesiology based on Petrine authority and succession, most clearly articulated in Roman Catholicism. Later in the narrative one finds the unique story of Judas' remorse at the betrayal of 'innocent blood' and subsequent suicide. Also in the Passion narrative, Matthew continues the interest in dreams, which was prominent in the birth story, with Pilate's wife communicating to her husband the nature of her troubling dream with the accompanying warning to 'have nothing to do with this innocent man' (Matt 27:19). Moreover, another uniquely Matthean element in the gospel carries the weight of perhaps one of the darkest aspects of all Christian history. After Pilate washes his hands and declares his own innocence in regard to the coming execution of Jesus, Matthew alone relates that then 'all the people answered and said, "his blood be upon us and upon our children."' (Matt 27:25). This narrative element of the so-called 'blood-guilt' has been used to legitimize early Christian anti-Jewish attitudes, the medieval pogroms and expulsions of Jews from parts of Europe, and the even more extensive anti-Semitism that led to the Holocaust. The influence of Matthew's Gospel in shaping that horrendous ideology cannot be denied. Yet rather than explanation, perhaps only silence and repentance are the correct responses.

Matthew's Gospel has thus had a turbulent history in the development and growth of Christianity. While the reception and application of the gospel has created a sublime picture of Jesus as a teacher of non-violent ethics with a concern for social justice and the in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven, the counterpoint to this is what may admittedly be a misapplication of Matthew's intention, but which has led to extreme expressions of violence and injustice. Therefore, not only for understanding the text in its own right but also for its impact in later history, it is important to appreciate the meaning and nuances of the rich yet complex story of Jesus of Nazareth in what can arguably be considered the most influential and important text in Christian history.

## *2. The Davidic Messiah – A Royal Christology*

More explicitly than any of the other gospels, the Gospel of Matthew links Jesus with the figure of David, and affirms him to be a royal messiah of the Davidic line. There are 17 references to David in the Gospel of Matthew, compared with 7 in Mark, 12 in Luke, and only two in John. Yet more significant than their number is their placement. Six of these references occur in the opening chapter of Matthew. In the opening verse Jesus is introduced first as the son of David. Such a claim of Davidic descent evokes both a kingly pedigree for Jesus and expectations of royal messiahship. Moreover the four references to David in the genealogy of Matt 1.2-17 are not simply placed on the same level as the other names. Rather, David is a key figure who structures the history of Israel with 14 generations before him back to Abraham, and 14 generations after him till the time of the deportation to Babylon. As many have observed, it may be the case that the number 14 is a gematria. That is it has special significance since the Hebrew name of David, written with three letters, the fourth, sixth, and fourth of the Hebrew alphabet add to a numerical value of 14. So perhaps the whole

genealogy is constructed as a cipher that points to David and his greater Davidic son. If that is too speculative, there is another feature of the genealogy which is totally clear. Despite the presence of several royal figures such as Solomon, Rehoboam, Hezekiah and Josiah, Matthew chooses to name only one figure in his genealogical table as 'king', and that of course is David (Matt 1.6). There is only one other figure in the genealogy who is given a title, and if you need me to tell you who that is – well you might just need to go and do some homework reading tonight.

Following on from the genealogy, the story of Jesus' birth contains Davidic references and overtones. That is not to ignore the fact that alongside these kingly references, Matthew also presents a divine link. By declaring Jesus to be Immanuel, 'God with us', Matthew undoubtedly wishes to present Jesus as more than simply a human descendant of David. Yet that Davidic element remains central and prominent. Joseph is himself addressed as 'son of David' to emphasize the immediate connection that Jesus has with the Davidic line. And while David is not explicitly mentioned in chapter two there are several references to Bethlehem. These include the prophecy from Micah about the emergence of a new shepherd leader for Israel. This is intended to evoke a strong and instantly recognisable Davidic connection. Yet, even more than this, it is stated that the magi come looking for the true King of the Jews. Matthew casts the story of the birth of Jesus in the context of a struggle over kingship between the false occupant of the throne, and the one who is a true Davidide. Matthew uses the title King of the Jews sparingly throughout the gospel, but it occurs at moments of great significance. On all occasions it is a title given to Jesus by Gentiles, either by the magi or by Pilate and his soldiers. What is recognised of Jesus on the verge of his human birth is only recognised again at the time of his human death. While unborn, while dying, Jesus is recognised by Gentiles as the true Davidic king of the Jews. This is a redefinition of kingship that is important for Matthew's understanding of who Jesus is.

