

Sermon for Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> September, 2014:

### The Call of Matthew

+ What a week it's been –the Scottish referendum *and* this time last week the Archbishop of Canterbury was standing here, the Cathedral was full and we heard him preach an excellent sermon for the Feast of the Holy Cross. But it wasn't the sermon that hit the headlines following the Archbishop's visit to Bristol, it was the interview he gave during the diocesan event, called 'standing room only' which happened here in the Cathedral on the Friday evening.

The interview attracted media attention because when Lucy Tegg from BBC Bristol, asked if he ever struggled with doubt, Archbishop Justin said he doubted in "lots of different ways".

He said: "There are moments, sure, when you think, 'Is there a God?' 'Where is God?'"

He went on to say:

"The other day I was praying over something as I was running, and I ended up saying to God 'look this is all very well, but isn't it about time you did something, if you're there?'"

"Which is probably not what the Archbishop of Canterbury should say."

He then explained that it was acceptable to occasionally have doubt, and still be a Christian.

Adding: "The extraordinary thing about being a Christian is that God is faithful even when we're not.

"When we get into the wrong place he comes alongside us and says, 'Right let's go from here.'"

Getting into the wrong place is part of the human condition and Matthew the tax collector, whose call we heard about in today's Gospel, was most definitely in the wrong place. Tax collectors were reviled by the Jews of Jesus' day because of their greed and collaboration with the Roman occupiers. They amassed personal wealth by demanding tax payments in excess of what Rome levied and keeping the difference. Jesus, walking past Matthew sitting at the tax collectors' booth, said to him 'Follow me' and Matthew got up and followed. Crucially, the action of Matthew in getting up, or rising up in some translations, stems from the word for resurrection. The implication being that by getting up and following Jesus, Matthew himself embarks on a new, transformed life. Hearing this, the minds of us, the readers of this Gospel leap forward, because we know that although the post-resurrection Christ was largely unrecognisable physically, his followers knew who he was by his actions. So from the use of this word we may deduce that once he had arisen from his place in the tax booth, Matthew will not be the same Matthew. Unlike Christ his physical appearance will be unaltered, but like Christ his actions will be an indication of his transformation. Matthew was lifted out of his previous sinful existence and offered a new beginning. To return to the quote from Archbishop Justin, God had come alongside him and said, 'right, let's go from here'.

At the precentor's conference in York this past week, as you can imagine there was much discussion of the Archbishop's comments here in Bristol. I was struck by an analogy made

by a friend of mine, Jan, who said that Archbishop Justin's comment on God getting alongside us and saying 'Right, let's go from here' reminded her rather prosaically, of a satnav. Personally I find satnavs a mixed blessing. Allowing it to guide me is wonderful, but I need the voice telling me what to do as well, and I find that bossy voice rather irritating – some would say it takes one to know one – but most particularly when my son sets it with a weird accent. But the point my friend was making was that if I take a wrong turn, the satnav never takes me back to my departure point. It pauses, recalculates and directs me to my destination along a different route. So it is with our Christian journey – we do get it wrong and there are plenty of dead ends, but God is always ready to draw alongside us, guiding us onwards on an altered route. He meets us where we are.

We don't have to hide anything from God, especially not our doubts, because as ++ Justin said, God is faithful even when we're not. We do get it wrong because following Christ is inherently risky, and as every Christian discovers sooner or later being called by God to serve him, as we all are, is challenging. The first challenge actually is discovering exactly what it is that we're being called to – which frequently takes years to discern. For the ten years before coming here I was a Diocesan Director of Ordinands, which meant I guided people who felt called to ordination. When they first arrived in my study I would ask them what had brought them here, and almost always their story was one of slow realisation, hesitation and disbelief. They were offering themselves for a particular service in humility, not knowing exactly what that might mean and with only an inkling of the challenges that lay ahead. The process leading to ordination is stressful and demanding, the only way to approach it is to trust God's guidance. There will be dead ends, doors which are pushed and fail to open but as many other exciting new beginnings, maybe not what we'd planned as God leads us along an unexpected path. Of course there are many callings and many vocations, but I've mentioned the process of discernment for ordination deliberately on this day when we celebrate St Matthew and his calling because the church of today badly needs more men and women to offer to serve God as priests.

The process of personal transformation starts when we answer God's call – whatever it may be to. And here I'm reminded of a story I heard last Thursday as Bishop Mike preached at the induction of Lee Barnes as Priest in Charge of St Stephen's Church, our neighbour just down the road. Bishop Mike spoke of Michelangelo's striking marble Pieta, which is in the Vatican. This beautiful, almost flawless statue depicts the Virgin Mary, cradling her dead son on her lap. Over the hundreds of years of its existence the statue sustained slight damage, but on May 21<sup>st</sup> 1972 catastrophe struck when a geologist with psychological problems attacked the statue with a hammer and much of it shattered. Putting it back together was the work of experts and took years – it was further hampered by the discovery that as the statue was struck, shards of marble had flown off and the appalled crowd took them away as souvenirs. Looking at the statue now, you would never guess the painstaking, time consuming work necessary to reconstruct this work of art filling in the gaps and restoring its beauty. To the amateur eye it looks just the same as it ever did but to those who know it's been restored it has an added fascination – it has been taken apart and put back together again, the same but different.

This being taken apart and put back together again is what will happen to us all to a greater or lesser extent as we commit our lives to serving Christ. The transformation may be subtle, or it may be dramatic. It may be completely life-changing, or we may be able to carry on with our lives pretty much unchanged, but seeing things through a different lens.

Others may observe that we are different – as Matthew’s friends and relatives undoubtedly did. Or they might not really notice – as with casual observers of Michelangelo’s Pieta.

Embarking on this adventure, having the courage as Mathew did to rise up and follow Christ, is to travel into the unknown. We don’t know where it’ll lead, what it will demand of us, how it will affect those who love us. But we do know that God will be beside us, guiding us loving us, meeting us exactly where we are and leading us to our final destination.

An anonymous prayer sums up what I have been attempting to say about the Archbishop’s interview, the call of Matthew and our reliance on God:

I asked for strength that I might achieve;

I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health that I might do greater things;

I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy;

I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of men;

I was given weakness that I might feel my need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life;

I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

I received nothing that I had asked for;

But everything that I had hoped for.

*Added by the Revd Andrew Williams, Curate of All Hallows, Twickenham*

*I asked for certainty that I may be secure in my faith;*

*I was given faith that I may be secure in Christ.*

Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered;

I am amongst all men, most richly blessed.

Amen.