

# *inclusive or exclusive?*

a sermon preached on the

*feast of matthew*

24 September 2017

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by father richard wilson*

the lections: Prov 3:1-6; Ps 145; Eph 4:1-14; Mt 9:9-13

Matthew, apostle and evangelist, in whose name today's Gospel was written, whose feast we celebrate today, was a man plucked out of obscurity. He was someone identified in Pharisaic Judaism as sinful for having colluded with the Roman authorities by collecting taxes for them and so, ritually unclean, for having the filth of money on his hands. But Jesus, far from alienating Matthew, calls him from obscurity and makes him a guest at dinner. This simple story we hear today serves to illustrate the fundamental dichotomy between the vision of community of the Pharisees and of Jesus and his community, which, incidentally, is now you and me.

We have to remember there is a historical separation between the man identified as Matthew the tax collector, apostle and evangelist who lived in Jesus' time, prior to 33 CE, and the Gospel written in his name which came to be at least thirty years later, maybe more. The author of Matthew's Gospel wrote within a Jewish community, one that sought to retain Jewish religious heritage in an identity evolving with a new Christian faith.

The Matthean community was probably one of a number of Jewish communities vying for prominence in an environment of confusion over identity and leadership. Other groups included the Pharisees, of course, but also the Sadducees and the Essenes.

Another movement was Rabbinic Judaism, emerging after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70CE, centred on small community synagogues and Torah observance – which gave the form of Jewish community we find among us today.

These various forms of emergent Judaism competed to represent a new national form of Israel in Palestine, each offering different approaches to the interpretation and observance of Torah. The particularities of their responses to Torah influenced the nature of the communities they would create.

This episode in Matthew illustrates the Pharisaic approach. One that defines community by drawing a sharp line between who is included and who is excluded. Their comprehensive doctrine and practice of ritual purity enabled easy identification of who was in – the ritually pure, and who was not – the ritually unclean, meaning all the rest, including Matthew the tax collector, and Jesus the Nazarene who ate and drank with him.

The outcome was, for the marginalised, a particularly trenchant social exclusion and inequality. Something that Jesus' ministry concentrated on opposing – most elegantly in his Sermon on the Mount, also found in Matthew's Gospel.

Brendan Byrne, a Roman Catholic biblical scholar in Melbourne, points out that the critical portrayal of the Pharisees' isolationist policies in Matthew's Gospel may have been responsible for a fair amount of Christian anti-semitism, even the Shoa, the Holocaust. It is important not to miss the point that the Pharisees were only one part of the Jewish population at the time, and did not represent the others.

Jesus' action of calling Matthew into his community and having dinner with him and a wider assortment of riff raff, drunks and ratbags, presents an opposing vision for community structure. He draws **into** community the marginalised and unclean. Not surprisingly, the Pharisees are outraged – on the basis of their ritual purity laws.

Jesus words are two seemingly unconnected statements. First, that it is the sick who need a physician – criticising the Pharisees' failure to attend to the weak and marginalised. Second, he instructs them to go and learn this: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice". Jesus directs the Pharisees back to their own scripture, in this case Hosea chapter 6, to understand the real object of faithful observance of Torah. The fundamental basis of Pharisaic community building is challenged and they are embarrassed by being told they do not understand their own faith tradition. Jesus knew how to pick a fight.

In particular, I believe Jesus exploits the insecurity of this group of men. He attacks their particular nasty conservatism, reflected in their fundamentalist reading of the Torah, their attention to their own dignity in the community and their sense of being threatened by the other contenders for social leadership. In the short term this is an evangelically effective move but ultimately Jesus is executed for it.

Holding these two approaches to community formation, exclusion or inclusion, alongside each other today is useful for examining the way we develop community in liberal democratic society. Is our approach exclusive or inclusive? Do we define our community by whom we keep out or by whom we invite in?

In a democracy, social policy is determined by the majority voices (if it is not, it is corrupt). My question is, is it the right and privilege of the majority to make as much of the community as possibly conform to its own pattern of living, its own preferences, its own culture and to exclude those who do not comply? Or, is the responsibility of the majority to guarantee a society that ensures all people have the opportunity to be included and to live fulfilling lives according to their own vision of human flourishing?

The lesson in Matthew's Gospel today **surely** is that community responsibility rests in the love and nurture of all, in inclusion and not in exclusion. I find in this lesson a way to interpret democratic social policy in our community – and I mean that at every level – nation, state, municipality and parish. It drives my response therefore to the refugee debate, the citizenship debate and most topically, the present issue of allowing Same Sex Marriage.

Jesus' Gospel tells us not to reject people that we might conservatively look on as ritually impure, but to make space for them, and to recognise their contribution to our lives. The quality of a community is determined by whom it includes, whom it protects and loves and nurtures, in particular how it treats its minorities and how difference is permitted, enabled, and celebrated.