



Following St Matthew

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St Matthew's Day

Proverbs 3:1-6; Matthew 9:9-13

22 September 2024

Haere mai e te kahui a te Atua

Tangohia enei kai Rangatira a te Karaiti.

Come, bringing your varied faiths and backgrounds,

For all are welcome to share in this act of communion.

These are words we use each Sunday to invite all people to share in the meal of the Eucharist. Most services of the Eucharist have some words of invitation before communion is shared, but these ones are distinctly St Matthew-in-the-City words. While some parts of our church suggest that communion is a meal meant only for Christians, the theology of this community always seeks to push beyond the established boundaries, because Jesus always pushed at established boundaries. The boundary that some place around communion is that it is a meal for those who are already part of the Christian community. The canons of the Anglican church state that communion is only for those who have been baptized. Frankly, I am inclined to treat that canon as more of a guideline than a strict rule to be followed, because I think it misses the point. The point being, that Jesus through his words and actions, constantly showed us that the love of God is uncontainable. The love of God does not give a damn about human rules which suggest that love is somehow limited and controllable.

Today we celebrate St Matthew, the person whose name is given to this church. St Matthew is listed as one of the twelve disciples, and according to the Gospel of Matthew, from which we have just read, Matthew was a tax collector. That detail about Matthew's occupation is only mentioned in this one place in the bible, and as such is a point of some debate. Was Matthew a tax

collector or was that one of the other disciples? Let's not get too hung up on that particular discussion today, but rather consider why this Gospel might have identified Matthew in this way?

While taxation is always debated within our political systems today, we should note that here in Aotearoa each one of us has some say in shaping the tax policies of this country. Our democratic system, for all its shortcomings, does allow us to vote for the different tax policies of different political parties, and enables us to hold governments to account for how our taxes are used. This was not the case in the ancient world.

In the time of Jesus taxation was a method by which the Roman conquerors exploited the wealth of countries they had conquered. Conquered people had no say in Roman tax policies which intentionally kept these conquered nations in a state of poverty. The Romans did this because it is very difficult to challenge an oppressing power when you are struggling to survive. The Romans demanded that the vast majority of wealth and resources created by people in places like ancient Palestine were paid to Rome as a tribute. To do this Rome typically co-opted local leaders to cooperate with them to ensure that the money kept flowing in their direction. Should this system break down in any way, the Romans would respond with force. Indeed, this happened only years after Jesus lived, when the failure of Jewish leaders to provide sufficient money to the emperor was one of the catalysts for the Jewish Roman war that resulted in the destruction and desecration of the temple in Jerusalem.

When Matthew is identified in the gospel as a tax collector, we are being told that this was a Jewish man who was to some extent complicit in the unjust system of the Romans. As a tax collector Matthew would have taken significant sums of money from his own people, the vast majority of which would end up in Roman hands. I say the vast majority, but not all, because this entire system was riddled with corruption. Tax collectors were typically believed to over

tax their own people as a means of lining their own pockets. By doing so they essentially created a system in which they did very little work in terms of creating wealth and resources, and yet benefitted in an unjust way from the work of others. This was a system of exploitation, not unlike the way modern capitalism exploits the working classes today.

When we hear Matthew described as a tax collector, we really need to add a few punchier descriptions to really get a sense of how people thought of him. When I was younger, I can remember people being described as sell-outs, meaning people who had abandoned their principles in pursuit of money. Matthew fits this description of being a sell-out. Another word that strikes a chord today might be coloniser. As a Jewish man Matthew doesn't fit this description quite so well, but he was certainly collaborating in the work of colonising his own people. In a sense, that makes such a description even worse. The point here is that a person in Matthew's position was hated by many of those within his community.

Today's Gospel reading gives us no context about the moment when Jesus called Matthew to follow him. We do not know if they had met before, if perhaps Jesus had been softening Matthew up in some way. We do not know what Matthew had been wrestling with himself, if he was already struggling with his role in the exploitation and subjugation of his own people. But we can add a layer of interpretation to this passage which is hinted at by the fact that Matthew is labelled as a tax collector. Jesus is not simply inviting Matthew to become a disciple. Jesus is suggesting to Matthew that it does not matter what he has done, who has been, what choices he has made, he can make a new choice, and if he chooses to follow, he will be completely accepted. This is the Jesus who says Haere mai. Come, bringing your varied faith and background, for you are welcome. And Matthew heard that invitation, and said yes, and followed. And in doing so Matthew did not leave any part of himself behind, but rather, he followed Jesus with all of his baggage intact.

And then the gospel reading tells us, that once Matthew decided to follow, he and Jesus and others shared a meal.

Communion is a sacred meal. The sacredness of communion is not located in our beautiful words, our rich musical tradition, the pageantry of clergy who lead the services. We might like those things, even love them, and we may well associate them with this broader concept of the sacred, but if we make the mistake of believing that God is contained within such things, we have made God very very small.

The sacredness of communion is found in the audacious claim that when we gather as a diverse community, with all our richness and wildness, that is the place in which God's presence can be felt and experienced. More than that, we only get closer to the fullness of God's presence, by responding to the call of Christ that says, I love you no matter who you are, who you have been, or who you might become. So, on this day when we remember St Matthew, let us remember that to worship in this place which carries that name, we too should welcome all, not judging ourselves or other for choices we have made, but with an understanding that those choices have led us here. Amen.