

June 5 2005

"As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him." (Matthew 9:9)

Matthew is a most suitable example for us to consider as members of a basically self-concerned and affluent society. Not because he was one of the twelve called to be an Apostle; not because he is considered to be the author of the Gospel which bears his name; but because he was prepared to set aside all that he had previously considered worth having to follow Jesus.

The Collect, or special prayer for St. Matthew's Day, September 21st, prays that God will "set us free from all greed and selfish love of money to follow our Master Jesus Christ." The old version, in the 1662 Prayer Book laid it on more strongly, praying for grace "to forsake all covetous desires, and inordinate love of riches." Inordinate means excessive, immoderate, intemperate. So when we use this prayer we are asking that we might have a right view of wealth, not making it the consuming, all-absorbing passion of our life. Because Matthew, before he answered the call of Jesus, did have an inordinate love of riches. And that is the right place for us to start looking at this man, and see the example he sets for us.

The surest way for a man to make money in that era was to become a tax collector in the service of the Roman Empire. The Authorized Version of the Bible uses the term "publican", which has meant that hotel licensees have come under an undeserved cloud. The word has changed its meaning long since, in ordinary English usage. In the Gospels the word is derived from a Latin one meaning a man engaged in public service and especially one who handled public money, a tax collector. Of all people the Jews were the most vigorous haters of tax gatherers. Most people dislike paying ,taxation. But for a strict Jew, God was the only one to whom it was right to pay tribute - to pay tribute to anyone else was to infringe the prerogative which properly belonged to God. Murderers, robbers, and tax collectors were classed together. A tax collector was debarred from being either a witness in a court case, or a judge. He was even debarred from worship which was why the tax collector in the parable in Luke 18 stood afar off to pray, and would not even look up to heaven. Matthew it is necessary to see him first in his mean and grasping condition.

It was not only on religious grounds that the tax gatherer was despised. The Roman system of taxation lent itself to abuse and corruption. Provided an adequate sum of money was handed in to the government, no questions were asked about how much an agent might skim off for himself. Besides which, those who did this unpopular work for a foreign occupying power were traitors to their own people.

So tax gatherers were despised as irreligious, and dishonest, and traitors. No self-respecting Jew would have anything to do with such a person.

Such a man was Matthew. Money was his idol. He had resolved to get rich, as quickly as possible, even if it meant robbing the poor, fleecing his own people, being ostracised by society, and excommunicated by the Church. So he was probably already a wealthy man, dreaming perhaps of becoming wealthier still and eventually retiring to enjoy his old age in peace and plenty. Then along came Jesus and changed it all.

Jesus was preaching at Capernaum, possibly across the street from where Matthew had his tax collector's booth. Jesus visited Capernaum frequently, and probably Matthew had heard him preach on a number of occasions. And the more he listened, the more he came to see himself as he really was, and the narrow, mean, and worthless life he was leading. At the same time he began to glimpse something of the new life Jesus was offering under the Kingship of God. One day, after he had finished preaching, Jesus stepped across to Matthew's office, looked him in the eye, and said: "Follow me." "And Matthew got up and followed him." The man who had been filled with greed and selfish love of money - the covetous desires and inordinate love of riches - was set free.

He found a new love and the new love drove out the old. That new love was supremely the love of Jesus for him. At the same time he made another discovery: in abandoning his money-making, he had suddenly become rich! He had found a new sort of riches - what St. Paul called "the unsearchable riches of Christ." Like St. Augustine, Matthew could say: "I gave up all for Christ, and what did I find? I found all in Christ."

But it didn't end there. As Luke tells the story, the first thing Matthew did was to hold a feast in his own house, and he asked the only friends he had, his fellow tax collectors and other outcasts from society, to come and meet Jesus. The scribes and the Pharisees were shocked that Jesus should eat with such a company. When he heard it, Jesus said: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." Jesus had chosen a man who all men hated, a man who was supposed to be lost to shame and dishonour, and had made him one of his own. A more unlikely man to be an apostle it would be hard to imagine, but Jesus saw the apostle buried in the tax collector of Capernaum.

