

21 September 2025 – Choral Eucharist

Readings: Matthew 9. 9-13

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Today, as a church, we are celebrating the feast of St Matthew the Apostle. Matthew was a tax collector, an unpopular position in his time. But when Jesus said to him, “Follow me,” he responded by simply getting up and following him. Matthew the tax collector, thanks to Jesus’ transformative love and call, became Matthew the Apostle and Evangelist.

As a newly licensed Lay Minister, I find it very meaningful to preach on Matthew, chapter 9, as my first sermon. It feels very fitting indeed to reflect on Jesus’ call and our response to it in the same week that I have been authorised to serve by the Bishop of London. For many years, I heard Jesus’ call, but I very skilfully found ways to ignore it. But eventually I found ways to respond to it. Becoming a lay minister is just one way for me to respond to his call, born out of my intense longing to be in the company of Jesus.

And I hope that the way God reveals Himself in Matthew’s gospel will inspire us all to listen to Jesus’ call - “Follow me” - and respond to it by following him. Following him with excitement, to see what role we can play in God’s plan. Following him with the desire to be in Jesus’ company always.

Matthew was a tax collector. Thinking with today’s assumptions, it might be confusing for us to compare what we understand as tax collectors with what it meant in Jesus’ time. Tax, of course, remains a contested issue even today, leading to heated debates and political discussions about social justice. But back in Jesus’ time, collecting tax was more than an unpopular job or a political discussion point as we understand it today. Tax collectors were collaborating with the Roman authorities, an occupying and oppressive force, and they were often dishonest, making extra money for themselves. So, it is not difficult to understand why tax collectors were considered to be traitors or seen as equivalent to sinners by society. And Matthew was one of them.

In today’s Gospel reading, we have a very profound image described in the most serene way. Matthew, the tax collector, someone who is seen as a traitor, a sinner, is sitting at the tax booth, probably during scorching heat. We don’t have any other images here; he is sitting at the tax booth. Then Jesus walks along, bringing a breeze into the scene, and Jesus sees Matthew. It’s so powerful: Jesus sees this person sitting at the tax booth, and he says to him “Follow me”. Jesus himself is calling someone to follow him, someone who is seen by society as not a great, respectable person. Matthew trusts Jesus, trusts his call, with peaceful obedience, and he follows him. He follows a calling. We can picture him leaving the tax

booth and physically following Jesus, or on a more abstract level, we can think that he leaves the ambition of making more money, earthly investments, and follows Jesus.

The verses where Jesus called Matthew come in the middle of passages where Jesus heals people. The call of Matthew is, then, situated within the context of Jesus healing people. Jesus himself openly says, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” So, responding to the call “follow me” brings healing—healing to the self, to the Church and to the world.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus is famously in the company of those who are at the margins of society, and here we see that too. The Pharisees judged him, saying to his disciples “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” It is important to pay attention to this scene. From whose eyes do you read or hear these verses? Who are you in this story? Do you feel closer to Matthew, abandoning what is wrong, what is worldly, and following Jesus? Or do you feel closer to the Pharisees, judging people by the company they keep? I’m afraid I can see myself judging people. But listening to Jesus offers us another lens, a more compassionate one.

Jesus tells the Pharisees “I desire mercy, not sacrifice”. This phrase, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” is from the book of the prophet Hosea 6:6. Here, Jesus reminds the Pharisees of prophet Hosea, proclaiming the importance of compassionate love for God over sacrifices and ostentatious religious adherence. After this, Jesus declares his mission: that he came for sinners. Seen in this light, shifting our judgement of other people to a perspective of God’s love for all, places us more in Matthew’s position.

Responding to Jesus’ call might sometimes be difficult, and it definitely comes with responsibilities. But even in the hardest times, it comes with God’s love. What can be more joyful than that? Following a calling is constantly seeking Christ’s company, and this can come in many forms: being part of the life of the church; contributing financially to its work; offering our service, like serving coffee; or showing compassion and having a friendly chat with someone who you haven’t spoken to before. Even your smallest, most humble contribution to the life of the church and to the world, in the name of Jesus Christ, becomes big, meaningful and healing, thanks to the works of the Holy Spirit.

It all starts with a simple reflection: What can I do to be in the company of Christ—in the church, through the church, and in the world? Today’s gospel reading tells us that when we follow Jesus’ call, we become part of his story. Think again about the first two verses of today’s gospel reading: “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.” In the

historian William Bright's words, who wrote the hymn we sang this morning, Matthew "...rose, responsive to the call, and left his task, his gains, his all." By the very simple act of intentional action—getting up and following Jesus—Matthew becomes part of the most beautiful story of all time: he sits with Jesus, and Jesus' message travels to those who need to hear it, in this case, the Pharisees, about the radical transformation he brings even in the most unexpected people. His message travels as Jesus' company transforms Matthew the tax collector into Matthew the Apostle and Evangelist.

As we celebrate the feast of St Matthew, may we lend an attentive ear to Jesus' call, and discern ways to be in his company, to follow in his way, to respond to his call. We know that wherever we sit, whatever we do, Jesus sees us. And Jesus tells us to follow him. We can ignore this call, and perhaps we did ignore it many times, as I did. But he will continue to see us and tell us to follow him. Following Matthew's example, we can simply get up and follow him, and Jesus will advocate for us always. So, the question for each of us is: will we get up and follow him today?