

Mt. 9:9-13; 2 Cor. 4:1-6

St. Matthew, Apostle & Evangelist - Trinity 14, Sunday 21st Sept. 2014
8:00 a.m. & 10:00 am (3rd Sunday + Sunday School)

Today is the Festival of St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist; in surveying what is known about who he was, it's clear that there is some doubt about his identity... that the **apostle** Matthew, who walked with Christ may not actually have been the same person as the **evangelist** Matthew, traditionally the writer of the first of the New Testament Gospels.

We may also discover that, despite the order of presentation in the NT, most scholarly opinion these days considers that Mark's Gospel was more likely to have been written first, and that Matthew, writing around AD 80-90, relied heavily upon Mark in writing his own account. Indeed, Matthew's Gospel is the only one of the synoptic (or similar) gospels, Mt., Mk., & L., to refer to the tax collector as Matthew, the other two call him Levi, but this may have been the equivalent of a surname.

Much like our faith in God, there is much in scripture that cannot be proven; but I suppose we wouldn't have to call it 'having faith' if this weren't so. What we can be sure of is that Matthew's Gospel has a distinctive character all of its own, and that the Matthew we encounter within its pages was a tax-collector, or possibly a customs officer, someone who was shunned by the wider society of his day as an agent of an oppressive regime, a thoroughly despicable sort to be avoided at all costs.

I tried to think about what kind of person would be a modern-day equivalent here in C21st north London, and it occurred to me that traffic wardens are unlikely to be the winners of a community popularity contest. Now I'm sure (?) that the majority of us are hugely appreciative of the vital work these brothers & sisters do, keeping the veins and arteries of commerce and connectivity free of blockage, protecting older people from some of the outrageous parking that can

block pavement access, esp. for those in electric buggies and wheelchairs, but how many of us, I wonder, would actively seek a Traffic Warden out, encourage them into our group, or join with them for a convivial supper.... but this is precisely the behaviour of the man that both we, and Matthew, endeavour to follow.

There's a recurring theme in Matthew - his concern for those who feel estrangement, for any who have been cast out, unfairly separated, or marginalised. This may reflect some anxieties of the Jewish Christian community of his day... soon to be if not already expelled from the synagogue for what was seen as their Christian heresy. The one sentence in our gospel reading this morning which is distinctively from Matthew's pen, appearing in no other gospel, is the part where Jesus, quoting from the Book of Hosea, says: "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'". Why does Matthew's Jesus repeatedly draw attention to the quality of mercy?

I believe it is because of Matthew's concerns for his community and for those that criticised it, that people should not be in the habit of making empty gestures, of buying righteousness through sacrificial offerings rather than giving something costly of themselves... but also that they shouldn't fall into habits of exclusion, inflicting suffering where they had suffered it themselves. I'm thinking now of our responses to single parents, asylum seekers, new age travellers, immigrants, or refugees. The baby Jesus and his parents were refugees themselves for a while. Matthew's Jesus knows very well the darkness of people's hearts and often exhorts us to have mercy: 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy' (5:7).

Matthew the Apostle was able to follow Jesus because he learned that he was forgiven; that the mercy that Jesus showed him enabled him to show mercy to others. Matthew the Evangelist helps us, through his emphasis on Jesus' teachings, to reflect on the complex figure of Our Lord as teacher, healer, Lord and redeemer. With his emphasis on mercy, of forbearance and compassion toward those we feel least inclined to grant this to, he sets out a new way of life that brings renewal and reinvigoration. **Amen.**

Talk for Sunday School on Proverbs 3.13-18

Proverbs 3.13-18 The True Wealth

¹³ Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding,¹⁴ for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold.¹⁵ She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. ¹⁶ Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour.¹⁷ Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. ¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy.

Thank you, Simon, for reading us that little piece from the Book of Proverbs. It's a piece all about 'wisdom', often referred to as a woman in ancient culture – and no doubt there are those who may still consider this highly appropriate (!). If anyone is wise enough to seek out wisdom, they will reap a reward so much richer than silver, gold or jewels, or anything else you could possibly wish for. If you learn to be wise you are more likely to lead a longer life, be wealthier in all sorts of ways, to encounter happiness and peace.

Here's a story from Sierra Leone that tells of someone who was not wise. It's called 'The Foolish Man and the Well':

In a village near Dodo there is a very big well. One night, when the moon was full and shining brightly, a foolish man went for a walk. He arrived at the well and looked down into it. At that particular moment the water at the bottom of the well was like a mirror. So the man saw the moon in the water. 'Oh dear, the moon has fallen down the well,' thought the foolish man. He decided he would have to pull it out. He ran home quickly and fetched a big hook. He untied the water bucket from the rope and replaced it with the hook. Then he slowly let the rope and hook down into the well. The hook hit the water with a splash. The man tried to turn the handle but it would not move. He tried and tried but the rope would not budge. 'The moon is very heavy,' he thought. But it was not the moon. The hook had caught under a very

big stone. Eventually, after an hour had passed, and the man's stamina was almost at an end, the handle suddenly turned and the man, surprised, fell backwards on the ground. He looked up into the sky. There was the moon. 'Good,' said the foolish man. 'I have put the moon back in the sky.'

Q: Ask the children why this man was foolish?

A: Identify that he put a lot of time and effort into trying to save the moon from the well – and then thought that he had done it!

Tell the children that it reminds us of a story in the Bible from Matthew's gospel where Jesus tells of another foolish man. It seems that this man was doing a sensible thing – building a house, no doubt for his wife and family. To build a house requires hard work and commitment. Houses are not built in a day. So why does Jesus say this man was foolish? *Read the story from Matthew 7.24–27.*

Matthew 7.24–27 - Hearers and Doers

²⁴ 'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!'

The foolish man in the story was taking short cuts. Explain that this story is a parable; that is, a story with a special meaning. Jesus is comparing himself to a solid rock. He is telling his followers that if they listen carefully to what he says, if they have faith in God and in the Bible, it will give them good and strong foundations for the whole of their lives. God wants us to know and to learn about how we can build our lives to make them good, wise and strong. **Amen.**

Matthew 9:9-13 - The Calling of Matthew

9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.

10 And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' ¹²But when he heard this, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

Proverbs 3.13-18 - The True Wealth

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2 Corinthians 4:1-6 - Treasure in Clay Jars

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Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. ²We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practise cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. ³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ

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