

## Matthew

21 9 14

O Almighty God  
whose blessed Son called Matthew the tax-collector  
to be an apostle and evangelist:  
give us grace to forsake the selfish pursuit of gain  
and the possessive love of riches,  
that we may follow in the way of your Son Jesus Christ.

Our text this morning may be found in today's gospel and is Matthew 9 v9:

**'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.'**

Do you like coincidences ? Mostly I do – if I notice them. Today's coincidence is that the day dedicated to St Matthew should fall on the Sunday in the year our gospel readings are largely taken from his gospel. Given our Common Lectionary is on a three year cycle while days move forward five days in every four years who among us is sufficiently gifted and motivated to work out when this might occur again (84 years time !) – probably not in my life-time !

Matthew's name means 'gift of Jehovah'. His usual emblem as an evangelist is a man because his genealogy of Jesus emphasises Christ's family ties. Many of Jesus' disciples were fisherman: certainly Andrew and Peter, James and John and Philip were though I don't think Bartholomew was – he came from Cana. But

Matthew was a tax collector, a tax-gatherer, a publican and that put him beyond the pale in kosher Jewish eyes. Why? Because he was working with the Roman authorities to raise taxes which were resented. He was a collaborator, a quisling, a Norwegian word for someone who worked with the Nazi's during the 2WW. And there was always the possibility of making money on the side for himself by exploiting his position to exploit his fellow Jews. What is truly extraordinary is Jesus should call Matthew to be one of the twelve; what is truly extraordinary is Matthew should get up and follow him.

The cost to Matthew was to give up his wealth, his security, his home, his friends. The gain - to be connected with God through Jesus, the Son of David; the thrill to be in the presence of the Messiah - to hear him preach and teach and witness his miracles. And what I find curious is that it is not Matthew but Judas who manages their common purse!

Scholarship calls into question whether Matthew actually wrote the gospel attributed to him. But what is certain, he had a hand in its formation because in spite of what some Jews thought about him, Matthew respected the Law, the Prophets and above all Jesus' teaching on and interpretation of the Law. In the second century, Papias (60 - 130AD) Bishop of Hierapolis, writes this of him: 'Matthew collected the sayings (logia) of Jesus in the Hebrew tongue.' So whether or not Matthew actually wrote or edited the whole of what bears his name, there is no doubt that his pen had a hand in what was written - a gospel written with a Jewish audience in mind to show that Jesus was their long-expected Messiah, fulfilling the prophecies of scripture, pointing a way to God by how to live this life

informed by a right understanding of the law and with a sense that the end times and the judgement of God were to come.

Legend is uncertain as to what happened to Matthew. Different martyrologies place his death in different places. The Roman Martyrology places his death by the sword in Ethiopia after having been the guest of the eunuch of Queen Candace. The Martyrology of Jerome places it at Tarrim in Persia while others suggest Tarsuana, east of the Persian Gulf. He may even have simply died a natural death !

So today on the feast of St Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist, what can we learn ? Firstly, the encouraging thought that no one is necessarily beyond salvation – that sinners and tax collectors are not necessarily beyond the pale. And secondly and most importantly, that Matthew had the courage to respond to Jesus' invitation to follow him. And of course my question – are we prepared to do the same ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

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