When St. Luke in his Gospel recorded the conversion of Matthew, he said that he "left everything and rose and followed Jesus". But in fact there was something he took with him: his pen. And we have the Gospel according to Matthew as the first book in the New Testament. Matthew not only followed Jesus, but placed his talents at the service of his Lord, where once he had used them for his own self-gratification. This man whom all men once despised, became the first to present to the world an account of the teaching of Jesus.

Let us pray: Almighty God, whose beloved Son called Matthew from his place of business to be an apostle and evangelist: set us free from all greed and selfish love of money, to follow our Master Jesus Christ.

Amen

SUNDAY BETWEEN 12 & 18 JUNE - Year A**Responsibility: Canon Barlow****June 12 2005**

[Based on the Gospel for today viz. Matthew 9:35-10:8]

St. Matthew, in today's extract from his Gospel, has quoted our Lord as referring to His disciples both as reapers and as shepherds. Both agricultural terms - it's hard to think of similes from the commercial and industrial worlds! These are terms for gatherers and carers - the harvest is there, ready; the lost sheep are there, needing to be drawn into the safety of the kingdom of heaven. In a mixed metaphor, Matthew says our Lord saw the people as sheep without a shepherd, and then said: "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few!"

In this country our cities are still small enough for most people to know about farmers and graziers and their reaping and shepherding, although we might be excused if we wonder about our politicians at times! Even in Darwin and other tropical towns there is still that awareness of the farming and pastoral industries. One wonders how meaningful those metaphors are for inhabitants of really huge cities! And even for us, the style and manner of sowing and reaping, and management of sheep has changed so much that the imagery needs to be re-thought and understood as in Jesus' day. Nevertheless, we do get the picture: the need for close and personal attention required as we try to extend the kingdom of God. We? Who brought us into it? We become automatically involved as we declare our allegiance and discipleship as Christians.

On the occasion described in today's Gospel, "When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." - Maybe of a Sunday afternoon you've turned on the tele to watch the football or cricket, and been amazed at the huge number of spectators who have come to watch the game, packed into the stands and right around the oval. Do you ever wonder what percentage of that number went to worship before going to the game? Some of course might have been to church on Saturday evening; some might have worshipped at a mid-week service; some might have paused at home to pray before going out to their entertainment. But it is probably fair and realistic to say that that percentage would be minute. Because this crowd is a pretty good cross-section of the community, we know there is a high proportion of people in that crowd whose lives are pointless; who have all manner of woes and worries; who have great burdens of sinfulness; and indeed many who sin without any feelings of guilt or compunction. Would not our Lord's heart be filled with pity for them, seeing them as sheep without a shepherd?

Jesus said to His disciples: "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest." He is surely saying the same thing to His disciples of today - we must pray for the increase of the ordained ministry, and for the increase of devout and faithful lay ministers, as well as for an increase in ourselves of that spirit of outreach and service.

He changed the metaphor. Not only is He a concerned shepherd, anxious that each member of the flock will be brought home to safety, but He is observing the unaware, unknowing, uncaring multitude as a harvest ripe and ready for bringing in. The harvest is large, the reapers are few. Where are the reapers to come from? Jesus turned to the twelve men who had been closest to Him, who had

indeed committed themselves to His cause, and in effect said: "You are the first reapers." Only a dozen, and what a huge task! Where to begin? Jesus said: "Begin right where you are, among the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Indeed in this first commissioning, they were expressly forbidden to go to the non-Jews - the Gentiles and the Samaritans. That would come later. And they were not merely to preach at the lost ones - they were to assure them that the kingdom of heaven is near, and then to be alongside them in their suffering.

