

'A Taxing Question' Matthew 9:9

'As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.' (Matthew 9:9)

I wonder what your thoughts are on listening to this first part of the Gospel reading this morning? I want you to place yourself there for a moment in the position of Matthew, sitting at his tax booth, minding his own business and along comes this fellow with a very persuasive voice who says; "Follow me." Would you go? Indeed, would you leave everything and go?

Matthew did, which seems both extraordinary and outrageous. We hear today still of cults in various parts of the world who woo potential members away from their homes and families. Quite often this can happen very quickly and often the person disappears from their own community, perhaps never to be seen again. Doesn't this strike you as much the same thing? It does me. This is why we have to be so careful not to read passages like this in isolation.

Sometimes when I am a bit stuck on a difficult reading and I want to get an idea for a bit of inspiration, I may listen to an online sermon or some such thing on the passage. I did so with this and I am indebted to Richard Bewes, former Rector of All Souls, Langham Place in London, who in one of his sermons unlocked this passage and this conundrum for me with just four words: "Matthew already knew him."

Of course he did! This was no brainwashing exercise for some freaky cult. Matthew knew who Jesus was, and Jesus knew who Matthew was. How do we know that? Well, this is where a bit of digging for nuggets in a Bible passage really bears fruit.

You see when we think of Jesus, we think of Jesus, born in Bethlehem but growing up in Nazareth, do we not? What we forget is that in Ch 4:13, just after Jesus has been tempted in the desert and begins his public ministry, Matthew's own gospel states that Jesus left Nazareth to settle in Capernaum, beside the sea. So, when at the beginning of Ch 9 it says he got into a boat, crossed the Sea of Galilee and came to his own city, we are not talking of crossing to Nazareth, that would be too small a place, we are talking of Capernaum.

Capernaum was important enough to have a tax collecting station, and Matthew was the man in charge. He had collectors working for him engaging with the 'customers'. Matthew himself, would be doing the accounts at the booth to pay the taxes collected to the Romans further down the line. As such, Matthew would have been responsible for collecting four types of tax: Exports, Imports, Tolls and Household tax.

It seems unlikely to me therefore that Jesus would never have come across him. He may have had dealings with him while working for the family carpentry business through taxes on timber and supplies, even while he was back in Nazareth. He would certainly have known him from associating with Peter, John and the other fishing disciples through taxes on their catches. Then, of course Jesus would have paid his own household taxes.

Matthew on the other hand would have heard about, and probably seen, Jesus from the time Jesus started his ministry, performing miracles, healing the sick, mixing with the outcast such as Matthew himself. Surely, Jesus himself would have got around at some point to chat to the most hated man in town, after all he spoke to Chief Tax Collector, Zacchaeus, while Zacchaeus was stuck up a tree in Jericho.

So when Jesus said to Matthew: "Follow me", he wasn't out to kidnap a new member for his gang so that he could take him away to a remote place and brainwash him there, with everything done in secret. No, Jesus' ministry was a public ministry, not hidden. Matthew went of his own free will, because he had talked to Jesus about life and prospects and seen something better than the life he was living.

Let's face it, his commitment was amazing, this, the richest of the apostles, gave it all up, from one day to the next, because he believed in a man who lived the example that all you need is love, some daily bread and a relationship with the living God. Now you wouldn't give up everything you have, just because some fellow passing by says "follow me", would you? Nor did Matthew.

Nice history lesson John, but what's the punchline? Well, I want to run this one by you. When was the last time you spoke about your faith to someone else? When was the last time by your actions you let someone know about the Good News of Jesus Christ? You see, we believe in and know and have a relationship with a God that knew us before we were born. The Christ that is at the centre of our hearts, knew us first.

By whatever means we encountered him, whether as a child or as an adult, he knew us first. We didn't slip past his attention. It wasn't a casual encounter while he was looking for someone else, or the other way. He knew us first. Then we discovered him and responded to his call, otherwise why are you here?

We, by following him, have now become his mouthpiece when Jesus calls others. Are we a secret society that doesn't like to talk about our faith to those beyond these walls, perhaps leading some to think we are all brainwashed, mad or bad? Or is ours a ministry in full view of the public where our faith can be lived out and seen by all.

"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)

Not my words, but those of Jesus from the Sermon on the mount from Matthew's gospel. Do we stand the lamp on top of the table or put it underneath? What do you do? You see the call "Follow me" is a tough call, but we are called to try to obey it because we know the one who called us and he knew us first.