

The Identity of St Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13)

10:00am Holy Communion – 21st September 2025 (The Feast of St Matthew)

Matthew 9:9-13

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.

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

Today is the feast day of St Matthew – 21st of September. I'm sure you knew that!

I find Matthew to be a most interesting figure in the gospel story, and I would say he was the disciple who stood to gain the most from Jesus, **if what we are looking for in the gospel is a transformation of one's life.** I am grateful to Justin, last week, and Victoria, back on 7th September, for sharing something of their own journey of faith and calling – how their lives have changed too. I might today add in my own story of how God has reappointed my life. Did you know that I was formerly a professional clown in a traveling circus. Having been abducted by aliens, I was then returned to Earth, dressed up as a parish priest. **It's not a very exciting story!**

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.

St Matthew understates his own calling in his own gospel. At no point is Matthew recorded as having said anything. What we have here in this single verse is the moment when Jesus calls him to begin a new life. **However, Matthew the apostle represents so much more than being yet another one of many whose life was reappointed by God, glorious though all such stories are.**

Recall how many of Jesus's followers had left behind their regular identities, such as being fishermen. Most of them were quite recognisable in the society of those times as being regular family people: lawful and respectful, producing and sharing, and living faithfully within God's Law. Theirs was a normal, if perhaps unexciting life.

When we consider the callings of most of these disciples, their first response to Jesus wasn't really a question of life-saving salvation. For Peter, Andrew, James, John, and the rest of them, they could all go to worship in the town synagogue, and they could all make the seasonal pilgrimage to the Jerusalem temple to address their sinful lives with sacrifice. **But for Matthew – none of this applied. His life was to all intents and purposes divorced from God.**

Matthew's original name was Levi – a common name of Jewish identity meaning '*those who are joined*'. It could not be more inappropriate. Matthew was anything but joined to his people. You see, Matthew was a collaborator with the Roman administration, a Tax Collector. I could at this point go off into a long historical tangent, into the whole background of the Roman occupation of Israel and Judah. But let's just say, the Romans were dependent upon their taxation, and it was their usual method to employ local natives to work for them amongst the common people. Because taxation applied to everyone, therefore everyone hated the Romans, and everyone hated Matthew. **His religious identity was one of separation from the people and separation from God - ostracised from his neighbours, his local synagogue and from the rituals of the temple.**

Matters of personal identity are at the heart of so much of what we hear in the social and political debate of these current times. **I wonder if you have ever considered where your own cultural identity came from?** The person you happen to be is, for the most part, something defined elsewhere, that you became associated with quite apart from any choices you have made. I am British and English, and I suppose identifiable as a southerner. All of that gives me certain expected traits quite apart from what I look like. You can

tell I'm not an Australian, although you would not know that in a photograph.

Identity and culture are quite difficult concepts to pin down in a clearly defined way, although people do try. Many have chosen specific fashions, motifs and symbols to identify each other, and to form certain sub-cultures.

Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s was a colourful time, with the youth presenting themselves as mods, rockers, punks, skinheads, new romantics, goths and all kinds of other characters. I'm sure many of you remember those days. Maybe you were once a punk rocker? Well, some still are - take a walk through Camden Town or the lanes of Brighton! How things have changed, or have they?

Symbols and labels are a very uncertain means of cultural identity, **and they do carry some risk.** Whatever accrues to certain images is too easily understood in narrow terms. **You may find yourself regarded in a way that you are actually not.** Who knows, maybe there were some soft, loving and caring skinheads? Perhaps, but you wouldn't automatically expect that. **So, you cannot easily control the terms of your culture, and yet others will judge you according to those terms, quite apart from anything else which might be true of you.**

In our gospel reading, Jesus calls Matthew, and Matthew responds quickly. The scenery is then dinner at his house, with Jesus, and where it seems many others like Matthew have been invited. **'And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?'**

By this point in the overall gospel story, I think the reputation of Jesus means there is an almost permanent following of the desperate, the curious, and those opposed to him. We read of these two sub-cultures – labelled groups for us to generalise our understanding. Sitting down to eat with Jesus are the ‘*tax collectors and sinners*’, and somehow looking through the windows are the *Pharisees*.

What then plays out is our expectation. The Pharisees are sanctimonious in their attitude, being people of the law – **not as hidden academics, but as public rabbis**. They were very uncomfortable with the great-Rabbi status that so many people were projecting onto Jesus: ‘*because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.*’ On that day Jesus spoke for the tax collectors and sinners, **but he does not deny their description as those whose behaviour is unacceptable to God**. Jesus might have defended them to the Pharisees, but he doesn’t: ‘*yes they are still tax collectors and sinners.*’ He could have said.

‘When Jesus heard the Pharisees, he said to them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’

So here is the point. Those eating with Jesus could not have sought atonement with God in the temple, taking the necessary ritual sacrifice of a lamb. **Literally, they wouldn’t have been let into that glorious house.** They were too far identified by the Pharisees and everyone else as those unclean, those Roman collaborators, unwelcome to approach God – stuck in the middle

between sin and salvation – hopeless and hated – no access to God and no mercy shown. **I wonder what they felt like on the inside.**

Jesus, the Son of God did show them mercy, and I'm sure a challenge to change and follow him. **Jesus peeled away the cultural labels and the identities of everyone that day.** Firstly, those sinners were shown that inside God wishes to offer them healing as mere repentant people alone, where their collective identities – whether accepted or deserved, were of no consequence to Him.

Secondly, Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Those so proud of their own status, and yet so willing to apply identities of separation and indeed hopelessness to any they chose to label. **They too needed repentance.**

Once again: *'matters of personal identity are at the heart of so much of what we hear in the social and political debate of these current times.'* That reality of our common life carries huge risks because we *are* all different, therefore so easily placed into sub-cultures we did not choose, and therefore division.

Our first identity is as Christians – which is the unity which God seeks between us. That identity is primary and exclusive. Just about everything else about you in a chance to be identified as different from each other. **We cannot help those differences, but we must never allow culture and sub-culture to become the only way we regard people.**

St Matthew's new name means – *'A gift of God'*. Surely, it is a good name for us all. Amen