

Readings:

Ezekiel 33: 7-11

Romans 13: 8-14

Matthew 9: 9-13

All are welcome

Imagine for a moment what it must be like to be an outcast. Someone society has rejected. Someone who is despised, fairly or unfairly. Someone who has no place with the rest of us. What sort of person might that be? Do you have anyone or any type of person in mind? Who might they be? Why are they in that situation? How does someone get to be the one on the outside looking in? Is it something they did? The place they came from? The way they dress?

In our diverse society it seems there is a place for almost everyone – being different here is being normal – there is no norm by which we can all be measured – everyone is welcome. And yet. And yet there are still those who for some reason are on the outside – maybe they are ignored or unseen rather than despised, but still they have no place with the rest of us. And there are those who really are despised, perhaps because of some unforgivable thing they did, or their unacceptable opinions.

Matthew, or Levi as he was originally named, as we heard in our gospel reading, was very definitely on the outside – and he was very much despised. I don't think there are many occupations these days which would make us despise someone – jokes about estate agents and traffic wardens notwithstanding – maybe we could add OFSTED inspectors – but in general, while we might think some jobs are more worthwhile than others and those who do them more worthy, we don't despise the people who do the mundane, the menial, the dirty jobs that we wouldn't do ourselves – because such work is necessary and we are glad someone is prepared to do them for us.

Think then, of Levi. We should give him his original name to begin with – Matthew is probably the name given him by Jesus. And just to add to the confusion – he is very unlikely to have been the author of Matthew's gospel. When we first encounter him he is Levi the tax collector. The outsider. The man with no friends other than fellow tax collectors. Tax collectors like Levi were despised because they collaborated with the occupying Romans. We have difficulty understanding that situation as our country hasn't been overrun by an enemy force since the time of the Norman conquest in the 11th century – remember 1066 and all that. It might have happened during the second World War but Hitler never quite managed to get his plan and his forces into place in order to invade us. But if you've seen a movie or read a novel about occupied France or our own Channel Islands you will know what rough justice was meted out to anyone who was seen as a collaborator with the occupying army – and it wasn't pretty.

Levi and the other tax collectors were collaborators and were hated because of it. They were also despised because they were dishonest, they exacted more than their due. To the more religiously minded Jew they were also despicable and unclean because they handled Roman coins which bore the image of the Emperor, and according to Jewish law as in the Ten Commandments, graven images were banned for being idolatrous. So one way and another Levi and his mates were thoroughly despised – and that's before you get to the actual job of collecting taxes. Taxes, or more correctly tolls, were collected on all goods and people moving from one place to another. In short, if it moves,

tax it. Levi sat at the entrance to the market place, and everyone passing by would have to pay as they entered and pay a toll on all goods brought in for sale and on anything bought as they left. There were no set scales of payment. The Romans told the tax collectors how much they wanted and it was up to them to add their own charges in order to make a living. It was a free for all and open to corruption. Plenty of scope then, for ripping people off, and in return no limit on the amount of ill-will generated.

Last week we heard about the call of the first disciples – Peter, Andrew, James and John. All fishermen who lived in Capernaum who gave it all up to follow Jesus. They would have known Levi. The fish they worked hard to catch and make a living from were considered a great delicacy in Rome, so much of their catch would have ended up there, having been preserved in salt, boxed up and shipped to off to Rome – but not before Levi had had his piece of the action. How much these young fishermen must have hated Levi.

We don't know why Levi had chosen this way of life, but for whatever reason, there he was, and we can't imagine that he was happy or got much enjoyment from life. Having plenty of money is all very well but it doesn't compensate for being cut off from the rest of society especially a society where community and relationship are key. So do you get the picture?

Let's move on then. Jesus is in Capernaum. It's his home town having moved there from Nazareth where he grew up. In our reading he is in the market place with his disciples and he sees Levi sitting there absorbing all the hatred along with the money, and he speaks to him. Not for a chat about the weather, or how is it going with the extortion racket – but 'Follow me.'

What are the disciples thinking? Him? Him! No way.

But Levi gets up and walks towards Jesus who welcomes him with open arms, and turns to his disciples and says 'This is Matthew – your new brother.'

That shut them up. Did they one by one welcome him as Jesus had done? Or did that take a bit longer?

What we are told is that there was a great party later that day – and we know how Jesus loved a good party. Matthew invited his fellow tax collectors to meet his new friend and to join in the rejoicing over a man reborn and given a new life.

But of course along come the party poopers, the Pharisees. They don't challenge Jesus directly but they pick on the disciples. Why this? Why not that? Jesus is always doing the wrong thing. Who does he think he is?

Table fellowship – sharing a meal with someone – was an important part of the fabric of Jewish life, and still is. Who you eat with says a lot about your beliefs, even who you are. So to eat with all these undesirables, social outcasts is giving a strong message about who you are and what you think is important. It's also saying you don't care much for the accepted customs and traditions of Jewish society – but if you're not careful you'll be a social outcast too.

