

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 19”

Matthew 9:9-13

As we've been reading through this gospel of Matthew, we've seen that Jesus has started to gather round him a small group of people who seem to be committed to following him – or, at least, to finding out what's going on. As Jesus has been teaching and preaching around the Galilee area he has attracted several men who will go on to be his “disciples”, and they have heard him explaining what his Kingdom is all about and the implications of that for those who want to be part of it. Mainly he has done that through what we now call *The Sermon On The Mount*.

He has also started to demonstrate what life in that Kingdom might be like as he has healed those who have been ill and driven evil spirits out of those who have been overtaken by them. His authority and power as the Kingly Messiah promised by the prophets and preachers of the Old Testament era are starting to become apparent and those first Christian believers who were the members of Matthew's church, and who were obviously Jewish, can begin to see that this Jesus is actually the fulfilment of all the Old Testament promises and prophecies. It's OK to believe in this radical preacher and teacher. He is, in every sense, kosher!

But as we said a couple of weeks ago, Jesus hasn't yet got his full complement of disciples. He's still calling people to follow him and commit themselves to him and his vision of God's Kingdom. And the passage we've just read is a short section about the call of yet another disciple – in this case, the author of this gospel himself. In the accounts that Mark and Luke give of this encounter, Matthew's other name of Levi is used, but there is no doubt in the minds of pretty well everyone who has ever written about this passage, that Matthew and Levi are one and the same person.

Matthew is here described as a tax collector, although it seems he was more of a customs official if he was sitting in a booth near Capernaum. This place was a key point on the trade routes which cut through the area and was actually on a border between two territories, that of Philip and that of Herod Antipas, two of the sons of Herod the Great who carved up his kingdom when their father died. The duties that were to be paid on goods and the levies that were due to those crossing the border were collected by officials such as Matthew, the first century equivalent of today's officials in Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. But unlike today's officials, who are rewarded for their work by a grateful nation in the form of MBEs and the like, these men were universally despised.

Of course, no-one likes parting with their money, especially if it seems to be going into something that is quite difficult to quantify. But being obliged by law to give your money to people whom you knew were ripping you off for their own gain and who were actually working for an occupying nation – well, that was pretty well intolerable. The collecting of revenues in the Roman Empire was a privatised business, with people competing for the franchises and the winners made their money by adding on their own “administration charges”. So, let's say you had contracted with Rome to collect a thousand denarii a day (these are just rough figures, you understand), you'd need to get that, cover the cost of bidding for the franchise and make a profit for yourself, so you'd actually raise maybe 1500 denarii a day – a pretty good mark-up, really. On top of that, the people doing the collecting were taking the money off their fellow countrymen and passing it on to the very people who were occupying the country and making life so difficult for them. In most people's eyes, Matthew would have been among the lowest of the low, which is why many people always referred to them – as do the Pharisees in this passage (v11) – along with the “sinners”. Any friends Matthew had would have been other tax collectors and other people whose position or behaviour put them on the very fringes of society.

But along came Jesus – probably someone whom Matthew had heard of by now, even if he hadn't heard him. And Jesus comes into and transforms Matthew's situation as dramatically as it's possible to do. It appears that Jesus was passing by Matthew's little kiosk and he simply calls out to him join him: just the two words, “*Follow me*”. As far as we can tell, Matthew has done nothing whatsoever to deserve this call. He is clearly not considered to be a “good” person. He hasn't, as far as we know, given any

indication that he wants to join Jesus. He would not have been a regular at the synagogue or part of the religious establishment. Jesus just calls him – exactly as he is and where he is. But Matthew doesn't stay as he is!

There is, as Tom Wright puts it in his commentary on *Romans*, a “*dangerous half-truth, currently fashionable, that God ‘accepts us as we are’*”. He points out that grace, God's call, Jesus' invitation to follow him, is always transformative. Jesus does accept us as we are, but he doesn't leave us like that. Matthew's life is about to change in ways that he could never have dreamed of – and his name will go down in history. The impact that Matthew has had through the gospel he wrote has been incalculable – and is clearly something that none of us will ever be able to do. But Matthew had a impact on the people around him, too – the kind of thing that we can learn from and emulate today. Let's look at that for a few moments.

Jesus sees Matthew there in his little customs booth, going through the same routine that he did every day, no doubt. He's getting on and earning his money, doing what he was trained to do, being part of the local economy, a well-known but greatly despised part of the business of that community. And Jesus simply calls him to follow him. There's no great appeal. There's no clever exposition of what the Kingdom is all about. There's no study group on the development of the Kingdom of God and its roots in the promises to the patriarchs. Just two words that changed Matthew's life – “*Follow me*”. And they changed Matthew's life because he responded. He responded in faith. Not a fully-fledged faith that had all the i's dotted and all the t's crossed. Not a deep faith that saw that all the words of the Hebrew Scriptures were now fulfilled in this messianic figure who had arrived at just the right time. It was just a faith that what Jesus had to offer was better than what he had now. Of course, it developed over the months and years that he spent with Jesus and that he spent reflecting on Jesus' life after he'd died and returned to life. But essentially it was a faith that said, “I'm prepared to go along with that and see what difference it makes.”

Here it comes – the Greek bit! The word that is translated here as simply “*got up*” and in some versions as “*arose*” is a fairly common word in Greek. But it's also the word used of resurrection – *anastasis*. Here's Matthew stepping out into a new life, starting all over again. All that had happened up until then was now behind him (obviously) and he was moving on into something completely new.