Many other of the descriptions of Jesus as son of David occur in the context of healing miracles. For instance, a pair of blind men cry out 'have mercy on us, Son of David' (Matt 9.27), elsewhere upon seeing a demon-possessed blind and dumb person healed, the observing crowd in amazement ask 'is not this the son of David?' (Matt 12.23), or a distraught Canaanite mother seeking the healing of her daughter beseeches Jesus saying, 'have mercy on me, Lord, son of David' (Matt 15.22), and later a further pair of blind men twice cry out 'have mercy on us, Son of David' (Matt 20.30-31). Additionally, in the temple it is not the religious figures but the children who greet Jesus with the cry 'Hosanna to the son of David' (Matt 21.15). The significance of these affirmations of Jesus as son of David in the context of miracle stories has puzzled exegetes, primarily because of the lack of Jewish expectations in Second Temple literature that the coming Davidic messiah would be a miracle worker. However, perhaps in the Gospel of Matthew the emphasis is on the marginal status for those who recognise Jesus as the Davidic messiah-king. What those in possession of their full senses, or who claim religious privilege fail to recognise is a fact perceived by the humble, the broken, the poor, the ostracised and the marginalised. The blind see more than the sighted, Gentiles perceive the Davidic king, and innocent children grasp the identity of Jesus while Jewish religious leaders repudiate their insights. Thus the Gospel of Matthew privileges the downtrodden and the socially alienated by portraying them as the ones who truly see Jesus for what he is – David's son, the true king.

Yet perhaps more than any other passage in the Gospel, it is the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday that presents Jesus most clearly as the Davidic king. Yet, even here there is a subversive and radical definition of what kingship means. At this point, Matthew subtly but

intentionally rewrites his Markan source material. In the Gospel of Mark, the crowd cries out, 'Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; blessed be *the kingdom of our father David*; Hosanna in the highest' (Mk 11.10-11). By contrast, Matthew reorders the first two affirmations, and rewords Mark's second makarism – 'blessed be *the kingdom of our father David*.' Hence Matthew has the crowd declare, 'Hosanna to the son of David; Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest' (Matt 21.9). Therefore, while Mark's crowd eagerly greet the restoration of the kingdom of David, Matthew's crowd recognise and welcome David's very son. Mark's crowd declare their expectation that the Davidic kingdom will be restored, but Matthew's crowd focalises that expectation on the person of Jesus, who is recognised to be the very son of David, a new king.

However, Matthew does even more to develop the Davidic links in his description of the triumphal entry. In this passage he redefines kingly expectations. As an addition to the Markan account, Matthew cites the prophecy of Zechariah 9.9. By doing so Matthew defies militaristic expectation for a dominant warrior-king, arriving mounted on a war horse. Yet the choice of scriptural text does more than affirm that Jesus' actions are the fulfilment of prophecy. Instead, Matthew takes a text that was understood by contemporaries as being a prediction of a messianic king and thus presents the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem as the arrival of the new Davidic king in the very city that was David's capital. Because of the later chapter divisions imposed on the biblical text, it is easy to forget what comes immediately prior to the triumphal entry. Following on from the request from the mother of the sons of Zebedee for her sons to sit on his right and left in his kingdom, Jesus criticises the way in which gentiles exercise lordship and authority (Matt 20.25). In its stead, Jesus tells his disciples that greatness will be reckoned to the servant, and that the Son of Man would exemplify such service by offering up his life. The disciples and Jesus then set out towards Jerusalem. The only story narrated during that journey is the encounter with the two blind men who twice address Jesus as 'son of David' (Matt 20.30-31). This arrangement of material seems far from random. First, a correction of the disciples' understanding of authority in the kingdom, then a double affirmation of Jesus as son of David, followed by Jesus arriving in David's capital city in fulfilment of a royal messianic prophecy while being heralded as son of David. Could Matthew be any clearer? The son of David has arrived in Jerusalem as the new king. Yet this is a gentle, donkey-riding king, who comes to the city with a new mode of kingship.

