

Reflection for 21st September (St Matthew)

Matthew was a tax-collector – someone who worked on behalf of the Romans, who were of course an occupying force and hated by the Jews. So as a Jew who had become a paid official of the Roman imperial administration, he was a collaborator as far as his fellow Jews were concerned, and collaborators are seldom popular.

His calling by Jesus is mentioned only in the Gospel that bears his name, although in Mark and Luke the tax collector whom Jesus calls is named Levi, and it is generally assumed that they are the same person.

St Matthew's Gospel is a very Jewish one. Its opening genealogy traces Jesus' descent back to Abraham, and all through the Gospel there are references to the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, starting with the prophecy that a virgin shall conceive.

Today's reading goes on from the calling of Matthew (or Levi) to show that judging people by their outward appearance or by what other people say about them is not what Jesus does. Jesus eats a meal with Matthew and his fellow tax-collector friends, thereby scandalising the Pharisees. It was enough for Jesus that Matthew had followed his call and had therefore been brought back to God. He was forgiven; he was accepted, and therefore he was received into the fellowship of a shared meal.

When the Pharisees criticise Jesus for sharing a meal with tax-collectors and sinners, he quotes some words from Hosea in which the prophet challenges the people to ensure that their lives match up to the high ideals expressed in their worship, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice", and tells them to go and learn what these words mean. He follows this up with the declaration "For I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners" – a phrase which is characteristic of his ministry to those on the margins of society.

So this short passage reminds us of three things. First, that a simple response to the call of Jesus is enough to bring about acceptance by him. Second, that the words we utter in our worship need to be lived out in the lives we lead. Third, that no person, however despised or unpopular, is to be excluded from God's fellowship.

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