

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

7th September 2008

[SUNDAY BETWEEN 4 & 10 SEPTEMBER - Year A]

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

Jesus said: "Where two or three come together in my name, **there** am I with them." (Matt.18:20 - N.I.V.)

The Greek word for church - *ekklesia* - means community or assembly. In today's Gospel extract we learn that the *ekklesia* does not have to be very large to be a Church. "If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name," said Jesus," there am I with them."

Now before you all go off in twos and threes to form your own Churches, I must remind you that it is a serious misunderstanding to take and act on one or two verses of Scripture taken out of context. People do fall into that trap, and because of such verses as I have quoted, have felt free to break away from some part of the organized Church because of disagreement or other upset, to found their own splinter group. To do that is to run counter to our Lord's great prayer for unity, recorded by St. John in chapter 17 of his Gospel: "Holy Father, keep them in thy name which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one." Any group, however seemingly holy and righteous, which tends to split up and break the unity of the Church, must be suspect and treated with extreme caution. There are times when we are unhappy about some aspect of our own Church, and we are tempted to break away from it in despair, but it is far more in keeping with our Lord's way to stay within it, and work and pray for its re-awakening and correction. After all, that is what He did - He was rejected by the Jewish Church, not vice versa.

Not that any of us are likely to go off and found a new Church, although just how easily this may happen has been shown by the formation of the break-away Anglican Church created by some who are unhappy about the ordination of women in some Dioceses. Our dissatisfaction is more likely to cause us to drop away from church attendance altogether, or else to transfer to some other division of Christendom which appears at the time to be nearer the true following of Christ than does the one to which we currently belong. Having transferred, it is very probable that some discontent will develop in other aspects, and within a short time the discontented one will be off again to pastures apparently greener. The last result will undoubtedly be worse than the first.

The Church is meant to be a Spirit-filled, Spirit-led, organisation. We recognise this as we pray before every meeting of every group within the Church - at meetings of Church and Parish Councils; at Diocesan Council; at Provincial Council; at Synod. But, as St. Paul wrote: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels", and we don't always hear the Spirit guiding us, and we don't always follow His guiding anyway, so mistakes are made.

Over the years and down the centuries, the experience of the Church has been codified, and formed into what might be called the discipline of the Church. There are the written and accepted rules and regulations for the actual running of the organisation, as any organisation must have a form of constitution for its proper management. This Diocese revised its Constitution and Regulations in 1972. When the Church of England in Australia became an independent, self-governing member of the Anglican Communion in 1962, the Constitution had first to be approved and accepted by the whole Australian Anglican Church through its elected representatives at the General Synod and at Diocesan Synods.

But those sort of rules are largely about the legal aspect of the organisation of the Church. There are others which endeavour to have the whole Church acting as a whole on any particular aspect of life, and these come down to the local Diocesan level. A general principle might be enunciated at the Lambeth Conference of Bishops held every 10 years, like say the ordination of women to the priest-hood, or the remarriage of divorced people in church.. Representatives of each Diocese meet at General Synod, normally held every four years, to try to establish a unified approach to a situation, and then each Diocese must decide for itself whether or not to accept the recommendations. This is the kind of decision that you ask your representatives on Synod to make on your behalf. Yes, it is cumbersome, but these are the big issues which need time for prayer and proper consideration.'

There are others which the clergy and the bishop discuss at clergy conferences, and which might or might not be accepted at Parish level, or by an individual priest. These are set out in Guidelines published by the Bishop, and again, not really binding except through loyalty to the whole unit. An example of this is the decision made some time ago not to use funeral parlours in place of churches for burial services.

There are still others which have come down to us by general use of church people - not laws or regulations, but customs and principles which the Church has found helpful. The self-imposed disciplines of control of self-indulgence during Lent, or of not eating meat on Fridays come into this category - although the latter one has largely gone out of useage now. Daily prayers and weekly attendance at worship are in this group. We know it is good for us to keep such a discipline and ,we do or do not keep to it according to our inclination, strength of character, religious training, or whatever other pressures there might be on us.

Man is a gregarious, social being. He cannot live, fully, alone. He depends upon others and others depend upon him. He cannot be the Church alone, either. The Church is not an afterthought either of

Jesus or His disciples. Right from the start of His public life Jesus began to form a community - in fact the first few disciples were called in twos, so there never was a time when the Church consisted of one disciple only. What binds people together as the Church is the person of Christ - their attitude to life; their behaviour; their joy; their salvation, are all attributed to Christ. So members of the Church are witnesses to and representatives of Christ. And the Church as a whole is invested with the discipline and the authority of Christ: "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (v,18) The only sin which Jesus mentions in this context is sin against a fellow human being. If Jesus is indeed God-with-us, then sin against a fellow human being is sin against God present within that brother or sister, as He is present in all His creation.

