

St. Matthew's Day 2015

Matthew 9: 9 – 13

I must try not to get too carried away with the fact that I'm preaching on the Feast Day (or, at least, the eve of the feast) of the Saint whose name I bear. I don't want to be harbouring any pretensions to saintliness: I think most people here know me too well for it to cut any ice at all. Mind you, confusions have arisen, particularly in the last parish where I was vicar and the church was dedicated to St. Matthew. So we had Matthew of St. Matthew's. And as I walked around the parish, little primary school children used to wave across the road and shout "Hello, Saint Matthew."

Well, however well *you* may know me, I can assure that *my* self-knowledge ensured I didn't let it go to my head. There is some benefit to be had, though, from identifying yourself with the characters in Bible stories. In fact placing yourself in the shoes of the different characters in a Bible story and trying to

experience the scenario of the story from different points of view, is a recognised spiritual discipline.

Of course, it's a matter of speculation. We can only surmise what Matthew might have felt like in the story of his calling that is the Gospel reading for this evening. In fact, although it is about his calling, and we're told Matthew rose and followed Jesus, nothing about Matthew is expanded upon. I guess it's fair to assume that Matthew was mesmerised by the charisma and spiritual authority of Jesus. On the face of the narrative as we have it, he simply deserted his post when Jesus passed by and spoke to him: such was the impact of a seemingly chance and casual encounter.

If that's right, it's fair to speculate further that Matthew will have felt extremely humbled then to have this remarkable man under his roof as they sat at table in his house. It's always said, isn't it, that tax-collectors were rogues who fleeced people who were

powerless to resist their abuse of authority. They over-collected, took more than was really due in tax, and pocketed the difference themselves. It may well be that Matthew was feeling rather uncomfortable, having his conscience pricked, finding the sheer love and compassion and goodness that radiated out of Jesus to be infectious; and concluding that the only way to respond was to set about some reformation of his character.

Of course it may be that Matthew was an arrogant bon-viveur who was renowned for keeping a good table and always providing stimulating and controversial conversation for the entertainment of his guests. It may be that at this stage it amused Matthew to patronise Jesus. We simply don't know. But the end result is the same. When people encounter Jesus it brings about transformation of their lives and complete reappraisal of their ethics.

Matthew started out as a rapacious tax collector; the very antithesis of the values Jesus was preaching. He ended up so closely and significantly associated with the Jesus movement that one of the sacred accounts of Jesus' life is identified by his name. Scholars don't think Matthew wrote what we call St. Matthew's Gospel, but the point is that it's the product of the Matthew school of the Jesus tradition.

Jesus is as present in this ritual meal that we are celebrating this evening as he was in that dinner party at Matthew's house the evening after he said to Matthew "Follow me." And the call to transformation and reappraisal of ethics is just as compelling this evening as it was that evening. I wonder what change Jesus is expecting if us, change of heart and change of life style.

There may be insight to be gained into that, not so much by placing ourselves in Matthew's shoes, as the

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

shoes of the Pharisees who were so shocked to see Jesus dining with tax collectors and sinners.

Now I have said it before, and I don't mind saying it again, that I'm convinced we need to be wary of the bad spin against the Pharisees that we find, particularly in Matthew's Gospel. I'm sure some Pharisees were frankly hypocritical, just as some of us – or perhaps to put it better, some aspects of each of us – are hypocritical. But on the whole, the Pharisees were decent, respectable folk sincerely trying to interpret their faith, using the tradition that had been handed down to them.

That tradition had created certain predispositions with which they approached life. That's what tradition does. It shapes you. It sets the point of view from which you look out on life. You haven't consciously chosen that point of view: it is what has been handed to you. And it therefore inevitably contains prejudices: judgments which have been made before by previous

generations but which may no longer bear scrutiny; judgments about what's right and what's wrong; about what's respectable and what's not respectable; and about where virtue is to be found and about where virtue isn't to be found. We constantly need to reassess, exercise our own judgments about what constitutes a good life-style, because it often changes faster than our attitudes can keep up with.

Of course the Pharisees were right to be shocked by Jesus dining at Matthew's. He hadn't been the sort of person it was good to be associating with. But things were changing, because God's spirit was blowing where it willed through Jesus.

If we step into the Pharisees' shoes we may well be challenged, like them, to reassess perfectly reasonable assumptions which have served us well thus far; and to recognise the Spirit of God blowing where it hasn't before, through Jesus.

Amen.