This is still the Church's work today. The Good Shepherd is still concerned about the lost and the strayed. He is still concerned about US, who might consider ourselves to be safely in His fold! As long as we live in this earthly body, we will be prone to sin, a target for temptation. St .Paul warned: "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." (1 Cor.10:12) Not that we have to fall, because as Paul went on to say: "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape." Being human we don't always accept the way of escape. Like wayward sheep who duck under the wire to get out onto the road, we are prone to leave the assured safety of the Heavenly Father's sheepfold. Judas Iscariot, and Simon Peter, and Paul, and undoubtedly all the others let Jesus down from time to time. That is reassuring! Sadly Judas couldn't face his failure, and committed suicide. But the others picked themselves up, admitted their mistakes, and went on. And we must, in *our* Christian pilgrimage

Jesus called those nearest to Him to be under-shepherds or harvesters, to bring the lost into the Kingdom - or more accurately, to make them aware that the Kingdom of heaven is near and available to them. So He calls us, who have committed our lives to Him, to be harvesters. Now you might say: "I didn't become a Christian to be an evangelist! I came because I was a lost sheep and saw hope of salvation", or something like that. Well that's O.K. - don't panic! Only a very small proportion are called to be clergy - probably just as well. And few are called to be Pastoral Assistants, although the door is wide open these days for more people to express their service this way. Not everyone is given the capability of persuading people to consider Christianity as a better way of life. Very few of us are asked or challenged to give up present occupations, or to leave home and family to become stipendiary missionaries. Some are of course, and we should support them through prayer and with finance.

What we can do as a labourer in the harvest, is to provide a good example of a truly Christian life. In our home, in our clubs, in our sporting organization, in our place of employment, we are to demonstrate what it means to be a follower of Jesus. That can be a tough enough assignment in these times of easy morals and slack standards. It is not easy to be one of the mob and still be respected as holding a high moral and religious position.

Next, it is important to be aware of opportunities to offer good advice and support, ready to rally round in times of trouble and distress. For many people are troubled today, and feel helpless, with insecurity of jobs; low prices and uncertain markets for our produce; children growing up to face all kinds of problems their parents didn't have; with violence and vandalism prevalent. A suggestion, a few words of encouragement, sympathy expressed by a card or a word or a touch - all kindly and lovingly offered can often work wonders.

And always be ready to acknowledge that your love, your joy, your peace are fruits of the Holy Spirit working within you as you respond to the Good Shepherd who has harvested you into His flock.

AMEN

June 19 2005

It is a bit difficult to see the point of the Old Testament reading this morning. It is a little bit of early Jewish history - important to them, but somewhat academic for us. But it is important that we have a glimpse of these early days, for it was through Abraham's unquestioning obedience to God that he became the progenitor of that family, and indeed that race, that culminated in the birth of the Saviour.

Abraham and his wife Sarah apparently were not able to have children a terrible thing in those days. Not only did children have to look after their ageing parents - there was no O.A.P. in those days - but a man's life was considered to continue through his sons. However Abraham did have a son, Ishmael, by his wife's maid Hagar - an OK thing at that time. In their old age Sarah did eventually conceive and their son Isaac was born. Sarah then became jealous of Hagar and her son Ishmael, and as we heard, had them ejected. Both Isaac and Ishmael became the forefathers of nations. Ishmael had 12 sons! Isaac and his wife Rebekah only had twin boys, Esau and Jacob. Jacob was a bit of a twister, and cheated Esau who was not all that bright, out of his inheritance and then had to flee. He married two sisters - he in his turn had been cheated because although he had fallen in love with the younger, Rachel, and worked for her father for seven years to win her, her father switched brides and Jacob married Leah. He continued to work for another seven years until he got Rachel.

Then the family really builds up - Jacob fathered six sons by Leah, and two by Rachel, and two more by Leah's maidservant and another two by Rachel's. Twelve in all. Oh, and Leah had a daughter, Dinah - at least she is the only one mentioned.