Reconciliation with God requires reconciliation with the sinned--against brother - if he is not reconciled with his brethren he is not reconciled with God. A form of general confession is included in our services of public worship iⁿ recognition that we have all gone astray from the paths of righteousness despite our best intentions: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us," wrote St. John (1John 1:8), but only God knows how genuine the confession is, and whether reconciliation with a sinned-against brother has been sought.

The commandments "are summed up in this one rule," wrote St. Paul, "Love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." (Rom13:9.10)

The Church, the worshipping community, ideally is made up of human beings living truly human lives in peace and harmony - a peace and harmony achieved only in the name of Christ, that is, by a life led by His Holy Spirit That Spirit is the Spirit of love. God is love, and where love is, there is God. The Church must be, and must be seen to be, a community of loving persons if it is to respond to its, vocation to be the light of the world, and indeed, the Body of Christ.

AMEN

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

14th September 2008

[SUNDAY BETWEEN 11 & 17 SEPTEMBER - Year A ' Responsibility: Canon Barlow]

"Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him: "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. (Matt.18:21 &22)

How easy it is for us to say in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." How difficult it is to really put this into practice! Undoubtedly all of us would want to be assured that God does forgive all our mistakes and our shortcomings: those things left undone which we ought to have done, and those things done which we ought not to have done. Yet how often we find it almost impossible to forgive a person who has done or said something which has hurt us. You have probably heard someone say, or maybe have even said it yourself: "I can never forgive him or her for what they have done."

In suggesting that he forgive seven times, Peter probably saw himself as being over-generous. The old Law had stated: "Wherever hurt is done, you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, bruise for bruise, wound for wound." So states the Book Exodus, chapter 21 verse 23. In the Book Leviticus - which is a book heavy on the old Law, we read: "When one man injures and disfigures his fellow countryman, it shall be done to him as he has done. the injury and the disfigurement that he has inflicted upon another shall in turn be inflicted upon him." (Lev.24:19,20) And again there is a similar passage in the Book of Deuteronomy. Yes! It's in the Bible!

This severity became toned down as time went on, and in the Book Ecclesiasticus, written about 200 BC - it's in the Apocrypha, not the Old Testament - we can read: "Forgive your neighbour his wrong doing, then when you pray; your sins will be forgiven. If a man harbours a grudge against another, is he to expect healing from the Lord? If he has no mercy on his fellowman, is he still to ask forgiveness for his own sins? If a mere mortal cherishes rage, where is he to look for pardon? Think of the covenant of the Most High, and overlook faults." (Ecclus.28:2-7)

In spite of this, Jewish tradition in Peter's time limited forgiveness to three times.

Matthew records in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus was updating the old Law, that He said, "You have learned that our forefathers were told 'eye for eye, tooth for tooth, but what I tell you is this: Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you. If some-one slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left. You have learned that they were told: Love your neighbour, hate your enemies. But what I tell you is this: Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors. Only so can you be children of your heavenly Father, who makes His sun to rise on good and bad alike, and sends the rain on the honest and the dishonest." (Matt.5:38-45) But apparently this had not registered on Peter, as so many things our Lord said does not register on us.

So we must take notice of Christ's reply to Peter: "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Or as earlier versions of Holy Scripture put it: seventy times seven, meaning that there must be neither counting nor calculation in the matter of forgiveness. There can be no limit to forgiveness for the Christian. It is required of him on every occasion. Peter had a great deal to learn - so have we. There is to be no limit to forgiveness. If we do try to set limits, it means that we do not know what forgiveness really is. When an injury is forgiven, it is cancelled completely so far as the injured person is concerned. It is not to be kept in mind or held against the offender even if he should offend again. So forgiveness is not an easy thing to grant. But the person who has offended needs to be forgiven: If we realise that someone whom we have hurt has harboured no resentment against us, and in spite of provocation has done everything to help us better ourselves and overcome our selfish attitudes, then it is almost impossible both to be aware of this and also to continue to nurture hatred against him. If we are not forgiven by the person we have hurt, there continues to be a sense of uneasiness in our hearts about the way we have behaved, knowing that we have hurt a person so badly that he - or she - feels unable to forgive us. And this feeling persists, even if we have sought forgiveness and been refused and can assure ourselves that we've done all in our power to heal the hurt. We need to be forgiven - and we need to forgive, for the sake of those who hurt us. Injury, hurt, sin, which is unforgiven separates us from our fellows. It also separates us from God.