According to some commentators there is an even stronger Davidic resonance here. I am not sure if I am fully persuaded yet, but if those commentators are correct then the proposed allusion would be particularly suggestive and rich. It is suggested that the coming of the gentle king mounted on a donkey to Jerusalem is based on the story of David's return to the city after the rebellion of Absalom (2 Samuel 19-20). If this were the case then we might have an allusion to king David who weeps on the Mount of Olives as he leaves Jerusalem (2 Sam 15.30) and who comes back to Jerusalem in a fairly conciliatory mood. However, the story is not clear that David was mounted upon a donkey, although David does come in a peaceful manner without exacting revenge (well not too much revenge) on those who sided with Absalom. In the end, the Absalom story and the return of David might not be in the mind of the evangelist. Yet, notwithstanding this, the royal messianic associations of the Zechariah passage are both transparent and widely used in Second Temple Jewish literature. This is sufficient to see that Matthew presents Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as the arrival of the long expected Davidic king. Nonetheless, Matthew defies many of those expectations by denoting a new type of kingship that is exemplified by gentleness and servanthood.

### 3. Followers of the Davidic Messiah – The Patterning of Discipleship

Matthew instructs the followers of Jesus to emulate their master, both by following his example and living out the ethics he taught. One of the lasting gifts of the Gospel of Matthew to subsequent generations of Christian disciples and communities is the most comprehensive statement of the ethics of Jesus. This of course occurs in its most concentrated form in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). It is worth noting that virtually none of this material is paralleled in the Gospel of Mark. However, Matthew does share some of the material with parallel traditions found also in Luke's Gospel. This shared material is typically seen by scholars as deriving from a source of tradition that pre-dates both Matthew and Luke, which is usually given the siglum Q, from the German word *Quelle* – meaning source. The reason for mentioning this is to emphasise that much of the Sermon is pre-Matthean material, and a good case can be made for tracing some of these traditions back to Jesus of Nazareth himself. Even the Jesus Seminar, which set a very high bar for judging gospel traditions as originating with the historical Jesus, ascribed several sayings in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount as having dominical origin. In particular, members of the seminar saw several of Jesus' statements on non-violence, love of enemies, and even the intimate address of God as father in the Lord's prayer as all originating with and being characteristic of the distinctive teaching of Jesus. While in this context we will not weigh the arguments for which of the various elements of the Sermon on the Mount may or may not originate with Jesus, it is sufficient to note that nearly all scholars feel that some of the elements in this lengthy Matthean discourse capture the authentic and radical nature of the ethical teachings of Jesus.

The pithy set of nine beatitudes set forth a charter of values for Jesus' first disciples. Those who mourn, the hungry and thirsty, the merciful, in fact those on the margins and those who are powerless are given a privileged position in the eschatological age. This set of blessings moves from the third person 'blessed are those ...' in first eight beatitudes to the more intense second person 'blessed are you ...' in the final beatitude (Matt 5.11). This shift to the second person form of address is transitional, since Matthew moves from a generalised description of the style of life that is worthy of the kingdom to a more specific address to the disciples concerning the distinctive behaviours that are required of the followers of Jesus. This direct address to disciples that commences with the final beatitude continues to Matt 5.16 with a staccato series of 'you' statements. 'Blessed are you when they cast insults at you and persecute you, ... your reward in heaven is great, ... you are the salt of the earth, ... you are the light of the world, ...let your light shine before people.' The gentleness that is the hallmark of the characterisation of Matthew's Davidic messiah is reflected in the values that the followers of Jesus are themselves to present to those whom they encounter. The disciples' gentleness is to reflect Jesus' gentleness, their mercy is based on the mercy that the son of David is called upon to show to the blind, and their experience of persecution is to be expected since they follow their kingly messiah in the way of the cross.

In the remainder of chapter 5, Matthew speaks about the relationship his followers are to have in regard to the Jewish law. Jesus is presented, in Matthean terms, as seeing his actions as fulfilment of the law and the prophets, not as abrogation (Matt 5.17). However, the very fact that the Matthean Jesus has to make such a statement, suggests that others may have viewed Jesus' pattern of acting in relation to the law as at the very least being non-standard. While calling for the preservation of even the least commandment, the way that such stipulations is to be maintained is not through rigid interpretation but through what is described as surpassing righteousness. Here it is not inaccurate to describe the ethics of Jesus

moving away from a system of prescriptions to a more reflective system of righteousness that is based on an interior knowledge of behaviour that aligns with the goodness of God.

