

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	21 September 2025
Service:	Eucharist, St Matthew, Apostle & Evangelist
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Vanessa Baron, Treasurer

Introduction: New beginnings

I wonder how many people here can remember the excitement of a new exercise book at school? We had to line up by the book room in our lunch break, clutching the old exercise book we reckoned was finished. A teacher named Miss Beard would then look through the book to see if there was any wasted space. If Miss Beard judged that the book was full then you were given a new one. A new exercise book was so exciting! All the old mistakes, untidy writing, red corrections could be discarded. Here was a fresh, crisp, clean book, a chance to start again. They even had a special smell!

We can all relate to the idea of a new start – we all enjoy them and the Gospels contain many examples of Jesus giving people fresh starts, not least Matthew.

1) Jesus saw Matthew Our Gospel reading invites us to picture Matthew in his tax booth by the side of the road in Capernaum. Matthew wasn't so much of a general tax collector as a customs official - waiting to levy taxes on goods as they passed from one province to another – one of the Roman's major forms of taxation: from Herod Antipas' territory to the Decapolis or across the Jordan to Philip's tetrarchy. We can imagine him in his little tax office, often hot and bored – always disliked, feared, despised – the Jews regarded his occupation as unpatriotic (he worked for the Romans); it offered easy opportunities for corruption and brought him into contact with those who were ritually 'unclean'.

But, in the NT, both occupations, that of a customs official and general tax collector tend to be represented by the same Greek word, and contemporary Jewish writers linked the tax collectors not only with 'sinners' – those who could not or would not obey the ritual purity laws- but also with thieves.

It's a very simple point, but both Luke and Matthew say that 'Jesus saw Matthew'. In the Gospels, Jesus notices people and seems able to make

judgements about them. I get the impression that Jesus was observant. Remember John's Gospel? Jesus had been watching Nathaniel at work under the fig tree and says of him, "An Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

Jesus took notice of Matthew – he didn't ignore him, or write him off as some despicable man, instead he issued both a command and an invitation, "Follow me!"

2) The Call - Follow me. Caravaggio famously painted this scene. He imagined Jesus pointing to Matthew and Matthew, in astonishment, pointing to himself, as if to say, "What, me?" The man most people avoided, amazed that this Rabbi would invite him to anything. Many commentators have remarked that Caravaggio deliberately painted Jesus' hand to recall the hand of God in Michaelangelo's depiction of the creation of Adam. It is as if, in this moment when Jesus calls Matthew to 'Follow Him', it is a moment of creation, a fresh start. And the Gospels record that Matthew gets up or it could be translated, 'He arose'. In which case we get the sense of new life, of resurrection!

3) The Dinner And not only does Jesus call Matthew to follow him, Jesus also goes to share a meal with Matthew, at his house. (What is implicit in Matthew 9, Luke makes explicit.) Then as now, sharing a meal with someone was a sign of a relationship. Jesus' willingness not only to notice people whom others despised is remarkable but more than that, in this passage, he identifies himself with the undesirable. To be a guest of the people classed as 'sinners' disqualified a man from being a 'haber' – someone with standing in the synagogue, recognised by the Pharisees as observing the tithing and purity laws. In effect, despite his own perfection, Jesus took on some of the blame associated with the 'tax collectors and sinners'.

So, no wonder, in the ensuing clash with the Pharisees, when they condemn him for eating with 'tax collectors and sinners', that Jesus reacts angrily, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy not sacrifice' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." Quoting Hosea 6:6 at them – endorsing Hosea's warnings against a religion that had become overly concerned with the externals, ritual purity; where love and mercy had been pushed aside.

Jesus sitting at table with the outcasts mirrored exactly the heart of God, which aches for people to return to him. As Jesus took on some of the blame associated with the 'tax collectors and sinners', there are echoes of what we will celebrate shortly, a meal to recall Jesus' death – where Jesus identifies with all that we are and where in the words of Isaiah, 'He was wounded for our

transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole.'

Conclusion - application

What would our judgement of Matthew be like? Challenge – how quick we are to overlook, to disregard, to ignore, to stereotype, to write off as uninteresting. In 1946, Walter Hussey, still at St Matthew's Northampton, not yet Dean here asked WH Auden to write a Litany for the Feast of St Matthew. He wrote, 'Lord, Deliver us, from forgetting it is our own impatience and indolence, our own abuse and terror of freedom, our own injustice ...'

What God in Jesus showed is the quality of mercy - Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy. Mt 5

But Jesus sees us – whoever we are, whatever we are like – whatever our hangups, insecurities, whatever our history, our failures, our petty ambitions and invites us to dine with him. Come follow me!

Today we have a Baptism– we will hear the call of Christ Directed to Alexander Harrison and his parents – an invitation to Follow Christ – to a new spiritual life that will last to eternity. But the Invitation to Alexander today is repeated to all of us and to all those who are ignored, rejected and outcast, 'Follow me!'