



Second Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 11 June 2023

READINGS

Genesis 12:1-9; Psalm 33:1-12; Romans 4:13-25; Matthew 9:9-13,18-26

Call of Matthew

Greetings. When I read the readings for this Sunday, there were a few things which came to mind and I feel perhaps it was fortuitous to preach on this Sunday's Gospel reading, both for you who are listening and for myself.

In the call of Matthew, which is primarily what I will be focusing on, I feel that there is a lesson for the individual and for the collective. When we transcend the limitations of dualistic thinking and begin to practice contemplative patterns of thought, we cease to see Scripture, and in particular accounts in the Gospels, as moralising tales and we begin to see that they speak very profoundly into the human condition and about the spiritual journey.

Each of us is comprised of three parts. You might think that I'm about to say body, mind and spirit. I'm not referring to that distinction. Each of us is comprised of an ego, a true or potential self, and a shadow self. The true or potential self emerges through a meeting or reconciliation of the shadow self and ego (which sometimes may be referred to as a false self). The call of Matthew is instructive at a corporate level, that is for the Church as a whole, or for all Christians, because it shows up our pretences at moral rectitude. Generally, as Christians we knowingly subscribe to the illusion that we are basically morally good (and even superior) people. In doing so we feel good about ourselves, we are affirmed, and whether explicitly or not, we compare ourselves to others whom we deem less moral or pure or holy than ourselves and in doing so we feel even better and more affirmed.

The call of Matthew, as in fact does the ministry of Jesus in its entirety, turns that on its head, just like the tables of the money changes were overturned by Jesus in the temple. Because the punchline of the call of Matthew is: "I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners." Jesus tells us clearly here that he has little interest in righteous people. If we consider ourselves to be righteous, the bad news is that Jesus just isn't that interested in us. He is far more interested in sinners. This is made clear in the Beatitudes where the first group of people who are blessed are the poor, which basically means the accursed and cut off and sinful, because that's what being poor meant back then. It is reflected in the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee where it is not the righteous Pharisee who is justified in God's eyes, but the sinful tax collector.

But the call of Matthew is also very instructive at an individual level. Because it represents the transformation, or the beginning of the transformation, of Matthew. Matthew is a tax collector. This

means a number of things. It means firstly, that he is a sinner, because he cannot remain ritually clean in terms of Jewish Torah because he is constantly handling dirty, impure Roman currency. Like the prostitute, he is rendered unclean by his profession.

Because he is legally or technically a sinner, those in authority, the religious leaders of his day, regarded him, with a great deal of disdain. In addition, based on his perceived collaboration with the Romans (who were despised by zealous Jews), his enrichment at the expense of his fellow countrymen, and his perceived corruption and greed in doing this, he was regarded by much of Jewish society, with a great deal of disdain.

Now, we don't know how it was that Matthew got into this profession. Perhaps he had no choice in the matter. Nevertheless, I think we can safely assume two things. First, Matthew enriched himself, or at least made a decent living (in financial terms) by virtue of being a tax collector. And second, Matthew must have had a rather low sense of self-worth and self-esteem due to the lack of affirmation, and indeed, outright hostility aimed at him from his fellow countrymen. So basically, deep down he feels like a piece of worthless trash, but he isn't too bad off financially.

Now whereas when we considered the call of Matthew at a general level and said that it is a call to the Church or to Christians to drop their façade of being holier or more saintly than others, for Matthew as an individual, it is also a call to examine those identities we assume which on the surface perhaps are not honourable or praiseworthy but which other people have assigned to us.

I'm not sure how many are familiar with the Enneagram, but I would say that Matthew is a five on the Enneagram. The five's root sin, or pitfall, is miserliness or stinginess, which can manifest materially or emotionally. For the five who is emotionally stingy, this means they are very protective over how much of themselves they give to others, mistakenly thinking that by guarding their personal resources, they will not lose any of their personal resources. It is perhaps motivated by fear of loss. The tragedy or irony is that in being so guarded and protected they deprive themselves of precisely that which they actually need – human love and interaction.

Again, we don't know how Matthew came to be a tax collector, but I think there's a good chance he was a five; that his root sin was miserliness; that he was motivated by a certain amount of greed and acquisitiveness (which was in his case financial) believing that so long as he did this, he would be fine, while at the same time being deprived of the love and affirmation of his compatriots.

In closing I am reminded of a refrain often used by Jesus. In the Gospels, Jesus uses it in different contexts, sometimes in relation to the disciples understanding the parables, sometimes in relation to the parable of the talents. In Matthew's Gospel, he uses it twice: "For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away." (Matthew 13:12) In other words, that which you think is valuable, but really isn't, will be taken away, while for those who know and recognise and have what is truly valuable, this will be added to.