

20 September 2020
Feast of St Matthew

Today is the Feast of St Matthew, Apostle, Evangelist and Martyr; one of the 12 disciples called by Jesus. As we celebrate these disciples throughout the year, so we are able to reflect upon different aspects of faith and how we should be seeking to strengthen our own journey of faith, open ourselves to new ways of thinking that reflect God's nature and how to engage in mission in today's world.

Matthew was not very popular in his day as a tax collector, officer of the Roman emperor, probably wealthy and seen as siding with the authorities. His identity is shrouded in mystery as there has been no personal biography left of him. He was probably a Gentile Semite who became a Christian.

The saints of the past came, and still do today, from a wide variety of backgrounds and we remember them for their commitment to Jesus and the building of God's Kingdom. Saints are not necessarily all "Highflyers" and many have gone unnoticed or not spoken about. I suspect we could all record individuals that we have regarded as saints.

I wonder who your favorite Saint is? Mine is Peter. I like his candor, earthiness, humanity and clumsiness. Peter says it as he sees it. His won vulnerability is on show for all.

Each of the saints teach us in their own way how to follow Jesus and Matthew is no exception. Matthew was writing to a predominantly Jewish community, written after the destruction of the Temple in 70CE. The introduction to his Gospel places Jesus firmly within the faith of Israel and establishes Jesus as the fulfillment of the messianic promise. Matthew's Gospel has also the reputation of being the Church's Gospel and often the one we know most about.

The source of Matthew's Gospel is not definitive, although it is generally agreed that Mark, as with Luke, forms a solid base alongside Matthew's own editing and interpretation of the material. In addition, scholars are divided that another source, now often described as the lost Gospel, containing many of the sayings of Jesus and known as Q was also important. What distinguishes Matthew from Mark is the author's arrangement of his material into 5 discourses.

As I reflected on today's reading and the call of Matthew, a much more profound question raised its head. How is it possible that the creator of the Universe could be interested in human beings, and how do we respond to this love from which we have come and to which we return at our death? This was the question of our discussion last Tuesday evening.

In today's Gospel Matthew does not waste time, or ink in explaining his call. He left his job, left his place of employment, left it all to become a follower of Jesus. Jesus did not choose the powerful, the influential, the social climbers, the political or religious leaders of his day to be his intimate followers. Instead he chose the ordinary-the outsider, even the hated. They were common people with common jobs. Some of them like Matthew the tax collector were despised. I have this picture in my head from reading today's Gospel of Matthew sitting in his office with piles of money that he has collected to hand over to the Roman authorities. Matthew is despised by the Romans because he is a Jew and rejected by the Jews as a traitor because he works for the Romans. He is in a no-win situation as we say. He is barred from the Temple and considered worse than a dog or a gentile.

I see him at the end of his tether. The passing pleasure of having money no longer brings happiness. Life is increasingly without meaning and purpose. No one loves him. No one looks him directly in the eye. No one wants to be seen with him. He is avoided in the streets. Nobody wants him around.

Then Jesus turns up. The one who heals and makes people whole. Matthew ponders and wonders what Jesus will say to him. Will he be rebuked and judged? No follow me he says to Matthew, and as the story unfolds in the Gospel Matthew responds without hesitation.

What follows is as important as Matthew's decision to follow Jesus. Jesus dines with all those who are rejected by the religious authorities and the faithful, and when asked why he does this by the Pharisees Jesus responds with the words, "it is not the healthy ones who need a doctor but the sick, but go and learn what this means, I desire mercy not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners. Here I am reminded of the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. "We may all be surprised at who we may meet in heaven, assuming we make it ourselves."

I suspect, although please correct me if I am wrong, that the majority of us gathered this morning are nurtured or cradled Anglicans or Christian. Church and God have been part of our life in some form or another. For many our children and even grand children have rejected the faith and see religion and church as belonging to past generations. Humanity we are told has the capacity to define its own future without God and religious morality. There is no doubt that the Church has not always been faithful to the Gospel and that atrocities have occurred under the Church's so-called watchful eye. Increasingly the challenge for us all to create new followers of Jesus requires imagination and lateral thinking. While 70% of Australians say they believe in God, what sort of God do they believe in? Is it a God of the gaps? Is it a God that supports their political ideology? Is it a God that never challenges their preconceived ideas about justice, compassion and mercy? Is it a God that they learnt about in Sunday school and remains a benevolent old man with a beard?

Theologian Marcus Borg, and he is not alone, writes about the need for Christians to rediscover God, God for our times, not by abandoning God but rather by reasserting God in ways to be helpful and responsive to the questions that are being asked in our current context. He speaks about God and the Gospels for our times, that is not limited by doctrine, privilege, tradition or culture, but one that asserts the soul of Christianity as robust, lively, engaging, compassionate and just reflecting the very nature of God's unconditional love and generosity for all. NT Wright speaks about the compatibility and complimentary ways both science and religion assist us in discovering the faith in ways that connect with today's world.

What then is our mission today as followers of Jesus here at St George's today? Let me suggest the following:

1. We need to recognize that few people come to us these days without the Christian community, both as individuals and together, reaching out. One way of doing this maybe is to invite people to share our life together in our book or gardening groups.
2. How we live in the world as individuals and what people hear about our life together influences perceptions about church. We need to live by being the church and not limit our understanding of Church as a building no matter how fine the building maybe. The church is the gathered community of faith that meets week by week to hear the word of God, to share in God's ministry, to pray and support one another.
3. Pastoral care, caring for one another, sharing resources and talents. This we do very well here.

4. We need to be informed about scripture, able to respond with integrity and knowledge about God. I believe this is the most compelling challenge of faith. To be informed and to listen.
5. To meet weekly for worship and prayer. To enrich our own faith.
6. Call a feast and invite all as Matthew did when Jesus called him. We all do not need to be experienced evangelists, but we need passion and enthusiasm for our faith. I hope we can have such an event when the pandemic is over and certainly when the new vicar arrives.

On this day when we mark the calling and discipleship of Matthew we are also called to rise to the occasion in whatever way we are able, renewing our own calling, our commitment to mission and advocating on behalf of all in need. The challenge is before us all. We are reminded to be people of good heart and mind confident that in all our endeavours God remains faithful and enduring.

Amen