

the way
a sermon preached on the feast of
St Matthew: apostle, evangelist & martyr
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at
st john's
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The Lections: Proverbs 3:1-6, Psalm 19:1-6, Ephesians 4:1-14, Matthew 9:9-13

“Follow me”.¹ These two little words catch the practicality of the baptismal calling. Discipleship of Christ is *not* information. Rather, it's response, action, praxis – a way. Matthew heard this call – which required of him a thoroughly practical response: “And he got up and followed [Jesus]”.²

We do not know, with certainty, whether the Matthew of today's story is the same person who wrote a 'gospel'. Certainly, a compelling support for Matthew's involvement is the very fact of his having been an outsider – an unacceptable, unclean, undesirable tax collecting 'sinner'. Matthew's very presence in the company of Jesus' followers is significant. As today's story demonstrates, Jesus' choice of companions raises more than eyebrows among the religious leaders.³ The fact that this particular gospel is named after that tax collector⁴ – regardless of who actually wrote it – is itself a potent symbol. The good news of God in Christ is told by someone utterly unacceptable to supposedly 'orthodox' religion!

If we reflect on that fact for a moment, we can see how that is bound to be so. Matthew 'gets' Jesus in a way that religious insiders do not – precisely because they are so enamoured with their status as 'saved' insiders, while Matthew knows he is not. It is this same evangelist who records Jesus somewhat caustically observing that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of heaven ahead of the religiously self-righteous.⁵ Likewise, that the gospel is hidden from the wise and intelligent but revealed to infants.⁶ The religiously self-righteous do not *need* to 'follow Jesus' – because they are convinced they know everything and already qualify as God's chosen. Matthew, on the other hand, is well acquainted with the opposite. The one uses religious practices as lever to win the God's favour. The other waits upon mercy. “Go and learn what this means,” Jesus pointedly declares, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice”.⁷

So what happened that Matthew's liberating good news of Christ's mercy became the bad news of sacrificing self-righteousness? What would Matthew the evangelist – whose gospel is known for shocking reversals in 'the Beatitudes'⁸ – make of Christian empire, crusade, thuggish proselytising, witch-and heretic-and-Jew burning, Christian misogyny and homophobia? Matthew – or at least, that writer or those writers who have composed this gospel – certainly knew about empire and crusade and burning and phobia. Scholars agree that Matthew's gospel was most likely written in the period immediately following Rome's cataclysmic destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70CE. Poignantly, Matthew's gospel is reckoned to have been written in Syria, possibly for the church in Antioch. In Antioch, those who had heard the call of Jesus to 'follow me' were caught in a pincer movement: between the terrifying might of Imperial Rome, and the defensive-aggressive reaction against them within the synagogue.

What was Matthew's essential message for that community? In commentaries it has been called 'the way of righteousness'.⁹ It is also claimed that Matthew's purpose was to “make clearer to his readers the claim of Jesus to be believed and obeyed”.¹⁰ Another says that “[Matthew] warns false disciples and those tempted to follow their antinomian [law breaking] course of least resistance [to

¹ Matthew 9:9, 4:19

² Matthew 9:9

³ Matthew 9:11

⁴ Luke and Mark both name this tax collector 'Levi'. Mark 2:14, Luke 5:27

⁵ Matthew 21:31

⁶ Matthew 11:25

⁷ Matthew 9:13

⁸ Matthew 5:3-12

⁹ Graham N Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp59-80.

¹⁰ J C Fenton, *The Gospel of St Matthew*, London: Penguin, 1963, p26.

persecuting powers] that everlasting torment waits the disobedient”.¹¹ Another asserts that Matthew wanted to ‘tell the story of Jesus’, to ‘bolster faith’, to ‘convince and refute’, ‘to explain present [persecuting] circumstances’, ‘to exhort’ [that judgement awaits the disobedient], ‘to arm for mission’.¹² That last term is particularly revealing of the militancy which later became endemic in Christianity. Righteousness and obedience became cardinal virtues in a Christendom empire setting. Is that really what it means to ‘follow Jesus’?

Yet perhaps it was not surprising that Matthew’s ‘Follow me’ became so associated with righteousness, obedience, law, militancy, and religious rivalry – and, eventually, empire. After all, the conditions which gave birth to the gospel were trauma, upheaval, division, and violence. In modern physics, the principle of ‘quantum entanglement’ suggests that every system is permanently affected by initial conditions: “particles entangled ‘at birth’ remain[ed] entangled forever despite the intervening distance”.¹³ We can hardly overstate the profound significance of Christendom’s reversal of the power orientation of the Jesus follower. Likewise, the Protestant Reformers remained men with medieval minds – their doctrine of ‘justification by grace through faith’ unable to escape the gravitational pull of obedience, law, righteousness, rivalry, militancy, and the empire mind of Christendom. It’s painful for us to admit that all-too-often this is how people outside the church perceive Jesus’ followers – a fact of significance in terms of the current global situation.

So it’s worth pondering: in a world so divided by religious rivalry, is it possible to ‘follow Jesus’ *safely*? Can the Jesus disciple escape the gravitational pull of Christendom righteousness, obedience, law, rivalry, militancy, and empire thinking? It’s too soon to tell – the historical jury is still out.

But I think we could – if there was a gravitational pull *earlier* than and *greater* than the accretions of rivalrous first century Antioch, militant Christendom, and Reformation divisiveness.

And it turns out that there *is* indeed a greater gravitational pull – right there in the very heart of Matthew’s gospel. It’s the gravitational event that *precedes* Antioch’s factional rivalry and righteousness. The tax collector at the centre of today’s feast met that gravitational pull – taking the risk of completely re-ordering his life by it. That gravitational pull is the essential paradox of the Christian **εὐαγγέλιον** *evangelion*: “Those who lose their life for my sake will find it”.¹⁴ Paul also expresses something of this paradox in this morning’s epistle: “When it says, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that he also descended into the lower parts of the earth”.¹⁵

This gravitational event is neither information to be ‘tweeted’ nor mere membership of a religious club – that is to grossly distort ‘the great commission’ of the closing verses of Matthew’s gospel.¹⁶ Rather, it’s a *praxis*, a way – *the* way of the Christ. What is the essence of this way? The way up is the way down: the way down is the way up. Entering into darkness is discovering light. Dying is rising. Losing life is finding it.

This is the gravitational pull of the evangel of Christ – by which it becomes possible to become liberated, from Antioch and Christendom and Reformation’s death-dealing righteousness, law, obedience, and rivalry.

And this is the gravitational pull of the Eucharist: in which our true offering at the Altar is our willingness to follow Christ on his way down. This is not mere information – words to be read from a book. Following Christ is a way, a *praxis*. Indeed, according to our tradition, it is *the* way – and a “condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything”.¹⁷

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¹¹ Robert H Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution* (2nd edition), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984, p10.

¹² David E Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, Macon: Smith & Helwys, 2001, pp5-9.

¹³ Dave Prueff, *Reason and Wonder: A Copernican Revolution in Science and Spirit*, Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012, p248.

¹⁴ Matthew 16:25

¹⁵ Ephesians 4:9

¹⁶ Matthew 28:19-20

¹⁷ T S Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’, in *Four Quartets*, London: Faber, 1944, p44.