

Thought for the week

The predominant theme throughout the Gospel of Matthew is Jesus' declaration that he has come to seek and save 'the lost Sheep of the House of Israel' – the Jews. He gets into big trouble for expanding his search to the Gentiles, but in today's reading Jesus encounters trouble enough simply by seeking those within the house of Israel – the Jews – who are lost. We know Jesus' heart is for all people; no one is beyond hope.

Today's passage opens with Jesus back in his hometown, where he calls Matthew a tax collector to follow him. Here we see Jesus not only reaching out to the lost and lowly, but also to the privileged and powerful. Matthew's story raises the question of inclusion and exclusion: who is 'in' and who is 'out'.

At that time, there were people considered by society to be either in or out: there were the Romans who were in – the occupying power – who had their own society and as the oppressors looked down at the Jews; there were the Jews who had their own hierarchies of who was important and who wasn't, who can contribute and who should be shunned – the Jews looked down on the Gentiles.

Jesus shows that there is no place for saying who is in and who is out, including within his group of disciples. In the early chapters of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus begins his ministry by calling specific people to be his disciples. Now, Jesus calls Matthew to follow him. The choice of Matthew, you'd have to say, was a little bit out of the box – the other disciples were mainly fishermen.

Even as a Jew, Matthew would have been totally surprised when Jesus came into his life – something beyond what he was expecting or could even hope for. When Jesus reached out and invited him to follow and be a disciple, it would have been a total turnaround, not only leaving his life of privilege and ill-gotten wealth but also following a teacher who obviously upset the establishment. Can you imagine?

When Jesus calls Matthew, it provokes immediate controversy. The Pharisees and Jewish leaders were outraged. And maybe this is Jesus' point. When the Pharisees saw who Jesus was hanging out with, Jesus' response was: 'If you are well, you don't need a doctor. I came only to seek and save the sick' (9:12). It's a little parable. Jesus says to his critics in effect: You are all insiders, saved, among the elect, you are already in; you don't need an invitation.

In these stories, Jesus invites us to examine our relationship with him and ask the question: Have we allowed Jesus into our lives to change us each day as we grow our faith?

The story of Matthew's calling is about profound grace, about a life turned around. It's a story that calls us to rejoice for all who had been beyond hope and have been found and can claim that Jesus is Lord. It is also a story that challenges each of us to go and share that hope with one another and those who think they are beyond hope.