In the section that follows, known as the antitheses, Jesus presents six traditions spoken to 'the ancients', in regard to each of which the Matthean Jesus then offers comment. These traditions all derive from stipulations found in the Torah. In the first of these six statements, Jesus cites the command 'you shall not murder' (Matt 5.21, cf. Exod 20.13). He then adds that in addition to murder, any act of abusive speech directed to one's brother carries the same weight of judgment. Similarly in regard to adultery, Jesus cites the command 'you shall not commit adultery' (Matt 5.27, cf. Exod 20.14). Again, Jesus extends the understanding of adultery to include lustful thoughts. In these two cases the Matthean Jesus does not simply take the meaning of scripture in a constrained manner. Instead the original meaning is intensified, and extended to form a more radical set of ethics. The third antithesis is different. Jesus cites the concessive permission that allowed a certificate of divorce to be issued to a wife (Deut 24.1-2). He revokes the scope of that concession by limiting it to the case of some sexual misdemeanour. In the next two antitheses dealing with the use of oaths and the practice of retributive justice, Jesus cites the relevant passages dealing with these matters (Lev 19.12; Num 30.2 and Exod 21.24//Lev 24.19-20//Deut 19.21 respectively). He then rejects both of these practices regulated by scripture. In relation to oaths, Jesus boldly states, 'but I say to you, make no oath at all' (Matt 5.34). Similarly, in regard to retributive justice which the Torah states must be applied without showing mercy, Jesus offers the principle of turning the other cheek, rather than escalating vengeance. Therefore, in Matthew's Gospel there is a complicated understanding of the role and authority of scripture. It both finds its fulfilment in the person of Jesus, but Jesus is presented as radically reinterpreting it and thus is depicted as a greater source of authority even than scripture itself. This approach to ethics is perhaps complex for the followers of Jesus, but it is also more empowering and flexible since they are called to have a surpassing righteousness within themselves and a merciful standard of forgiveness towards others.

In chapter 6 of the Gospel of Matthew, several instructions are given to the followers of Jesus concerning their spiritual practices and way they are to live their religious lives. The Matthean Jesus addresses the topics of prayer, fasting, hoarding of possessions, single-minded devotion to God, and renouncing a life characterised by anxiety. Focusing on the first of those topics, prayer, it is possible to see the pattern that Jesus establishes for his disciples. However, the very familiarity of the words can perhaps obscure the radical intimacy that is encapsulated in the prayer. It is a prayer that has a clear eschatological outlook with its petition for the kingdom to come, and it demonstrates a radical subservience to the will of God. In this passage Matthew establishes the pattern for the prayer of his followers. However, what is often missed, because we tend to read the gospel texts in such small chunks, is that the Matthean Jesus not only teaches his disciples how to pray, he also shows them what it means to pray such a prayer. If we put the Lord's Prayer of Matt 6.9-13 in parallel with another of Jesus' prayers, some very startling insights emerge. The next time Jesus offers a lengthy prayer in the gospel is during his anguish in Gethsemane (Matt 26.36-46). The source for this passage occurs in Mk 14.32-42. However, there are a couple of key differences that are not simply interesting, but are actually highly illuminating. In Mark, Jesus commences with the words 'Abba, Father'. By contrast, in Matthew the wording is changed to 'My Father', thus bringing the form of address into closer parallel with the first person 'Our Father' of the Lord's prayer. Yet the similarities do not end, nor are strongest in that regard. Mark simply tells readers that Jesus prayed the same thing a second and third time. Matthew provides the

content of the second prayer. After again addressing God as 'My Father' and acknowledging that it may not be possible for the cup of suffering to be removed, Jesus prays 'thy will be done' (Matt 26.42). These words are the words of the Lord's prayer itself, and they are not found in the Gospel of Mark. In the Lord's prayer in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches his disciples what to pray. With his prayer in Gethsemane he shows his disciples what it actually means to pray for God's will. Offering up the petition 'thy will be done' is a demonstration of a willingness to put oneself in harm's way as Jesus did when he embraced God's will for him.