Joseph was Jacob's favourite, because he was the first-born son of Rachel, his true love. The other brothers schemed to get rid of him, and sold him into slavery and he was taken to Egypt. The story becomes a bit more familiar now - Joseph grew into favour with the Pharaoh of the day, and rose to high office. A severe drought caused the old man Jacob to send his other sons to Egypt to buy grain, and to make a long story shorter, eventually the whole family moved to Egypt. This was the beginning of the build-up of the Jews in Egypt, and their later becoming slaves under a Pharaoh who had forgotten all about the service Joseph had rendered many years earlier. And this in turn leads on to the epic of Moses and the plagues and the escape from slavery to the Promised Land which we know as Israel - the name given to Jacob by God when He appeared to him at Bethel. "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body. The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also will give to you, and ¹ will give this land to your descendants after you." (Gen.35:11,12) No wonder the Jewish people of our own time resist any move to take their Promised Land, or any part of it, away from them.

After that little excursion into ancient history, we turn to the Gospel for today.

Last Sunday's Gospel passage spoke of-the calling-out and the authorizing of the Twelve, followed by an instruction as to how to begin their work. In today's extract Jesus is telling them not to be afraid of what might happen to them, and claiming the highest degree of loyalty. He had warned them that their lot would be like His and we know this meant rejection and death. But they are not to be afraid or to abandon their work. "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul Everyone therefore

who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven." There is also this warning: "Whoever **denies** me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven."

"Have no fear" is said to them several times in this passage. And they would need that reassurance later on when they were confronted by terrible torture and painful death. But they are not to fear persecution, because as long as they proclaim the Kingdom, they are doing God's will and are on His side.

Jesus goes on to give them reason for not being afraid. Men can only kill the body; God can destroy both in hell. So it is more fearful for them to disobey God, who through Jesus is **commanding them** to preach the Gospel, than to be put to death by persecution. And even sparrows, the cheapest living thing in the market sold for food, are known to God; therefore they, of so much greater value than many sparrows, are undoubtedly in God's keeping.

We are so accustomed to thinking of Jesus as the Prince of Peace that His statement "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword", comes as an unpleasant shock. What can He mean? It is a plain fact of history that when Christianity first took hold it frequently split families in two. As it still does today in many family situations. One of the earliest charges levelled against the Christians was that they interfered with domestic relationships. Most people want nothing more than to be left comfortable in mind and body with no frets or anxieties to mar their situation. When Jesus enters a person's life, He is likely to upset that spiritual lethargy. No-one can invite Jesus into his life and expect to remain the same. It is true that Jesus offers peace of mind and conscience even at times of great physical stress, danger, and upset. But it is a peace which comes often only after some mental and spiritual wrestling and surrender. This may come, and often does, at a cost to human relationships. For Jesus demands precedence for a loyalty even over that for our nearest and dearest. But once having given Him that precedence, family relationships can improve tremendously as love and tolerance flow on from the love of Christ. Unless the others are too set in their ways to accept the new situation. Then divisions can, and do, occur.

Jesus came with the claim for absolute obedience; with the claim for complete loyalty; with the claim to have the right to disturb life; with the claim to be the agent of judgment; with the claim that a person's reaction to Him settles that person's eternal destiny.

We pray that, as the Father raised Jesus from death, so by the power of the Holy Spirit we may live a new life to His glory.

AMEN

June 26 2005

It is not a bad idea, when faced with a complex Reading like the extract from St. Paul's letter to the Roman Christians which we have before us today, to have another look at it using a less formal translation, as in the Good News Bible or the paraphrase by J. B. Philips.

Today's Reading for instance, in the Good News Version, opens: "Sin must no longer rule in your mortal bodies, so that you obey the desires of your natural self. Nor must you surrender any part of yourselves to sin to be used for wicked purposes. Instead, give yourselves.to God, as those who have been brought from death to life, and surrender your whole being to him to be used for righteous purposes. Sin must not be your master: for you do not live under law, but under God's grace." (Rom.6:12-14)

Just before that, in verses 9 to 11, Paul wrote, and again quoting from the Good News Bible, "We know that Christ has been raised from death and will never die again - death will no longer rule over him. And so, because he died, sin has no power over him; and now he lives his life in fellowship with God. In the same way you are to think of yourselves as dead, so far as sin is concerned, but living in fellowship with God through Christ Jesus."

