

SERMON – MATTHEW – Matt 9.9-13, 2 Cor 4.1-6 – 19 September 2021

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



The Feast of St Matthew – our patron saint. My theory remains that Walter Evans was facing a huge tax bill, so dedicated this church to Matthew, the patron saint of tax collectors, in the hope of some divine assistance. In the King James Bible, Matthew is described as a “publican” – which is a somewhat different image these days.

This is the first time that Matthew is mentioned in the gospel that bears his name, but the story of his calling is also in Mark and in Luke – although in both those gospels he is named “Levi” (it’s always assumed it is the same man).



We have the image of him sitting “at the seat of customs” (that sounds better than “at the tax booth”, though I should imagine that, yes, Matthew had a booth and was gathering the taxes off the fishermen as they landed their catch. These days he’d probably have a fluorescent jacket as well. Not popular – he worked for Rome, he was a representative of the Empire that had conquered the world.

Having had a dad who was a Roman nut, and having lived north of Hadrian’s Wall for seven years, I love the Roman Empire, but I can quite understand that if I was someone who had lived under their Rule, I would not have been so enthusiastic. I would not have lasted a week in the Roman army, and if I was a native I would probably have been too awkward to knuckle down and behave.



For a Jew, and later (of course) for a Christian, faith was incompatible with being a good member of the Empire. The Emperor was supreme, and any religion which put a god above the Empire was suspect. I have no doubt that the Roman authorities made it difficult for Matthew and the other Jews they employed. There was the racial divide – and two thousand years later – that divide is as great as ever, and the religious divide – even in their own country, Jews would be despised and hated. I have experienced a bit of hatred over the years, but I have never been in a place or a situation where it is an everyday occurrence. There are many in our city who cannot say that.

Other Jews would make it difficult for Matthew too. No good Jew should work for the Romans, no good Jew should collect taxes for the occupying power, no good Jew should do anything for an Emperor who put himself in the place of God. Actually, none of those things should be done by any Jew – good or otherwise. We may not like the Inland Revenue, we may moan about taxes, but it is what makes our Society works – and we still pretend we live in a Christian Society. I'm not sure we can imagine ourselves as Matthew, facing that level of personal hostility, day in and day out.



But Matthew had friends, other tax collectors, other people on the outside of society – and how sad that even the gospel writer describes them as “sinners”. Is that how they saw themselves, or was that how other people saw them? Was that how Matthew saw them? He was at home with them, and I wonder if he worried there would be now a clash between him and them, between Jesus and them. We don't know how much experience Matthew had had with Jesus, how much time they had spent together, before the calling – I hope he was secure in his faith and friendship, so secure that he wanted to invite others to a meal to meet him properly.



I must admit, I find a challenge here. I have a faith of 59 years, my mum and dad took me church almost from week one, I know these stories, I have a relationship with Christ. At aged sixteen I decided this was a relationship I wanted to publicly affirm, and then I was baptised. I have lived in that relationship, a relationship I share with my wife, shared with my kids, and shared with many, many others. In the very darkest hours of my life, that relationship (my relationship with Christ and my relationship with his people) has kept me from going under. When we visited the boys' graves in Milbourne yesterday, there is a sense that they are with Christ – in a better place than this, though I'm not sure how I picture it. There is also the knowledge that they rest in a holy place, a place where Christ is worshipped, and knowledge that that graveyard (and indeed the flowers on their graves) are cared for by my friends. All those emotions are intertwined together.

Sometimes though, I do find myself wondering if I make enough of my relationship with Jesus. Am I good at talking about him when I talk to you? Am I good at focussing our church on him? Will we even mention his name once we've done the prayers at the start of tomorrow's PCC meeting? How much do I talk about him when I meet a baptism family or a wedding couple or do a funeral visit?



Trouble is, when I start to ask these questions, I can easily get depressed. Indeed I was getting a bit depressed trying to write this sermon. Then I had an email from a wedding couple I married back in Ponteland a few years ago. They had both been through a huge amount before they found each other and fell in love, and we worked through a lot as I prepared them for marriage. They got in touch now as a response to a message from me about Julie's 60th birthday, which is coming up. They have recently adopted a couple of children and were telling me all about them. And they have another family wedding coming up in St Mary's church – so I must have done something right!

“Since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry of the Spirit, we do not lose heart” wrote St Paul – OK, OK, stop moaning Barham. We’re not doing too badly.



We’ve been through a lot since we celebrated a Bicentenary two years ago. We had a good few months and a smashing week of celebration – but that does seem a long time ago. We’ve lost some of the friends with whom we celebrated, the paintwork we re-did on the south door is now a bit chipped, and the village seems to have moved further away from us. I am worried about where we are now, now our numbers are lower, now Covid has broken up some of our worshipping habits, now our financial position is a lot worse than it was – and they are challenges that we must face. They are challenges, they are not going to go away, and we have got to face them. The village has changed, the world has changed, and the church has changed – though I am glad that the church changes slowly, with more of a long-view than anything else.

Christ continues to call the sinners – so he calls all of us. In an hour or so we will celebrate his call of Matthew again, but this time on Zoom – and none of us had even heard of Zoom when we had our Bicentenary. Now it means that some of our older congregation members can remain part of the life of this church, even though they can’t attend physically – and we do need your help and support to make that continue to happen. Later today I will share Christ’s love with a family as they come to remember a life well-lived, and then with two families as they come to celebrate the birth of their children. This evening we will celebrate Matthew with music and prayer and friendship – and so we will continue.

The post-communion prayer sums it up so well:

Lord God, the source of truth and love, keep us faithful to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, united in prayer and the breaking of bread, and one in joy and simplicity of heart, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.