

St Matthew

A sermon preached by the Dean of Guernsey, the Very Revd Tim Barker at St Stephen's church Guernsey on Sunday 22 September 2019

One of my many positive experiences on moving to Guernsey just under four years ago was the discovery of bureaucracy on a human scale. If I need help, I can call a number and speak to a human being who will usually be able to sort the problem there and then. It's refreshing. One example of a very Guernsey moment was when I had to call the Income Tax Office. When I was put through to the appropriate section, the person on the other end said. 'It's OK. I don't need to take you through security. I heard you on the radio this morning and I recognise your voice.' This was a revelation after years of terror about contacting Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs or receiving a letter in the ominous brown envelope.

Before I left the UK, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs was trying a charm offensive to persuade people to complete their tax returns. As the deadline for the self-assessment tax returns drew near, the advertisements appeared in the papers and on television, on advertising hoardings and computer pop-ups. The slogan was simple: 'Tax doesn't have to be taxing.' I remain unconvinced!

But on the feast day of St Matthew, the converted tax collector, what about the Christian faith? How taxing, how demanding, do we expect it to be? How do we interpret the call to discipleship in our own lives? How do we interpret that call to others both in our personal example and in our common life as a Christian community?

The dilemma is a real one for the Church at the present time. We know we are called to be a Church in mission. We are called to do as Jesus does in the gospel story: to go and be with those who are outside the grace of God. Matthew describes such people as tax collectors and sinners; he knows only too well that he was once in this category, and no doubt remembered with a shudder the difficulty of being an outsider, hated as an agent of the occupying Roman power who could earn his income only by extorting money from the people, paying on the agreed amount to the Roman authorities and keeping his cut. No wonder Matthew was so relieved that Jesus recognised in him a basically honest man struggling to get out of the way of life in which he had been trapped.

Jesus is quite clear, when he is criticised (by implication) for calling Matthew to be a disciple and in being willing to meet those whom Matthew describes as 'tax collectors and sinners', that he 'did not come to call the righteous but sinners'. We are called to have a special concern for those

who are outside the grace of God, those for whom the experience of church worship and community as we know it is alien and off-putting.

Over the last few years, the Church of England has begun to invest time and energy in creating new Christian communities alongside our parish churches with all their rich tradition and heritage. These new communities share in the life of the Church of England but seek to express that life in different forms and shapes and patterns. They are 'church' designed for the benefit of those who are not members, where there is no expectation that new Christians will merely fit in to tried and tested ways of doing things.

There are already hundreds of these 'fresh expressions of church' in the Church of England. They take many different forms. Some are still fragile. Some look very different from church as we know it. Some are simply taking familiar forms and making them available on different days of the week in different venues. Here in Guernsey, there are examples in the Sunday afternoon service at St Pierre du Bois, designed to reach families, and in the Ignite project planned at St John's church, which aims to make Church accessible to people who might not feel comfortable in our more usual services.

All of them have as their motivation the pattern of Jesus in the story of Matthew's call: going to where people are, on their terms, ministering to their needs, creating new community, unambiguous about the message of faith. And there are signs that some of this work is proving effective, in terms of numerical growth, alongside 'traditional church' done well, such as in our cathedrals and parish churches.

In short, growth seems to happen when we are open to exploring what being a Christian disciple might mean - whilst recognising that, in the contemporary cliché, 'one size very definitely does not fit all'. Discipleship is our response to being created by God, called by Jesus and sustained by the Holy Spirit. Discipleship is following Jesus, together.

St Luke presents us with a gentle and inclusive narrative that draws us in to share Jesus' concern for the poor and needy, to see our need for the healing and wholeness which only Jesus can offer us.

In contrast, Matthew does not pull his punches on discipleship. From the very beginning in the birth narratives we have a story which does not shy away from cost and suffering: the sacrifice of Joseph; the slaying of the children as Herod reacts to the threat of another king; the journey of the Magi; the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt. The message of John the Baptist is definitely uncompromising. Jesus' own first act, as recorded by Matthew, is to call disciples: Peter and Andrew, James and John. What do these disciples do? Immediately they leave everything behind and follow.

Matthew's gospel is the most church-focussed. Matthew gives us the vision for this community characterised by the humility of a child; the treasuring of the lost, the maturity to handle conflict and make its own decisions, the ability to forgive seventy times seven times because we have been forgiven.

Matthew had clearly faced identical questions to the ones we face today. It is Matthew who tells us that the church will always be a mixed community: wheat and tares grow in the same field. He has clearly observed varieties of Christian commitment. It is Matthew who reminds us over and over again what true discipleship is: it is not about pious outward observance but inner transformation which others can discern because of what we do and how we live our lives.

Matthew gives us the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with the Beatitudes in which we see Jesus' vision for Christian character: humility, sorrow for the anguish of the world, gentleness, passion for justice, full of mercy, seeking peace, willing to suffer for the gospel. Matthew tells us that demands of Jesus go deeper than mere observance of the demands of the law. Jesus' discipleship is not box ticking, but complete transformation of who we are and how we live our lives. It is taxing – but only here, in Christ, do we find life in its fullness.

Meeting Jesus was enough for Matthew to realise that his life was without direction. Meeting Jesus was sufficient for Matthew to recognise that he was sick in the heart of his being, and needed strong medicine. When Jesus called, Matthew got up and followed. A new life beckoned. Jesus' call was demanding, but it was also liberating.