

Are you a new creation, rescued from the dominion of darkness and the doom of diminishing in death?

Are you walking the way of acceptance by God; the way of rejection by Man,

Are you a disciple growing into the destiny of your life?

Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven.

Or perhaps you're a friend of Matthew, invited to his party.

Yours also is the tax booth. Yours also is the sickness of sin.

Yours also the hearing of Jesus. He stands before you now.

He is looking at you. He is telling you: Follow me.

Will you rise and enter the narrow gate or turn aside in fears and tears and keep to the broad ways of the life that you know so well.

Imagine if Matthew had decided not to follow Jesus.

Decided by hesitation of commitment.

Decided by calculation of the cash he'd have to give up.

Decided by fears.

Decided to stay in the darkness, though he did not know he was in it.

Decided in the sunshine of the lake to stay in the broad way, not seeing that he would come to be one more life locked up in the trophy halls of perdition.

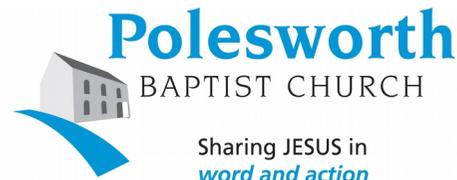
As Jesus says later to Peter: whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?

Come, dare to be a new creation, rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Son whom the Father loves.

Rise up and follow Jesus.

Rejoice and be glad for great will be your reward in heaven.

Amen.



1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

21<sup>st</sup> February 2021

Reflecting on Matthew 9:9 - 13

### Reflection [1]

Where should we start? Logic says start at the start, go with the flow, follow the order. But, today, let's do the reverse.

I have not come, Jesus says, to call the righteous, but sinners. That doesn't mean He has no interest in right-living people. Nor is He saying that some people are so good that they have no need of Him.

The Gospel means good news, and these words are the good news of the good news. Jesus came to call sinners. Good news for everyone for, as Paul tells us in Romans 3, quoting many Psalms, there's no-one righteous, no, not even one. Jesus comes for everyone. That's the Gospel good news.

Being unrighteous creates a barrier between God and people. A brick wall of such width and depth and height that no human being can scale it, go round it, burrow through or tunnel under it. All such endeavours only increase its magnitude. It can only be breached by turning to God & receiving forgiveness. As Paul says in Romans c4: blessed are they whose transgressions are covered, whose sin the Lord will never count against them. Jesus came to rescue people from sin and its consequences and bring them into God's kingdom.

So why then does Jesus say to the Pharisees: Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifice? He is quoting from the Law and the Prophets, their every-day scripture, which is our Old Testament. As He said in the Sermon on the Mount He did not come to abolish the Law & the Prophets, but to fulfil them. So now He says: learn that I desire mercy not sacrifice. In passing let's note that that is a God statement. He expresses the words as His own, I desire mercy, not sacrifice.

To learn is not to know the scripture by rote, but to understand what the scripture is saying and apply it. It's His answer to the Pharisees angry, upset, condemnation: 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?'

The phrase Jesus quotes comes from the book of Hosea. In brief, Hosea is a prophet whose life and words express in vivid ways the failure of Israel to live truly with God. Though God is faithful to His people, His people persistently refuse to be faithful to Him. They turn away from Him. Like a spouse turning to

other lovers they commit adultery, breaking their love loyalty to God for the hope of blessing from the local gods.

When God expresses His distress over their actions and His total commitment to them, they do turn back to Him, and repent of their wrong-doing. But it's a superficial work. They offer sacrifices to God presuming that God will then do His God-job and help and protect them. Yet it's a cheap show of love, which God exposes by saying, His desire is for actions of mercy not works of sacrifice. [see Elizabeth Achtemeier. New International Biblical Commentary. Minor Prophets 1 – minor because the books are small, not for their level of significance – Paternoster Press. ISBN 0-85364-809-3]

Jesus is not saying He is anti-sacrifice – He Himself will be all humanity's saving sacrifice. He is re-stating God's concern that external God-service is not 'Hesed', that is the steadfast love of the Lord that leads people to live in ways expressing the qualities and character of God. The NIV translates the word as mercy. God wants His people to practise the mercy that He has given to them. Jesus is challenging the Pharisees. Their focus on living by rules is re-birthing the external sacrifices that Hosea deplored. They are more concerned about keeping rules than living like God, and blessing others with the blessing we have been given.

