

8.00am Matthew the Apostle

21.9.2014.

Matthew the apostle appears in the four lists of the twelve that are to be found in the New Testament. It is only in Matthew's gospel, however, that two features obtain - the first is that in that gospel, Matthew is described as 'Matthew the tax collector' - elsewhere he is just 'Matthew'. The second is that it is only in Matthew's gospel that the tax collector at the tax booth is named as "Matthew" - in Mark and Luke he is named as 'Levi'. It is thus Matthew's gospel in which we find the strongest tradition and evidence that there was indeed at least one tax collector within Jesus' close circle of disciples. And this is very significant I think, because given the critical feature of Jesus' ministry, that he associated with tax collectors and sinners, and that his offer of salvation and inclusion in the Kingdom was available first and foremost to this group, then Matthew the apostle stands as a very strong example of being a recipient of that outreach of grace that came from Jesus, and which we understand remains his offer to all people for always.

So one of the questions that Matthew the apostle poses for us, is the question as to what was so special about this outreach of grace, that embraced especially the sinners and the tax collectors? And in delving into this question I am especially indebted to the American biblical scholar Ed Sanders, and his book *Jesus & Judaism* (which I recommend). What we know very well is that the tax collectors or publicans of the bible were quislings to the Romans on whose behalf they collected a range of taxes from ordinary Jewish folk - for use of Roman roads, against assets such as land and property, against agricultural produce and as poll tax and empire tax. They also lent money, often to farmers with the loan secured against the forthcoming harvest. They were of course Jewish themselves, and on account of the fact that it was only Jews who were being taxed in this way, and that the tax collectors stood to make a great deal of money (we recall Zacchaeus and his lucrative business in Jericho) and like Zacchaeus many were fraudulent and extortioners, they were not appreciated one little bit. They were, rather, both disdained and mistrusted.

What is interesting, however, in the gospels is that the tax collectors are frequently referred to alongside the "sinners". And the gospels indicate that it was a widespread accusation against Jesus that he associated with tax collectors/publicans and sinners - people didn't like it. Clearly, at one level we can understand their unhappiness since the tax collectors were both working for the Romans and making money out of the poor - so why was Jesus associating with them and including them in his circle? Wasn't he *for* the poor? More to the point, however, it was principally some of the Pharisees and the religious leaders who were most vocal in the accusations - and we find it of course in our gospel reading - "when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, 'Why eateth your master with publicans and sinners?'" And this takes us

into another domain. Because as well as the publicans being socially disdained, and being resented for their economic advantages, there was a religious issue. In the New Testament a sinner is a technical term. It isn't a word for someone who's done something bad or naughty and who needs to say sorry. A "sinner", rather was someone who had wilfully decided to turn away from their religious commitments within the covenant community, who no longer went to the temple or kept to the Torah, but who had effectively rejected and cut themselves off from the faith community. A sinner was thus an outsider who because they had chosen to leave was now living outside of the normal religious arrangements of the day. For everyday folk who remained within the covenant community there were the normal remedies available for everyday transgressions or to alleviate occasions of ritual uncleanness. You went to the priest or you had a ritual bath. But for the 'sinners' these practices had been abandoned and there was no easy way back. Among the sinners there was also a particular group, which Sanders calls the "the professional sinners" – they were ones whose actual profession placed them outside the community and its norms – and one such group were usurers, which included the publicans/tax collectors. They were in direct contravention of Leviticus 25 vv.36-38 "take no interest from your brother who becomes poor". It's for this reason in objective terms that we find the tax collectors lumped in with the sinners in the gospels ... What we can now see a little more clearly are two things – the first is why Jesus' offer of grace was so attractive to someone like Matthew. As such an outsider in this society and with no remedy open to him to allow him to be reconciled and achieve wholeness and wellbeing, here was an offer, that if it was genuine, he couldn't refuse! What joy there must have been to find a group of people who said come and join us, come and eat with us, you are saved, you are whole. It was a great party they had at Matthew's house! This was Jesus' offer of grace – who in such a position could turn it down!

The second thing we can see is why some Pharisees and religious types were so sharp in their condemnation of Jesus for his actions in this regard – because what he was effectively doing was disregarding, and in their view disrespecting, the normal channels for being restored to wellbeing in the community. He was ignoring them, perhaps even ridiculing them, and they didn't like it.

There is one final note to sound here. Ed Sanders suggests that the most significant feature of Jesus' offer of grace was that it was available without qualifications. He notes that in Matthew and Mark's gospels Jesus says "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners". The sinners and the tax collectors are invited to "come follow me", but not that they must first repent or make restitution or change or do or be anything! They are invited as who they are. This is pure grace. And the offer is that grace will work in them the joy of his salvation. If the Son of man shall set you free you shall be free indeed! This is the best of it and this is probably the greatest scandal, and I think it remains a scandal even to us! Sanders admits that the gospels tell of a leper being sent to the priests, and that in Luke's gospel forgiveness is often

linked to repentance – repent and then only be forgiven. He suggests, however, that the earliest and the truest Jesus tradition is the one we find in Mark and Matthew as exemplified in the case of Matthew the apostle, where the only qualification for belonging with Jesus is to accept the offer to ‘come follow me!’ Thus Matthew stands for us, if nothing else, for the ultimate, breathtaking value of Jesus’ offer of grace which was and is something we cannot turn down. It is the light of the glorious gospel of Christ that Paul grasped and we are invited to learn to walk in this light.

Reverend Julian Francis

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