Now of course forgiveness cannot undo what has been done, and probably we will always be careful in our dealings with someone who has hurt us. Nevertheless, when we forgive we must set the hurt aside and treat the person with love and consideration, as if there had been no offending incident. Similarly in our relationship with God. Even His forgiveness cannot bring innocence back. He cannot undo the sin, but He can and does forgive the sinner, and so opens the way to restoration and the action of His grace. By not seeking God's forgiveness. or accepting it, we cut ourselves off from God's grace - that spiritual strength we need so much - and our spiritual condition goes from bad to worse, making our ultimate return to God so much more difficult.

Unfortunately we don't always see ourselves as needing God's forgiveness. We think we are not too bad, not as bad as lots of other people. And this is a devilish temptation. We are not to compare ourselves with others in this matter. Paul called himself "the chief of sinners", and he was not putting on an act and being mock-modest. Because he realised so strongly his own falling-short and need of forgiveness, he experienced more and more the knowledge of the love of God which treated him so tenderly. The closer we are to Christ, the more He makes us aware of areas in our life which we didn't worry about before, but which we now see need to be put right. As Jesus tells us, the one who has the most to be forgiven is the one who will love most and so will be able to enter into loving relationships with others.

When someone has wronged us, we might think we can forgive them and then ignore them, cut them out of our life. But we can't. We must go on caring, showing we are concerned about their well-being. And this is impossible unless we are always aware of our own need for forgiveness, and are experiencing the overwhelming, forgiving, love of Christ.

AMEN

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

21st September 2008

[SUNDAY BETWEEN 18 & 24 SEPTEMBER - Year A 'Responsibility: Canon Barlow]
 (Reference: the Gospel for today. Matthew 20:1-16)

Jesus said to the unemployed labourers: "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." At first sight our reaction to this parable might well be: "That's hardly fair - the men who bore the heat and burden of the day were paid only the same as those who'd only worked one or two hours!" Surely our Lord doesn't mean us to apply this parable to problems of employer-employee relationships? If it was tried, every union in the country would be out on strike, and rightly so. But after all, Jesus did say that the labourer is worthy of his hire. (Luke 3C:7) And in his instructions to Christian masters, St. Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Colossians "Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven," (Co1,4:1)

Mind you, that master did offer to pay those first employed a certain sum, and they were happy to accept that amount. Strictly speaking the generosity of the employer in giving the others the same amount was none of their business. Those later employed had similar financial needs, and apparently it was not because of laziness that they were not working.

In passing you might be interested to learn if you don't already know, that in this Diocese that same principle is applied to the stipend of the clergy. The Bishop is paid the same rate as a priest, although he does have an allowance to cover the special needs of his position. And an Assistant Curate receives precisely the same as a Parish Priest -after all his cost of living is the same, even though the Rector carries the responsibility of the Parish. And an archdeacon receives no higher duty pay, in spite of his extra responsibilities - only reimbursement for his travelling and other costs, The Registrar also comes under this line of thinking and receives the basic stipend plus house and travelling while on duty. The reasoning is that all are in one way or another employed in God's service, and all have much the same living expenses.

Jesus said that the Kingdom of Heaven is illustrated by this parable, and surely a wrangle over rates of pay is not an illustration of that Kingdom. In His use of parables, our Lord had two basic aims. One was to plant in the minds of His audience a seed of understanding about God's eternal truths, which if thought about, would grow to be part of a person's make-up, and would come to mind as he grappled with the problems of life and of the Christian response to temptation and challenge.

The other aim had to do with separation: to divide and sort out the sincere followers from the mere hangers-on. He said on a number of occasions -"He who has ears to hear, let him hear." To some, the parables were little more than pleasant stories and that was as far as it went. To others the same stories enshrined great and valuable truths.

In this Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, Jesus is saying that God is the landowner and the vineyard is His Kingdom into which He calls every man, woman, and child at every moment of their lives, and that at the close of the day, when time ends, He will reward those who responded, as He sees fit. Everyone who responds is precious in His sight and is rewarded equally.