While the Sermon on the Mount is primarily a discourse on discipleship, Matthew does not limit his treatment of that topic to that passage alone. The term μαθητής 'disciple' occurs seventy-six times in the Gospel of Matthew. In addition, Matthew refers to the Twelve (often in conjunction with the word 'disciples') on eight occasions, he calls them apostles only once (Matt 10.2), and several individuals are explicitly named throughout the Gospel (most notably the twelve names are listed in Matt 10.2-4). In this foundational passage the evangelist states that Jesus appointed the twelve disciples for the following reasons.

And having summoned His twelve disciples, He gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. (Matt 10.1)

In effect they are called to carry out the same activities that Jesus was performing during his ministry, which functioned as signs of the inbreaking kingdom. In fact, Jesus directly instructs the disciples to use the words 'the kingdom of heaven is at hand' in their preaching (Matt 10.7). This is the same message that Jesus proclaimed after his forty days in the wilderness (Matt 4.17). It is interesting that Matthew's description of the role of the disciples, while largely dependent on the parallel statement in Mark's Gospel (Mk 3.13-15), omits Mark's first reason: 'he appointed twelve that they might be with him.' This omission might be motivated by the desire not to present Jesus as dependent on other figures for companionship. In this sense, Matthew may be presenting a more self-contained, perhaps even a more divine representation of Jesus.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' initial calling of followers is directed to the fishermen Simon called Peter and Andrew his brother, and the siblings James and John (Matt 4.18-22). At this stage the term 'disciples' is not used to describe them. Instead they are simply called to follow, and to be 'fishers of men'. However, at the opening of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sits down to teach and his disciples come to him at that point. The term 'disciples' is unexplained, as is their role. Nonetheless it is possible to see that these people are still following Jesus and receive his teaching.

It appears that the term 'disciple' is not just reserved for the Twelve in Matthew's Gospel. A figure described as 'another of the disciples' comes to Jesus and requests time to go and bury his father (Matt 8.21). Jesus responds with the apparently pastorally harsh words 'follow me; and allow the dead to bury their own dead' (Matt 8.22). While there have been various attempts to soften the force of this saying, here Jesus prioritises discipleship over other commitments, and in particular this entails constancy in following Jesus. In one of the central statements concerning discipleship, Jesus utilises the harvest imagery and tells his disciples to beseech the Lord to send workers into the harvest (Matt 9.37-38). The implication is that the disciples are to engage in this work. Then after calling the twelve disciples (Matt 10.1), Jesus places an initial limit on the scope of their preaching. They are to 'go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matt 10.6). That limitation is explicitly countermanded by the risen Jesus at the end of the gospel when he instructs the then eleven disciples to 'go

therefore and make disciples of all nations' (Matt 28.19). Here the scope of the mission is universal, and the term 'disciple' can be applied to anybody willing to become a follower of Jesus.

In Jesus' teaching a disciple remains in a subservient role: 'a disciple is not above his teacher' (Matt 10.24). Discipleship is also presented as a life-negating commitment, since following Jesus requires taking up the cross and following the path of crucifixion (Matt 16.24). Thus, at first glance, there appears little to recommend the way of discipleship. It prevents one from carrying out family duties of burial, it places the disciple in a servile relationship to the teacher, and emulation of the master leads to crucifixion. However, in the Gospel of Matthew there is the promise of eschatological reversal and reward. When the disciples express their amazement at another of Jesus harsh saying about the difficulty of the rich entering the kingdom, Peter speaking on behalf of the disciples states 'we have left everything and followed you, what then will there be for us?' (Matt 19.27). Jesus points to the eschatological future which will bring glory for him and reward and status for the Twelve. He promises Peter and the disciples that they 'shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel' (Matt 19.28).

Disciples form a key group in the Gospel of Matthew. They are called to follow Jesus. That primarily means receiving his teaching and emulating his mission of preaching, exorcism and healing, which are activities that point to the coming kingdom. Discipleship is presented as a difficult path, that can require cross-bearing as a way of following Jesus. Yet despite appearances, in Matthew's Gospel, the disciples are promised a future reward and status that transcends earthly loss. Yet more than this, by embracing the ethics of Jesus, by praying the prayer he gave, by emulating his actions of healing, gentleness and mercy, the disciples are transformed into the likeness of their master.

