

ST MATTHEW, APOSTLE AND EVANGELIST

Proverbs 3. 13-18

2 Corinthians 4. 1-6

Matthew 9. 9-13

I speak to you † in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today we commemorate the Feast of St Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist; and we have before us the story of our Lord calling a tax collector named Matthew, as related in St Matthew's gospel. In St Luke's gospel, the calling of Matthew is also recounted; but in that story, the man is called 'Levi, the son of Alphaeus'. Perhaps Matthew had two names; in any case, it is interesting to note that the name Matthew is the Greek rendering of a Hebrew name meaning 'gift of God'.

Now in order to fully grasp the significance of Matthew's story, a word must first be said about the collection of taxes in the Roman Empire. When Rome took over Palestine, in order to ensure that taxes were collected, franchises were offered to local individuals by the Roman government. These franchises gave the individuals the right to operate the taxation system in a certain district or town. But the people who operated these franchises were known for their abuse and corruption: they took bribes from the rich and extorted supplementary taxes from the middle class and the poor. They were therefore hated, not only for their dishonest practices, but also because they had entered into the service of the Roman oppressors.

To make matters worse, there were two types of tax collectors. There were those who were called general tax collectors,¹ who collected fixed-rate taxes on land, income taxes and poll (or registration) taxes. And then there was a second type of tax collector,² who was given the freedom to collect other variable taxes. Not only

¹ Known in Hebrew as 'gabbai'.

² Known in Hebrew as 'mokhesm'.

could the amounts of these taxes vary; the reasons for the taxation could change as well. This second category of tax collector was free to collect taxes on imports, exports, goods sold and bought, buildings, bridges, animals, and almost anything one could put one's eyes upon. If the first group of tax collectors was despised by the Jews, the second category was even more despised. Poor Matthew belonged to this second category of tax collectors.

When our Lord calls Matthew and invites him to follow him, Matthew's response is immediate and positive. He decides to leave his tax booth near the north port of the Sea of Galilee and to abandon his much-despised profession and lifestyle. In a matter of seconds, he loses his career and gains a destiny; he loses his material possessions and gains a spiritual fortune; he loses his security and begins an undreamed adventure. This radical decision is so overwhelming and life-changing that Matthew decides to throw a banquet³ in our Lord's honour; and he invites other 'sinners' to attend. In the eyes of the Jews, 'sinners' included people who were notorious for their immoral activities, such as thieves, prostitutes and brawlers; and they also included people who, by the exercise of their professions, could not be expected to live a full Jewish religious life.

When the Pharisees see this banquet occurring, they are horrified. For them, any meal was an important occasion and a sign of fellowship. *Their* banquets were opportunities to share one another's company and food under religiously controlled circumstances. To see our Lord openly sharing a meal with tax collectors and sinners was outrageous, scandalous behaviour in their eyes.

In response to their dismay and their question to his disciples, Jesus says, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.' And quoting the

³ The coming of the kingdom of God was sometimes portrayed as a great feast (cf. Mt 8. 11). Thus the dinner party over which Jesus presides has the overtones of the eschatological fellowship of the messianic banquet.

prophet Hosea, he continues, ‘Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”⁴ For I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners.’

These statements of our Lord present us with two challenges.

The first challenge is to remember (as if we needed reminding!) that like Matthew, we too – you and I – are sick outcasts and sinners loved by God. The moment we forget this, we become like the Pharisees. If we lose touch with that truth, we run the risk of becoming arrogant and proud. Jesus’ words remind us that our discipleship is born out of an utter dependency on the grace of God. We are continually called to make an honest appraisal of ourselves and realise afresh that we are unworthy sinners who are loved and treasured by God nonetheless.

We have all heard people say, ‘Well, Christians certainly aren’t perfect.’ That we already know. In fact, it is because we know this that we are Christians. Or we might have heard others say, ‘Well, *churches* certainly aren’t filled with perfect people’. We know that too; that’s why we are here. It’s precisely our imperfection that has motivated us to come this morning. Or we might hear someone else say, ‘Well, I could never attend church, because it’s full of hypocrites.’ My response to that comment has always been, ‘O go on, come to church, we can always use another one!’ Everyone in the world has been hypocritical. We know our faults and are willing to admit it. You see, most people have the idea that religion is for good people; but the truth is, it’s for bad people who know just how bad they are. That’s why we have come to God. Our Lord came to earth for bad people. That is the message of Christianity. It is the essence of the gospel and the reason for the Incarnation.

⁴ Cf. Hos 6.6. See also Mt 12. 7.

The second challenge presented to us by our Lord's words is equally humbling. In actual fact (and the timing of this gospel passage is perfect, as the school year has just begun), Jesus has given us (and the Pharisees) some homework to do. We are to consider again what God means when he says, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For our Lord, mercy is more important than the legal purity that was so prized by the Pharisees. Mercy has greater value for God than all sacrifices do.⁵ Our God is profoundly merciful, and is moved by the failures of his people; by the failures of people like you and me.

In eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus declares to them and to the world that they too, belong to the people of God, and to the covenant community that God is always creating and renewing. I am reminded of a phrase penned by Huston Smith: 'God is the centre; and there is no circumference'. Our Lord calls anyone and everyone who has lost their connection to the Source of Life and communion with others, to belong to his Church. As we take these words to heart, our Lord may indeed lead us to reach out to some 'unlikely' people here on the island; to show them compassion, love and mercy; and to invite them to consider responding to the love of the God whom we serve.

On this day when we mark the discipleship of St Matthew, we are called to rise to the challenge of radical discipleship: acknowledging our weaknesses and failures, but rejoicing in the grace and mercy that we have received from our God; and committing ourselves to a lifestyle of mission and outreach that shares the love of Christ.

Amen.

⁵ Cf. Is 1. 10-17.