We may look upon the vineyard as this world in which we live now - it is part of God's kingdom because it is His creation, although large parts of it are in revolt and do not recognise His Lordship. The call to work in the vineyard indicates that there is a Divine purpose for everyone to fulfill. God has not made anyone nor any living thing for mere existence. The chief end of man, the old Presbyterian catechism used to say, is to glorify God and enjoy Him for ever. So true human happiness is only to be found in doing that for which God made us. It is under our daily circumstances, and by our use of our daily opportunities and our abilities that God calls us to holiness:

"The trivial round, the common task
will furnish all we need to ask:
room to deny ourselves a road
to bring us daily nearer God," the hymn says. (A& M- 4)

So God teaches us that holiness is the outcome of co-operation with Him in all that we do, and of the continual resistance of all that is evil, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

When the employer in the parable went out to hire the men at various times of the day, he could not compel any one of them to work for him. He could offer employment, but it was for them to accept or refuse. Many people today pay no heed to Christ's call. Preoccupation, lack of interest or inclination, indifference, opposition - all deter them from responding. We know only too well how even in this community the unheeding members of society put pressure and temptation on us to

Some people set aside Sunday worship in order to participate in some perhaps quite worthy cause, or take part in a health-promoting "Fun Run", or sporting fixture. We might have to cope with the demands of our job. This is causing a great eroding of people in their Christian life, and puts a considerable pressure on many who are not all that strong in their faith. The noise and bustle and demands of the world drown out the small voice of conscience. The *voice* speaks again and again but when a deaf ear is continually turned, the voice seems to become fainter and fainter until eventually it is no longer heard at all. But when the spiritual ear is attuned to the calling voice of God, response will be welcomed by Him even at the eleventh hour. "You also go into the vine-

yard-* Even as those who worked only the one hour trusted the landowner to give them what was right, so we may trust Him who calls us. There is work to be done in God's vineyard today, as there was in the vineyard of the parable.

We who attend the worship of Almighty God regularly and faithfully are those who bear the heat and burden of the day. We do it because we have come to some idea and vision of what God requires of us; what He promises us; how He supports us; what lies before us at the end of life's day. We give, we work, and we worship, for we know that God has called us to this. And we dearly long for others to answer God's call, and come and join us as we work this part of God's vineyard.

We also tend, at times, to be like those in the parable who first went into the vineyard, and grumble at times about late comers who get the same generous treatment that we do. We know pretty well who ought to come to worship, but do not; who could contribute generously, but do not see the need as we do; and perhaps we murmur when they use "our" church for marriages, baptisms, and funerals. Ought we not be glad that there is that much concern at least for religious forms and sacraments? Ought we not try to get alongside them at those moments of great joy or grief in their lives? No, it is not easy for us who "have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat".

Many people today are in a quandary. They see the world in turmoil, internationally and locally; they see and worry about loosening of morals and a greater permissiveness by society towards all sorts of evils and wrongs; they find control and direction of their children difficult. And they know in their hearts that the answer lies in God - yet they cannot bring themselves to break the ice and come looking for Him. The answer of course is not simply "Come to church and all will be well." Christians are not exempt from the cares and worries of the world. But they do know where true peace is to be found, *and how to* obtain spiritual strength and fortitude to enable them not only to cope with the trials of this world, but to use them as stepping-stones to the next. We ought to be able to assure them of the message of today's Gospel passage - that it is never too late to reach out and accept the generous love of God.

AMEN

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

28th September 2008

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

SUNDAY BETWEEN 25 SEPTEMBER & 1 OCTOBER - Year A

[Based on the Gospel for today: Matthew 21:23-32]

The little story in the second half of today's Gospel passage probably rings a bell of recognition in the heart of every parent who hears it! The frustration of telling one of the children to do some-thing and then finding out later that they didn't get around to doing it. But also the pleasure when one says "I don't wanna do it", and then quietly does it so that you will be surprised to find the chore has been done after all.

However really to appreciate the meaning behind this parable, we must first understand that it is not set in a culture like our own, where children feel free enough to go against their parents' wishes - even, all too often, being outrageously defiant. And where parents hesitate to punish too vigorously for fear of losing the love of their child. Or, again all too often, for fear of the legal authorities stepping in. This latter situation has come about regrettably because from time to time a child has to be protected from violent, unreasonable parents. The whole relationship situation has changed radically from the days when a child had to obey unquestioningly, through the Victorian era of being seen but not heard, to today's rather free and easy, and on the whole more satisfactory relationships.