Jesus gives his critics short shrift in reply and reminds them that scripture tells them that God's mercy, God's loving kindness is more important than the law, more important than insisting on the traditions and customs that the Pharisees used to maintain their own status in Jewish society.

People of the time saw a close link between spiritual and mental well-being and physical health. So we often read in the gospels that the people Jesus healed were also told by him that their sins were forgiven. Healing and forgiveness go hand in hand. A holistic approach to well-being that chimes with much contemporary understanding. It was the people at the margins of society that needed Jesus, not the ones who were wealthy, had lots of friends and were well-respected. As he said, it is the sick who need a doctor, not the healthy. It was the friendless who needed a friend, not the popular. Jesus had come to rescue the lost and the unwelcome, the people on the outside seen as unclean, those not wanted here, or anywhere. Just so, he made it clear that everyone was welcome to eat with him at his table – and not just to eat with him, but to share in the Kingdom of God which was being made a present reality in his life and ministry. Matthew was invited to join in, whatever the Pharisees and anyone else thought. And Matthew decided to say yes, and joined Jesus' growing band of disciples.

What does all this have to do with us? Two things.

One is that God calls all sorts to follow him, not just the nice guys. God's love is total, free and unconditional. It's total because it's for everyone, no matter what, no matter who. That means even if you've got a past that you're not particularly proud of, or even downright ashamed, God loves you just as much as anyone else with an unblemished record. When you say yes to Jesus the slate is wiped clean, the past is forgotten – just as it was for Matthew.

Everyone is loved by God – you, me, everyone. In a later verse in Matthew's gospel (13:45) we read:

⁴⁵ 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Here Jesus is giving us a short parable that is usually understood to be a metaphor for the value of having a relationship with God and seeking the way of the Kingdom. Knowing God is the pearl of great value. But there is another way of reading it which I think is better. The fine pearl of great value is you, me, everyone. And God gives everything, in the life and death of Jesus his Son, to gain your love. That is how much you mean to God. And if you mean that much to God, how should you respond?

Saying yes is not about doing lots of things in the church or giving lots of money. First and foremost it's about having a loving relationship with God, it's about knowing Jesus for yourself through prayer, through reading about him in the bible, even through our sermons!

God's love is free – there is nothing we can do to earn or merit it. God's love is free and freely given because that is what God is – love, through and through. Love is what God is and all that God does. And his love is unconditional – there is nothing we can do that will make him stop loving us. That is the love Matthew recognised in Jesus and it changed his whole life. It's the love God has for each of us.

In our first reading from Ezekiel God says that he has no pleasure in the death of the wicked – what he wants is for them to turn from their back from their evil ways and live – as did Matthew. In our reading from Paul’s letter to the church in Rome we heard that love is the fulfilling of the law. Love as lived out by Jesus in all he did, supremely in the crucifixion. Love as seen by Matthew as something that could heal his unhappy way of life and give him a new start.

And that is the second thing we can take from all this. We are all, I imagine, familiar with the Ten Commandments – don’t steal, murder, commit adultery etc. But in John’s gospel, at the Last Supper on the night before the crucifixion, Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment. Not a hint or a suggestion, something to think about in your spare moments – but a commandment. Love one another. Sometimes that’s difficult when we find that our fellow Christians are not always easy to get on with. I don’t suppose Peter and the others were overjoyed to have Matthew join them, and no doubt there were some difficult moments as they travelled around Judea following Jesus and trying to understand what he was all about.

The disciples – perhaps brash young men, with their own views on life – had to learn from Jesus that love is more important than anything else. They had to accept Matthew as a fellow disciple and forget all that had gone before. They had to see Matthew as Jesus had accepted him – as beloved and valued.

But everything changed after the Resurrection with Pentecost and the giving of the Holy Spirit. We know from reading the book of Acts that the disciples stayed together after Pentecost, worshipping daily in the temple and preaching the good news. Everything they did was led by the Spirit. And we have that same Spirit at work in us if we have said yes to Jesus. With the help of the Spirit we can learn to value the other – the difficult person, the one who has different ideas about how things should be done, different ideas about what is acceptable or not, the one who needs help and support rather than giving it.

Sadly it’s been a mark of the church’s history especially since the Reformation, that if people in the church disagree, instead of trying to find a solution under the guidance of the Spirit, those disaffected leave – either to go to a different church or if it’s a serious enough issue and there’s enough people involved, to form a new church. That cannot be what Jesus had in mind for those called to be his Body, commanded to love one another so that the world would know we are his disciples. Difficult it may be but that is our calling – to love one another for Jesus’ sake and for the sake of the gospel. It may take a lifetime of trying to get it right, but Jesus has called us, individually and as a church, and so we can live in that love, if only we will let God and let it happen. Then day by day as we grow in that relationship and get to know Jesus better ourselves we can make him known to others.

To him be the glory. Amen.