The Pharisees' rule keeping was not only leading God's people astray, it was leading them astray. When Jesus says I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, He means, He did not come to invite people who are so self-satisfied they are convinced they do not need anyone's help, even God's. That's why Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. He knew that amongst them there were people aware of their short-comings before God and hungry for His rescue. Which brings us after a worship song to Matthew

## **Reflection [2]**

Jesus saw Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. The tax collector's booth represents Matthew's life. It was the place of his work. Capernaum was an edge of the frontier town. There, goods came into Israel and goods went out of Israel. Matthew was very probably an import, export customs and excise collector. He and his colleagues planted their booths to catch the traders.

His booth was the fountain of his wealth. It gave him the place to take the taxes for the authorities and the opportunity to take his share of what he collected and any side payments that might be offered. His wealth bought him a house and the means to lay on a feast for Jesus, for His disciples and for Matthew's own circle of tax collectors and sinners.

His booth was also the source of his troubles, for, as he would have had to work with the occupying Roman powers, he was seen as a traitor.

His booth stood for an occupation that was so widely corrupt that even if Matthew was personally honest – and who knows if he was - he could not escape the general association of tax collectors with sinners, as the by-word for all that was wrong in Israel. His work was a scandal and a smear.

His booth was the house of his work but it cut him off from the house of Israel. For he physically contacted gentiles, making himself ceremonially unclean, barring him from the synagogue.

Yet it is at his tax booth that Jesus tells him: Follow Me! And he does, straight-away, no delays, no holding back, no cavilling, no saying 'later, when I've sorted out all these people'. In the midst of Matthew's identity, a tax collector at his tax booth, in the place of his personal meaning and his sin, Jesus speaks acceptance and a new start. Mercy to fill Matthew's empty soul, love to heal his wounded spirit, God's acceptance declaring him welcome.

So Matthew gives up catching people for taxes and becomes a gatherer of people for the kingdom. Now his wealth is treasured up in heaven, with all his money on earth counted as nothing. No more corruption. No more taking up extras to benefit his position. No more valuing his self-worth by the sum of his wealth. No more inviting his friends round for a good time party, but inviting people to receive the good news of Jesus Christ.

He will still suffer.

He hasn't set out on a pilgrimage of pleasant paths.

The Pharisees wont admire him because he's joined Jesus.

Religious authorities in foreign parts will condemn him.

He will be crucified for Jesus.

But their verdict over him will be the trophy of his life.

No more heart sorrow, soul sickness, spirit suffering, for he has entered into gospel goodness: blessed is Matthew when people came to insult him, persecute him and falsely say all kinds of evil against him because of Jesus.

Rejoice and be glad Matthew, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus came for people like Matthew, people who are not so satisfied with their life that they think they don't need God. Has Jesus ever stood before you, looking into your being, telling you: Follow Me.

Did your spirit rise, was your soul released,

did your flesh stand up? Are you following him?

Did you enter the narrow gate; are you walking the narrow way?

Are you a new creation, rescued from the dominion of darkness and the doom of diminishing in death?

Are you walking the way of acceptance by God; the way of rejection by Man,

Are you a disciple growing into the destiny of your life?

Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven,

Or perhaps you're a friend of Matthew, invited to his party.

Yours also is the tax booth. Yours also is the sickness of sin.

Yours also the hearing of Jesus. He stands before you now.

He is looking at you. He is telling you: Follow me.

Will you rise and enter the narrow gate or turn aside in fears and tears and keep to the broad ways of the life that you know so well.

Imagine if Matthew had decided not to follow Jesus.

Decided by hesitation of commitment.

Decided by calculation of the cash he'd have to give up.

Decided by fears.

Decided to stay in the darkness, though he did not know he was in it.

Decided in the sunshine of the lake to stay in the broad way, not seeing that he would come to be one more life locked up in the trophy halls of perdition.

As Jesus says later to Peter: whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?

Come, dare to be a new creation, rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Son whom the Father loves.

Rise up and follow Jesus.

Rejoice and be glad for great will be your reward in heaven.

Amen.