But in other times and other cultures, and certainly in our Lord's day and culture, such defiance would have been unthinkable, and the story would send a thrill of horror through the hearers. Here was a father who told his sons to go and work in the vineyard. Apparently it was a courteous request, because the word used for "son" is affectionate. The son refused rudely: "I will not". He could at least have made polite excuses to "save face", like the people did in another of our Lord's parable, those invited to the Great Banquet: "I have bought a field and must go and see it"; "I have bought five yoke of oxen and I go to examine them"; "I have married a wife and therefore I cannot come". That host would not have been pleased, but at least the courtesies had been observed. Luke 14 has the story. But the abrupt outright refusal of this son was a breach of the Commandment "to honour your father and your mother". On any reading of the Law of Moses the boy was guilty, and for some breaches of this Law a son could be stoned to death! (Exodus 21:17) As against that, what could be more obedient and proper than the re-

sponse of the second son: "I go sir". Courteous, polite, with the proper term of respect. An ideal son by the sound of it. The only trouble was that he did not go to the vineyard and probably had no intention at all of going. Whereas the defiant son thought better of his stand and went off to do his father's bidding.

In a simple story with familiar characters, Jesus drew the contrast between those who pay lip-service to God and those who actually follow His will. For Jesus the great tragedy of many of the religious leaders of His day was that they only thought they wanted to do God's will. They only paid lip-service to the Law and the Prophets: they did not love the Lord their God with all their heart and with all their soul and with all their mind and with all their strength! And certainly did not love their neighbours as themselves. In fact many of those whose immoral and dishonest lives the religious leaders despised were now changing their old way of life and putting the past behind them, showing in their new lives the result of repentance and rededication. The Pharisees would have condemned the son who defied his father at first - to them the most important thing was that he had sinned against his father. To Jesus the whole point was that he had repented, been genuinely sorry for his disobedience, and turned to do his father's will. He was still a sinner, but he was a repentant and forgiven sinner now, and that was far more important.

The parable was addressed directly to the religious leaders. But it was not a story told to undermine the people's respect for them. As we heard, they came up to Jesus as He was teaching, and demanded: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" You can almost hear the peremptory tone. Instead of trying to convince them of His credentials, Jesus referred to the authority of John the Baptist, and asked them whether his authority came from God or from men. They said among themselves: "if we say from God, he will say why didn't we believe him; if we say from men, we will be in trouble with the people because they believe he was a prophet". So they replied "We don't know". And Jesus said to them "Well neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things", and launched into the parable about the two sons.

That is why He said after telling the story: "John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax--collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it you did not change your minds and believe him." John the Baptist prepared people for the Kingdom of God by calling them to repentance. Many who knew themselves to be sinners - typified by tax collectors and prostitutes - listened to John's advice and later became followers of Jesus. The chief priests and the elders refused to listen to John even though they witnessed the change in the lives of those previously sinful people. Jesus clearly informs them that although they consider themselves to be God's Chosen People, this in itself is no guarantee of entry into the Kingdom.

Ezekiel was a stern prophet who clearly saw God as a righteous Judge, and that the choice of righteousness or unrighteousness was up to each individual, who would be rewarded accordingly. He wrote: "When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, he shall die for it.... Again, when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he had committed and does what is lawful and right, he shall save his life." (18:26,27) And not lose that hope and expectation promised to the faithful by Jesus who said: "Where I am there you may be also" and "I go to prepare a place for you."

But of course we do not apply words like "wicked" or "iniquitous" or "unrighteous" to ourselves! They are much too strong - we are not like that! We might have our little weaknesses, our little selfishnesses, our little thoughtlessnesses - but never wickedness or iniquity!

There are two regrettable extremes here. One is the ease with which we can lightly excuse our little slips from the high standard to which we as avowed Christians are called. The other is the terrible belief that when a person has done something awful in the world's judgment, that God can never forgive us. Both are wrong! Any falling away of whatever degree in the eyes of human judgment can be forgiven by God and will be forgiven by God, provided - and this is the unalterable condition set by God Himself and spelt out by Jesus - provided we are prepared to admit our faults and shortcomings and repent: turn from the error and seek forgiveness and start all over again.

Those who are baptized and those who are confirmed declare their allegiance to Christ and their rejection of all that is evil - they say they are going to do the Father's will. Many say with the second son in the parable "I go sir" and do not go. They stand to be condemned. Others are slow to do the Father's will, like the first son in the story. Last week's parable of the workers in the vineyard reminded us that however late the hour of repentance, it is always acceptable. But none of us knows how late the hour is, and we are wise to be always ready to repent of our foolish ways and follow the leading of our Saviour Jesus Christ: "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus ... who humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.

