



I Desire Mercy

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St Matthew's Day

Ephesians 4:1–7, 11–13 | Matthew 9:9–13

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A church can become known for what it did at a particular moment. St Matthew-in-the-City has a history of speaking when silence would have been easier, and making room when other churches were closing ranks. Some of us were part of that history. Some of us are here because of the legacy of it. Some people found this place at a time when they did not expect to find a place in the church at all. On St Matthew's Day, it is right to give thanks for those who made that possible.

This is still a church that seeks justice. We continue to speak publicly about the lives of our neighbours. We open this place for conversations that matter to our city. We join others working for a world in which people and creation can flourish. That commitment is alive among us. Perhaps that is why St Matthew's Day is a good time to ask how it might grow. When we know the stories of the boundaries crossed before us, we can become less curious about the boundaries we now take for granted. The readings today invite that curiosity.

In the Gospel, the objection to Jesus's meal is about the people at it. His critics think they can tell, from the company he keeps, that something has gone wrong. Jesus answers them with a line from the prophet Hosea: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Sacrifice was a serious religious practice. Jesus is speaking to people who care about faithfulness to God, and asking them to look again at how they recognise it. They have seen the meal. They have seen who is there. But they cannot

see mercy at work because they have already decided what the company says about Jesus.

That is an uncomfortable possibility for any church. We may care deeply about justice and still have habits that limit whose wisdom we hear. We may be ready to speak on behalf of others, while being slower to notice what they could teach us. Matthew himself makes the question difficult. He is a tax collector, implicated in a system that benefits from the subjugation of his own people. Jesus's call does not make that system harmless. Nor does Jesus conclude that Matthew can be understood entirely through his part in it. And so, Jesus calls him to follow. Jesus sees a possibility for Matthew's life that others have ceased to imagine. And the call asks something of Matthew, too. He gets up from the tax booth and follows. Mercy opens the possibility of change, for Matthew and for those who must now make room for him. That is more demanding than a general declaration of welcome. It asks what might change when we take another person's life seriously, including the parts that challenge us.

That is why I think Ephesians fits well alongside this Gospel. It speaks of a church called to unity, and of gifts given to different people so that the whole body can grow. Its vision of unity depends on difference. There is no need for patience, or for bearing with one another in love, if everyone already sees the world in the same way. And the passage has a purpose beyond keeping the peace. The gifts of the community are given "to equip the saints for the work of ministry." The church grows toward maturity as more people are equipped to take part in that work. That gives us a way to ask what mercy means here, now. It is possible to welcome someone warmly and still expect them to fit into a community whose shape was settled before they arrived. It is possible to listen to a person's experience and still leave all the decisions with those of us who

already know how things work. Ephesians invites us to notice the gifts we might otherwise miss. Someone may bring a question that changes how we understand our work. Someone else may know how to begin a conversation we have been avoiding. A person who has only recently come through the doors may see a possibility that those of us who have been here a long time can no longer see. And the question of whose voice counts does not stop at the church door.

St Matthew-in-the-City sits among people whose lives are shaped by decisions about housing, income, public space and who is considered to belong here. We know how easily a person experiencing homelessness can become a *problem* to be moved along, rather than a neighbour with a history, relationships and hopes for their life. We know how readily political language can turn people into categories before we have heard them speak. We are approaching an election. Parties will offer different answers to difficult questions, and we will make our own judgments about them. But as Christians, we have to ask more than whether a proposal sounds efficient, popular or reassuring to us. We have to ask who will bear its costs. Who has been heard in making it? Does it address the conditions that leave people without a secure place to live, or does it merely make their hardship less visible to the rest of us?

Those are political questions. They are also questions of mercy. Jesus's words do not allow us to confine mercy to how kindly we treat an individual across a table, while ignoring the systems that shape whether that person has a table, a home or a safe place to stand. This is one reason I value this Church's willingness to speak publicly. Seeking justice is part of our life together. Our task now is to keep that witness close to the people whose lives are at stake: to hear what they tell us, to let

it test our assumptions, and to stand with them when a decision threatens their dignity.

Ephesians calls us to humility, gentleness and patience as we do this work. Humility means recognising that we do not know everything about another person's life. Patience means staying with work that will take longer than an single election campaign. And gentleness is no excuse for silence when someone is being harmed. These are ways of remaining answerable to one another while we act.

The election will pass. The calling of this Church will continue. I do not think we need to work out today what St Matthew-in-the-City's next defining act will be. Churches rarely know, in the moment, which choices later generations will remember. We can pay attention to what is before us: the neighbour we might otherwise overlook, the experience that complicates a simple answer, the gifts that make us more able to respond. So today we can give thanks for what St Matthew-in-the-City has been, and for the justice we continue to seek. We can take heart in the people already doing this work, here and across our city. We can draw others into it, and be willing to learn from them.

"I desire mercy," says Jesus. Mercy gives Matthew a future beyond the place others had assigned him. It asks those around Jesus to imagine a community larger than the one they thought possible. In Ephesians, that community grows as more people are equipped to share in its work. That is a hopeful calling for St Matthew's Day. We have inherited courage, and we are still more than capable of it. As we listen to our neighbours, speak where we need to speak, and make room for more people to shape this church's life, we can grow into a justice that is deeper, more faithful and more fully shared.