

“Follow me”: Jesus’ call to us

A sermon preached by Revd Dr Mark Butchers on St Matthew’s Day (21st September 2008)
at St Peter’s, Wolvercote

The Gospel for St Matthew’s Day: Matthew 9.9-13

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?’ But when he heard this, he said, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’

Today we remember Matthew sitting at his tax booth, responding to Jesus’ call upon him, “Follow me”. Matthew was what was called a “publican”. Publicans were local people employed by the Roman governors to oversee public works: the building of roads, sewers, aqueducts and so on. They also collected the taxes. They bid for the contract to do so, paid the tax bill themselves and then recouped the money from the locality by collecting taxes. Any profit they made, and there were ways of maximising that, they kept for themselves.

Understandably, being Jews working for the occupying power, they were not popular with their fellow Jews. They were deemed to have put selves outside the Jewish Law, and thus were banned from Jewish worship. They may have been powerful and had powerful friends, but they were outcasts from their own people. What they did was perfectly legal, but some of their practices were perhaps morally questionable. In short, they enjoyed great material wealth and power, but at what cost both socially and internally - in their inner being? Perhaps it was recognition of that cost that led Matthew to get up and follow Jesus.

Matthew, of course, had never heard of the practice of ‘short-selling’. Nor was I particularly conscious of it until a few days ago. But the current financial turmoil has been unavoidable for all of us, as have the revelation of some of the questionable practices and the greed which seems to have got us into the state that we are in.

Short-selling, as I understand it, is this. A dealer borrows shares in a particular company from another person and pays that person a fee to own those shares on a temporary basis. Then by selling lots of these shares, the temporary owner tries to drive down the price of that company. When the price is sufficiently low, they buy back the shares in that company at the lower price. They thus sell high and buy low and make a profit. They then return the shares to the original owner, keeping any profit they’ve made. Sometimes of course it backfires and the shares go up instead of down and they make a loss.

All of this is apparently perfectly legal, but to my mind morally questionable. The individual gets rich, but at what potential cost to the company and its employees? And I wonder at what cost to the individual themselves? They may be able to afford a lovely home, but if they stop and look seriously at how they achieved that, what does that do to them on the inside?

Of course it's easy to demonise city traders, the spivs of recent tabloid headlines. And there's a certain *Schadenfreude* around at the moment at their current woes. But as Matthew the Gospel writer reminds us, we need to beware of the logs in our own eyes. We live in a wealthy society. It is easy to get sucked into that to such an extent that need and want get blurred and greed for too much takes over. I know that for myself. We slip into acquiring in the here and now, forgetting the poorest in our world, the Lazaruses at our gates, blind to their needs and their existence. Compared to many around the world, we are wealthy people, but at what cost to those we overlook, and indeed at what cost to our inner health and our spiritual well-being?

Jesus' call to Matthew, "Follow me", is more than just an instruction to walk behind him on the road. It's a call to Matthew and to all of us to follow his teaching, his example, his way of life. It means adopting a new outlook, new priorities, a new focus on God's Kingdom rather than ourselves. It's a call to resurrection life. And indeed when Matthew got up from his tax booth, the Greek word used is *anastas*, which means "rising" – the same word as is used for "resurrection".

So there is more than a hint of resurrection life in Matthew's response to Jesus' call. But doing that, embracing this new way of living, inevitably involves dying in some form. New life and death are interwoven, two sides of the same coin. So when we or Matthew rise to follow Christ, we die to old ways, or aim to. We die to a focus on ourselves and live to ways which benefit others and our wider community. We die to mantras of self-promotion and the acquisition of more and more for us, and rise to the giving of our time and resources in a spirit of humility, in the service of others. That at least is the call upon us, even if we don't live up to it. It is what "Follow me" involves.

And it is not a once only call. Certainly there may well be a moment for all of us when we make a decision to commit to Christ. But that decision is re-made every day. Every day in word and deed we die, rise and follow – or fail to.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the leaders of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany. He was imprisoned and executed by the Nazis for his opposition to them right at the end of World War II. He expressed this interweaving of death and life in Christ's call like this:

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death – we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time – death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call. Jesus' summons to the rich young man was calling him to die, because only the man who is dead to his own will can follow Christ. In fact every command of Jesus is a call to die, with all our affections and lusts. But we do not want to die, and therefore Jesus Christ and his call are necessarily our death as well as our life. The call to discipleship, the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ means both death and life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Cost of Discipleship, p.79

There is a cost to discipleship, to answering Christ's call, "Follow me." But interwoven with it is the joy and fulfilment it brings. How can one measure the privilege of giving of one's time to someone in need or grief? How can you measure the fulfilment which comes from giving deeply of oneself in a voluntary organisation or a charity, or through contributing to

the well-being of one's community, or to the people in need overseas? How can you measure the value of not lying awake at night in silken sheets, knowing deep down that they are the fruits of dodgy dealing?

So yes, there is a cost to discipleship, but what is the cost of not following, or ignoring Christ's call? What does that do to our inner being? The cost and joy of discipleship are interwoven in Christ's call. Dying to self and rising to Christ are interwoven in that "Follow me". And each day we are asked to make the choice afresh: do we count the cost and find it too much? Or do we count the cost, sense the joy, and then embracing both, rise and follow? Amen.