Amen

St Matthew's Day

21st September

[Responsibility: Canon Barlow]

“As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office, and he said to him “Follow me”, and he arose and followed him”. (Matthew 9:90)

The saint whom the Church commemorates today is a most suitable example for us to consider as members of a basically self-centred and affluent society. Not because he was one of the Twelve called to be an Apostle. Not because he is thought 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 prays that God will free us from all greed and love of riches so that we may follow the steps of our Lord Jesus Christ in the way of self-giving love. The older version of the prayer in the Prayer Book of 1662 laid it on more strongly, praying for grace to forsake all covetous desires, and the 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 money, not making it the consuming, all-absorbing passion of our lives. Because Matthew, before he answered the call of Jesus, did have an inordinate love of riches. And that is the right place to start looking at this man and 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’, often linked with ‘sinner’, which has meant that hotel licensees have come under undeserved stigma. The word has changed its meaning over the years, in ordinary usage. In the Gospels it is derived from the Latin ‘publicanus’ - 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 do not like paying taxation, but for a strict Jew, God was the only one to whom it was right to pay tribute—to pay tribute money 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 or a judge in legal matters. He was even debarred from public worship, which was why the tax gatherer in the parable in Luke 18 stood afar off to pray, and would not even lift up his eyes to heaven.

Few of us would go that far in our relationship with employees of the Taxation Department. But to understand the full implications of the conversion of Matthew, it is necessary to see him first in his mean and grasping condition.

It was not only on religious grounds that the tax collector was despised. The Roman system of taxation lent itself to abuse. Provided an adequate sum of money was handed over to the government, no questions were asked about how much an agent extorted and kept for himself. And besides, those who engaged in this unpopular work for a foreign, occupying power were traitors to their own nation. So tax collectors were despised as irreligious and dishonest traitors. No self-respecting Jew would have anything to do with them.

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 ostracized by society, and excommunicated from the Church. He was probably already a wealthy man, dreaming, no doubt, of becoming wealthier still and eventually retiring to enjoy his old age in peace and comfort.

Then along came Jesus and changed it all.

Jesus had been preaching in the town of Capernaum, possibly across the street from where Matthew had his Customs office. Jesus frequently visited Capernaum, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and probably Matthew had heard him preach on a number of occasions. And the more he heard, 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 the road 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 - 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. Even 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 he could say: "I gave up all for Christ, and what did I find? I found all in Christ".

So how did Matthew celebrate his conversion? He threw a party. He held a feast in his home, and he invited 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 people. When he heard of it, Jesus said: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick do". Jesus had chosen the man who was 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. Jesus saw the Apostle buried in the tax collector of Capernaum.

When Luke, in his Gospel, recorded the conversion of Matthew, he said that he got up, left everything, and followed Jesus. (5:28_ In fact there was something he took with him: his pen. We open our New Testaments and are at once confronted with 'The Gospel according to Matthew'. Ancient tradition unanimously agrees that Matthew wrote a Gospel, and that he wrote it in Hebrew primarily for Jewish Christians. Whether in fact he wrote the Gospel as it stands is in some doubt, because great sections of it are transcripts almost exactly from Mark's Gospel. It is most likely that what Matthew did was to collect and edit and issue the first collection of *The Sayings of Jesus*, and his account of the teachings of Jesus formed the basis of the first Gospel, which came to be called by his name because he had contributed so much to it.

That the Gospel was written with Jewish Christians in mind is borne out by the genealogy of Jesus begun at Abraham - to whom the promise was given that his descendants would be the Chosen People of God, and our Lord's early lineage is traced through David. The portrait of Jesus as the Messianic King, looked for down the ages by the Jews, is repeated over and over again: the Magi offer him gifts for a king, and Herod fears a rival for the throne. 'The Kingdom' is mentioned frequently. The fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies is stressed, as is our Lord's attitude to the Law.

Perhaps that is academic stuff of interest only to clergy and biblical students. The main thing is that Matthew placed his talents at the service of his Lord, where once he had used them entirely 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.

Of his subsequent career as a leader in the 'Early Church, little is known, and even the site of his martyrdom is disputed. But at the end of his Gospel he proclaims Jesus as the ever-present Lord of the Church, quoting Jesus' final promise: "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age".

As we give thanks for the life and example of this man, we pray that we too may be freed from the temptations of this world so that we may follow Jesus in the way of self-giving love. AMEN.