

St. Matthew, 21 September 2025

Readings: Proverbs 3.13-18, Psalm 119.65-72, 2 Corinthians 4.1-6, Matthew 9.9-13

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.** (Psalm 19.14)

Today being the 21st of September, the Church keeps the Feast of St Matthew, Apostle, Evangelist and Martyr. Less than a month ago we kept the Feast of St Bartholomew and last Sunday the Feast of the Holy Cross. These commemorations, these observances with the great seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter give shape and depth to our keeping of the Christian year. Through keeping the Christian year peppered with its saints' days and other holy days the Church in her wisdom assists, gives substance to Jesus' call to Matthew then and to us today, "Follow me".

It is salutary to be reminded in September of the centrality of the cross for Christian faith, for believing, belonging, being and becoming, doing this about six months after we kept Good Friday when we proclaim, "This is the wood of the cross on which hung the saviour of the world" is salutary. The collect for Holy Cross Day spells out the horror of that hour, a horror visited upon the world daily. We need only for a moment to give thought to the harsh conditions the peoples of Gaza are having to endure, or the children taken from their parents and their homes by soldiers under the present Russian President's rule, or the school girls mainly Christian from northern Nigeria who were taken hostage by Islamist militant group Boko Haram in 2014.

The cross reminds us that God stands in solidarity with the suffering of the world wreaked upon us by our own foolishness, deficient in divine wisdom and lacking the will to learn it, coupled with man's inhumanity to man. That is why we must give attention to our souls, the households of our innermost selves so that we do not become net contributors to the suffering of the world in our areas of authority, influence, and power. Where we hold sway. However small these may be in the big picture. We as Christians, all of us, can build from the bottom up and should we have a little more or even great authority, influence, and wealth we will not only assist in the building up, but we can also help from places nearer the top.

We do this by giving attention to the voice of God and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Jesus makes it clear when he says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing". (John 15.5) Let us not do man's work, but the work of God.

Let us work towards becoming net zero contributors to the suffering of the world by how we live our lives, in our places of authority, influence and power, forsaking the foolish ways of the world by following too much the devices and desires of our own hearts – turning away from these for the sake of the Gospel of Christ. No one is without authority, influence, and power, although these are not equally distributed. Let's jettison that all too pervasive notion of powerlessness as Edmund Burke remarked, "Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little."

The collect pulls no punches, "Almighty God, who in the passion of your blessed Son made an instrument of painful death to be for us the means of life and peace: grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ that we may gladly suffer for his sake; ..." I know I will never gladly suffer, though suffering has been and may be mine for the sake of the Gospel.

But today is St Matthew's Day and not Holy Cross Day, but like the other Evangelists Matthew devotes a good quarter of his gospel to the telling of Jesus' passion, his suffering and death. The account of Matthew's call is succinct. "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."

From that moment on Matthew comes alive for us, who like him have heeded the call to follow Christ. What has gone before in his life is mostly hidden from us. What we are for the most part interested in is what his life looks like as he accompanies Jesus in his public ministry and how he carries on after Jesus' death and resurrection. This is not unfamiliar territory. I am often asked about my calling. The question isn't so much about how I became

a Christian, it is a prerequisite, but how I came to be in the public ordained ministry of the church.

Well, not unlike Matthew, I was called into the public ministry of the church. Yes, it was on a particular day, at a particular time, in a particular place. It was on a Sunday in the summer of 1979 while sitting at my father's desk in my parents' apartment in Hamburg. I could have ignored it and put it aside. It was a call from without that made itself known within. The light and the accompanying call can be summed up simply. "All that you have lived and experienced so far has been preparation for the ministry I am calling you into". I could have easily put this moment aside, imperceptible to anyone who would have been with me at the time. There were no outward manifestations. There was nothing dramatic at all. How very disappointing? Sorry. I could have ignored it. It would have been very easy. I chose not to, because I knew this moment would niggle me for the rest of my life. Well, here I am. The rest is for another time, perhaps.

But it is worth thinking about Matthew before his world is turned upside down and his life takes on new direction and new meaning. Before proceeding we need to see and to grasp that making a decision to follow Christ, to understand yourself to be a Christian, requires a new mindset, a new way of being, a new way of belonging. Your values will slowly be reconfigured. Priorities change. We no longer run from the cross, but towards it for true liberation for which it shines. I know how reluctant people are. John Donne's poem *Westward Faring* is about running from the cross on Good Friday. At times you will resist and at other times dig in. This reset will include how you value life and how you value the life of others, even the lives of strangers, of people and peoples you will never meet this side of eternity. As children within the family of God you will learn daily how to value them, speak for them, care for them and those who truly care will also find the strength and the courage to challenge, resist and correct. To truly love and care does not mean to go along with each and every fad. It is to cultivate a certain detachment to the ways of the world nurtured in the faith.

Obviously, we cannot take on the care of the whole world individually, or as a local church (smallish), Diocese, the Church of England or even the Anglican Communion, but we can make a contribution under the direction of the guidance and working of the Holy Spirit, always putting ourselves at the disposal of what God requires for the world and of each one of us. This is not contradictory. What God desires for the world he desires for us and what he desires for us, he desires for the world. These will 'perfectly align' rightly understood. He has the whole world in his hands.

As I conclude, I realise I have been writing this sermon back to front or at least that is how it feels to me having wanted to highlight that Matthew is a publican, a tax collector in the service of the Roman Empire. This we know. What might surprise us, but won't on reflection, is that publicans were highly valued and respected by the Romans, the citizens of Rome, because it was, they who on behalf of Rome collected the taxes that made the citizens of Rome wealthy. The publicans were instrumental in amassing the wealth by which Rome and the Empire were maintained. This is the other side of the coin of being a publican, tax-collector at the time of Jesus. We have lost sight of just how important these publicans were. Cicero, one of the greatest of orators, described 'the publicani' as the "the flower of knighthood, the ornament of the state, and the strength of the republic," and as "the most upright and respected [of] men". *

Matthew by choosing to take seriously the call to "Follow me!" exchanges one life of being disrespected/respected for a life in which he will be disrespected/respected for different reasons – namely for being a follower of and witness to Christ. In my life I have experienced or witnessed how people who are Christians are shunned, belittled and often not taken seriously sometimes causing an air of embarrassment in certain assemblies or making people feel uneasy by their sheer presence.

It was earlier this year that Esther Rantzen, a well-known British TV presenter of a previous era had the audacity to say without blinking an eyelid that the religious voice should be excluded from having a voice in the debate surrounding the assisted-dying bill, as it makes

its way through the British parliament, although religious people and particularly Christians are most definitely part of British society and have been for a rather long time. Extraordinary what people will assert who trumpet democracy. Democracies at their best are about inclusion not exclusion, including exposure to views you agree or disagree with. This may be painful. Cardinal Nichols, Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster made a simple point that is so easily lost sight of. "The whole point of a democracy is that we share views and I think we know that there are many voices of strong conviction in our society and all of them have a right to be heard."

Matthew meaning gift from God, also known as Levi, chooses to take seriously the call to follow Jesus. He chooses a new life, a new way, a new identity. It is in Christ. In Christ alone. It is costly. Paul writes, "It is time now for you to wake up from your sleep. The time when we will be saved is nearer to us now than when we first believed."

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SKETCHES OF JEWISH SOCIAL LIFE IN THE DAYS OF CHRIST, 1876
The Revd. Dr. Edersheim, pp. 51-59
The religious Tract Society 56, Paternoster Row;
65, St. Paul's Churchyard and 164, Piccadilly