Belief in the Resurrection is a basic essential of our Faith, and every Sunday of the year is an Easter Day anniversary. The Church chose Sunday as its day of worship and re-creation instead of the Jewish Sabbath - Saturday, because it was the day of the week on which Christ rose from the dead. They could have chosen Friday, the day on which He died, emphasising that Christ died for us and for our salvation. They could have left it as Saturday, for most of the early Christians had grown up in the Jewish tradition of keeping the Sabbath holy. But it was and is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ which set and sets the seal of our belief in the divinity of Christ and therefore the effectiveness of His death. As we acknowledge in the Prayer of Consecration in the Eucharist, it was "by his death on the cross and rising to new life, he offered the one, true sacrifice for sin and obtained an eternal deliverance for his people."

Not because an angry God needs to be appeased, but cause has effect, and therefore sin must be paid for. Man, by his selfish sinfulness spoilt his relationship with God, and the only way in which that personal relationship with God could be restored was by an act of perfect unselfishness, and this could only be done by one who was absolutely sinless and needing no forgiveness. By the action of Jesus Christ due respect was paid to the moral law that punishment must follow sin, and also, on behalf of man, God was given that completeness of human response for which He looked to restore the possibility of personal relationship with Himself.

The Resurrection not only reassures us that what Christ did was effective and acceptable to the Father, but it holds also the promise for us of eternal life. The Old Testament has little to say, one way or another, about life after death. So the disciples who buried Jesus on Good Friday had only a vague hope that for their beloved Master this was not the end. In every Funeral Service there is a message and reminder to mourners about the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life which we as Christians hold - or ought to hold, if our faith is weak. And we base that sure and certain hope on Jesus

Christ, who said, as the Service reminds us, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet will they live."

St .Paul in his first letter to the Thessalonians wrote: "Brothers we do not want you to be ignorant about those who have fallen asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." (1 Thess.4:13,14) The real tragedy is that so frequently one is filled with doubt that the person for whom the prayers are being said has in fact really lived and died in the faith of Jesus Christ. But that is not our responsibility. It is God's, and He is the all-knowing Judge.

But what if, after Jesus had done all His teaching and healing and other good works, He had died on the cross and NO resurrection had followed! How much would His earthly ministry have been worth to us, and how much impact would He have made on the lives of men and women down the ages? Very little. It would have been just another case of something that often happens - of bad men getting the better of a good man; of the chief priests and all our Lord's enemies coming out on top by force and violence; of evil conquering good. We would see the story of the Incarnation, and of our Lord's ministry, in quite a different light from what we do now, and it would be a message of despair.

But by rising from the dead, Jesus has made it into a message of hope and encouragement, not merely because His resurrection is a sign to us of the immortality of our souls - great news as that is, but because it tells us that good IS in the long run stronger than evil, and that Jesus HAS conquered sin. "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions." (Rom.6:11,12)

A person might say, when he turns in revulsion from a way of life which he has previously followed: "I'm through with that sort of life." He means he is finished with it; he has died to it; and he is turning to a new life of better quality. That is, rising again to higher things. The cynic might quote Jeremiah and ask: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?" (13:23) Yet something of this kind has been done in the life of a truly converted person, and it should be quite understandable to us as Christians. Perhaps it has happened to some in this church. It is a deliberate reorientation of a person's outlook: whereas once he lived with his face towards spiritual darkness, now he lives facing the light. Dead to sin; alive to God.

There is a traditional prayer, or Collect, which begins: "O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as pass our understanding " We are of necessity limited in our understanding of God and His loving goodness, and Divine forgiveness is surely in that category, as indeed is resurrection from death, and eternal life. Yet we know that in turning to God through Jesus Christ, we can know ourselves to be dead to sin and able to live the new life in the power of the Holy Spirit, and may look forward with confidence, and hope, and expectation to the life of the world to come.

AMEN