#### *4. Concluding Thoughts and Observations*

Many stories are said to go viral these days. One such story that received much attention recently, not just in Christian circles, related to the appointment of a new pastor to a mega-church in the USA. I might just say that the appointment of a pastor is not usually a viral story. However, you might be wondering what connection there might be between mega-churches and congregations in the Scottish Episcopal Church, which no matter what their many virtues might be, typically the adjective 'mega' does not characterise them. The connection is that like the Scottish Episcopal Church the new pastor of that mega-church had read the most important Christian text. The story on the internet went something like this.

There was a large church in the USA which was recently appointing a new pastor. On the same day that the new pastor was to be introduced to the congregation a homeless man arrived. For thirty minutes before the service he was begging for change to buy food. At this mega-church with a congregation of around 7000 only three people spoke to this man, and nobody gave him any money for food. Despite this he decided to attend the service and sat down in the front row. No doubt since such churches have televised services (we are so behind the times in the SEC), this homeless man was told by ushers to sit at the back where he could not be seen. As the service progressed the time arrived to introduce the new pastor. One of the elders invited the new pastor to come forward and to address the congregation. Amid the clapping, the slowly walking figure of the homeless man made his way down the aisle. The clapping faded away as he progressed to the front. The elder, who was the only other person who knew that the new pastor had come in disguise handed him the microphone. His first words were from Matthew's Gospel: "Come to me you who are blessed

of my Father ... For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me. ...Then the righteous will answer him, Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you...? Then the king will reply, Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

After reciting this passage, the pastor then told the congregation what he had experienced that morning. Heads were bowed, there was the absolute silence of shame. He then said, Today I see a gathering of people, not the church of Jesus Christ. The world has enough people, but not enough disciples. When will you decide to become disciples? He then dismissed the congregation.

Becoming a disciple, being a follower of the gentle Davidic messiah-king, is not presented by Matthew as being a life of ease. It is not a life of prosperity, prominence and social standing. As it was for Jesus, so it is for his disciples: it is the way of the cross. Matthew promises followers of Jesus that they will be persecuted and rejected, that they will be delivered up to torment, and that they will follow in the way of the cross. For those in the early church, and for many of those in the contemporary church, ‘the cross’ is not a mere metaphor. Instead, it is an accurate description of the reality that the life of discipleship. Thus, the choice to follow the pattern of Jesus can be a death sentence. Yet for such disciples the Gospel of Matthew often continues to be the most important and influential text they have ever read. That is because it show that the meek kingly messiah has trodden that same path before them. In that story they find the true portrait of the one who is their pattern and king.

I wonder if all of you picked up the citation in my title in the phrase ‘their pattern and their king.’ I am sure you all did. It is from the second verse of a well-known hymn that speaks of:

The Lord who left the heavens,  
Our life and peace to bring  
To dwell in lowliness with men  
Their pattern and their king

That verse speaks of the humility of kingly messiah, hailed at his birth by the magi as king even while born in lowly circumstances. It looks forward to the one hailed as Son of David on his entry into Jerusalem, yet only a few days later mocked by soldiers as a mere supposed-king. Yet Matthew shows throughout his gospel that only the outcasts, only the foreigners and only the blind can see Jesus as the true son of David and the kingly Messiah. However, amid that recognition, comes the realisation that following Jesus means embracing the cross, which is the way of rejection in this life. Yet the Matthean Jesus promises he will be with his disciples even unto the end of the age.

The hymn from which the phrase ‘their pattern and their king’ is drawn is the hymn ‘Bless’d are the pure in heart’. It is a phrase that occurs in only one of the gospels – the Gospel of Matthew, as one of its beatitudes. For those with hearts purified by following Jesus, who recognise him as the Son of David, that sixth beatitude promises that ‘they shall see God.’ Instead of only seeing the immediate, they are promised that they may gaze on the ultimate. According to the Gospel of Matthew, making Jesus one’s pattern and seeing him as the king means embracing the way of the cross. According to Matthew such a pathway is the only way in which one may be ultimately blessed of the father and finally see God. With that deep insight into the life of discipleship and the rich understanding of Jesus as the gentle and humble Davidic king, is there really any doubt that the Gospel of Matthew still remains and

will always continue to be the most important and influential text for those who are willing take up the cross by allowing the true Son of David to be for ever their pattern and their king.