**The Calling of Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13)**

In today’s reading we heard a story from the Gospel about a man named Matthew, who was a tax collector.

These days we may hear the occasional joke about tax collectors or the Inland Revenue, but 2,000 years ago tax collectors were not a joking matter. They were disliked, even despised, and feared by most people, who considered them to be socially and morally corrupt, making their living through defrauding others.

In the reading today, which is known as ‘The calling of Matthew’, we hear how Jesus saw Matthew, sitting at the tax booth, and gave him a simple invitation – “follow me”. In response, Matthew gets up and follows Jesus. A simple call and a simple response.

And that was the beginning of a remarkable transformation of Matthew, the hated and feared tax collector - a few verses on we learn that Matthew goes on to become a disciple of Jesus.

We don’t know what motivated Matthew to follow Jesus. Perhaps he had previously heard his preaching or witnessed some of his miracles. Maybe there was something incredibly charismatic about Jesus, or perhaps Matthew wanted to change his life.

For whatever reason, Matthew felt compelled to get up and follow Jesus. Jesus called and Matthew followed.

I’d like to share a few thoughts about this story of Matthew being called to follow Jesus, and what we can take from it in terms of how we act and live our own lives today, some 2,000 years after the events took place……..there’s three brief points I want to draw out from it.

And the first is to mention the hospitality of Jesus.

1. **The hospitality of Jesus**

In verse 10 we read: “And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples…”

A central point of this story is that Jesus always welcomes sinners and outcasts and offers them hospitality. Jesus is absolutely at home with sinners and outcasts and those on the margins of society.

And that is such an important message for us today ; that Jesus shares hospitality with us, regardless of who people are, irrespective of what a mess they may have made in the past, or how confused and chaotic their present circumstances may seem - Jesus does not judge us or condemn – he wants to be with them, and he wants to be with each of us, sharing himself with us and inviting us to share ourselves with him.

Hospitality is at the heart of God’s relationship with us – and that is why hospitality is so important for us as Christians and for our church, as we seek to reach out and to reflect God into the local community. God, in Christ, has invited those on the margins into his home without judgement and, in the same way, we are to invite people into the home of our church also without judgement.

Our God is a hospitable God – and we are called to be a hospitable church where everyone feels welcomed and no-one feels judged.

And what is at the heart of such a hospitable approach? Well, that’s the second point I wanted to draw out this morning from the Gospel story - Jesus accepted people just as they are.

**2. Jesus accepted people just as they are**

At no point did Jesus ask any of his guests to change: he just accepted them as they are.

As guests at the meal, there was Matthew, the hated and feared tax collector, and, as were are told in verse 10, there were “sinners”.

But Jesus doesn’t ask Matthew or the others to change.

He doesn’t refuse to eat with them until they have repented. He doesn’t say, “You can only follow me if you give up your sinful lifestyle”: there are no conditions attached at all.

Jesus just accepts them exactly as they are and loves them as they are.

We also hear in that Jesus’ disciples are at the dinner, and again, Jesus is perfectly comfortable with that, although it may have led to some tensions or discomfort among the various guests.

Sometimes churches, either consciously or subconsciously, encourage their members to only socialise with other Christians. But Jesus’ approach is the complete opposite. He is quite meet with and dine with tax collectors, sinners and disciples – and he is quite happy for his disciples to mix socially with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus is demonstrating that saints and sinners are welcome at the Lord’s table.

There is a profound lesson for us as individuals and as a church, I think, about the type of hospitality we show to others. It is easy for us to prejudge others or indeed ourselves.

But Jesus doesn’t do that – Jesus sees people, not for what they are, but for what they can become.

It is easy for a church to welcome people in on the condition that they ‘become one of us’ or change their way of behaving, to fit in with our expectations. “You can come to the table – as long as you and your family change and play by our rules”. But that’s not Jesus’ way. He is showing us that everyone is welcomed, everybody is loved, nobody is asked to change in order to fit in and receive a place at the Lord’s table. His table is open to everyone, without judgement, without preconditions.

The hospitality of Jesus is for everyone, no matter what…

Thirdly and finally…

**3. Jesus challenged the views of the Pharisees, the established religious leaders at the time**

The Pharisees practiced the institutional form of religion.

They were looking in on the dinner, presumably from the outside - for it is unlikely the Pharisees would dare go into such a gathering of sinners. They would have been shocked and disturbed by what was taking place, wondering why Jesus would eat with tax collectors and sinners.

It is too easy to criticise the Pharisees as if they were evil or wicked people – I don’t think they were.

They were faithful and pious leaders, devoted to serving God. But there focus was on adhering to the religious practices, rituals and traditions – they were so committed to those that they had somehow forgotten the heart of their faith; they had forgotten the reason they were following God in the first place.

And that’s exactly what Jesus points out to them in verse 13: “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

He is reminding the Pharisees, and us today, that all the traditional practices and rituals are meaningless unless we practice mercy and love and kindness and compassion towards others. That is the heart of our faith – not the observance of religious rituals.

I don’t think Jesus is saying that the rituals and traditions should all be thrown out and no longer followed. He’s saying what’s most important is that we live our lives how Jesus has taught us, demonstrating love, kindness and compassion to others. And in doing so, we can revive and breath new life into those traditions and rituals, and revitalise our churches.

So this is a short story in the Gospel of Matthew, but one that is packed with good teaching for us.

First, we learn that Jesus shows hospitality to everyone – and everyone, without exception, is welcome at the Lord’s table; everyone is welcome to receive the hospitality of God.

Second, we learn that we are all acceptable to Jesus, just as we are. He doesn’t lay down any preconditions – God loves us just as we are.

Thirdly, we learn that we should focus on what’s at the heart of our faith – practicing love and mercy, kindness and compassion towards others, using our hands and skills to serve our family, friends, neighbours and communities.

This is a small passage in Matthew’s Gospel – but it is a radical passage.

I’d like to share with you something I read recently:

***“A review of a book called*Walking the Bible*by Bruce Feiler, had the following intriguing statement: ‘…like many non-religious people I harbour a secret, lingering desire to be persuaded.’ How might anyone like the reviewer be persuaded? What might convince those outside the Church who are often seen as cynical, disinterested and detached? It might be, says Jesus, the example of transformed lives that illuminate his teaching and preaching. The offering of compassionate welcome and care to those who do not consider themselves worthy of it. The reaching out in love and concern to the dispossessed and the victim, the refugee and those seen as unacceptable and unattractive, yet who are loved and treasured by God. Actions not words alone.”***

So, in the midst of all the change and uncertainty of our world today, Jesus gives us a simple command: “Follow me”. If we follow Jesus, live our lives as he has shown us, welcoming and accepting others, and demonstrating love and mercy, kindness and compassion, we will strengthen our churches and reach out to the communities around us to make a real positive difference, being the shining lights that Jesus calls us to be.

In says earlier in Matthew’s Gospel that to be the light of the world, we must shine in the darkness.

In these verses we have heard this morning, Jesus is showing us how we can do exactly that.

Dave Pearce

13 August 2023