When Jesus calls you, you don't need it all sorted out at once. Jesus is not looking for a faith that is built on years of study and experiment. He's prepared to accept you as you are and help you move on into a deeper and fuller faith. Don't feel you've got to change before you can respond to Jesus – he'll sort out the changes as you get up and follow him.

And it's the following bit that's the key here. Look where Matthew follows Jesus. He doesn't follow him out of that booth and into a seminary or a theological college. He doesn't follow him into a church and a bunch of people who are doing nothing but praying and worshipping. He follows Jesus back amongst his friends and colleagues. As we've said, Matthew wouldn't have had many friends outside the circle of his fellow tax collectors and traitors. But he followed Jesus as he began to talk to them about this new life.

Can you see what's happening? Matthew has committed himself to following Jesus, this Kingly Messiah. And that step of commitment starts to transform Matthew as he wants to tell others about it – but the people he wants to tell are those closest to him, the people who are, in the current jargon, on his own “*frontline*”. Matthew is sharing the gospel, the good news that Jesus can transform things, with those who are all around him. He introduces Jesus quite naturally to those with whom he regularly mixes. When they come round for dinner, Jesus is there with him, and they can see him and the difference he's making to their friend and colleague.

But not everyone is happy with this. The Pharisees, the religious establishment, the gatekeepers of the law, start huffing and puffing that these people with whom Matthew is eating aren't “*the right sort*”.

Matthew, if he really has changed his ways, shouldn't be mixing with such people – and Jesus, as a rabbi, certainly shouldn't have anything to do with them. Good, religious people should be a bit more careful who they mix with and should stick to their own kind.

And Jesus hears their harrumphing and complaining and points out what it's all about. The people who are good and religious and so on – well, they can sort themselves out, surely. It's the ones who are currently on the edge – the unloved, the unaccepted, the difficult ones, the ones who don't behave as we'd like them to – they are the ones who need to hear the good news of transformation. And he goes on to quote from *Hosea*, from their own much-loved Scriptures – “*I desire mercy, not sacrifice*” (*Hosea 6:6*). They knew what that meant – and what Jesus was trying to tell them through it. God wasn't interested in the animal sacrifices that the people brought to the Temple as a kind of sop to religion before they then went out and behaved as if God didn't care what they got up to. There was no point in those Pharisees going through the motions of religion – and boy! could they go through the motions! – if they had no heart for those who most needed God's love, those who (whether they acknowledged it or not) were most desperate to hear the good news of forgiveness and healing and hope. These people on Matthew's frontline needed to hear what Jesus had to say. They needed to discover what Matthew had discovered. They needed to experience the forgiveness and transformation that are at the heart of God's new Kingdom.

So what can we pick up from that and emulate today? Well, of course, there's the truth that still holds good today, that Jesus calls us where we are and in whatever state we are and starts to change us. We don't need to have it all sorted out, only to trust that Jesus will help us sort it out. I don't know how many times you have heard Jesus say simply “*Follow me*” to you, nor how many times you've effectively said, “Not now – I don't think I understand it all yet”, but you can keep on saying that forever if you want. There comes a point where you've just got to get on with it, to trust that Jesus knows what he's doing and that those around you who seem to be following have made the right decision. (Just a clue on that – they have!) If that's the place you find yourself this morning, don't put it off any longer. Get up – arise! – and follow Jesus into a new life.

For most of us here, though, I suspect, it's what happens from then on that we need to pick up. It's this stuff about Matthew's “frontline” – a word which I think we might hear a bit more often to refer to that place where we find ourselves each day. This is about neighbours and friends and colleagues and family. It's about the way we live out our life of following Jesus with them. God doesn't want just “*sacrifice*” in the sense of religious rectitude. God loves it when we come into church together to worship him, I'm sure. But that's just a couple of hours a week. What about the rest of the week? What about tomorrow morning at the school gate? in the sixth form centre? at the supermarket checkout? on the early train to London? down the fitness club? in the newsagents? at the office desk? Jesus is with you there, too, just as he was with Matthew having dinner with his friends. And he'd be pretty chuffed if you introduced him to those around you.

If you were here last week, you'll remember that The Mob did a quick sketch about sharing your faith at school and Erik talked about Jesus' commission to get out and share the good news of Jesus' transforming power with those around. When he was preparing that he asked me a question about one of the words in Jesus' Great Commission in *Matthew 28:19*, so I had to go and look some things up. When Jesus says “*Go and make disciples ...*” there, the word we translate as “*go*” is actually a participle which means, in effect, the literal translation is “*going*”. We could say it means, “*as you go ...*” When you're going along through life, tell other people about life with Jesus. And don't forget, as Matthew found when he had his friends round, and as Jesus promises in those words from the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus is with you. He's “*with you always, to the very end of the age.*”

You've been here to worship this morning. I hope it's been helpful. But think about where you will be this week. Think about your frontline. Think about Matthew and his experience of letting other people see that Jesus was with him. Are you prepared to introduce someone to Jesus this week?

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Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think Matthew follows Jesus so immediately? How did you first hear Jesus calling you? Did you respond immediately? Why/why not?
2. Matthew had a lot of friends who didn't know Jesus. As we get more involved in Christian things, our circle of non-Christian friends decreases. Is that a good thing? Why/why not? If it's not a good thing, what can we do to redress the situation?
3. Do you see your "frontline" as a place to talk about Jesus? Why/why not?
4. How can we keep the balance between being part of the community of the church and being part of the wider community?
5. How can we best support each other as we try to introduce Jesus to others?
6. Pray together about some of the people you would like to talk to about Jesus. Pray for opportunities to occur naturally to introduce Jesus to others.