

## THE PILGRIMAGE OF MATTHEW

A sermon preached by Bishop of Oxford, John Pritchard at St Peter's Wolvercote on St Matthew's Day, Sunday 21 September 2014

Matthew 9.9-13

One of the great things about stories is the anticipation of finding out what happens next. At night before going to sleep I often read a novel. I go to bed really looking forward to finding out what's going to happen, but after five pages I'm almost invariably dropping off to sleep so I have to wait until the next night.

So what happens next in Matthew's story? We know the critical moment of his call. Matthew was a tax collector, which means he was certainly a collaborator with the hated Romans and almost certainly a cheat. By collaborating with the Romans and taking taxes from his fellow countrymen he had made himself a social outcast. He had a toll booth and anyone passing through on the profitable route between Assyria in the east and the Mediterranean in the west, the famous Via Maris, would be required to turn over a hefty sum of money.

And as he collected the tax he would be adding his own hefty slice, in the same way Zaccheus did. Not a way to win friends and influence people. He would have had his lackeys of course. You may know Caravaggio's famous painting of Matthew sitting in the tavern with four young friends who doubtless saw him as their passport to good money. They would have been an isolated group, keeping to themselves, outcasts.

But in comes Jesus and points straight at Matthew and says, 'Come on; you're with me.' That's amazing enough, given Matthew's social position. But just as amazing is that Matthew says, 'Right, I'll just get my coat.' Perhaps he was inwardly disgusted with himself and grabbed at the

prospect of a new life. Perhaps he wanted real friends, real company. Or perhaps the compassionate authority of Jesus was just irresistible. Anyway, he went.

And that's about all we know of him. He's in the lists of disciples but no more. We don't know what happened next. The historian Eusebius says he preached to the Hebrews but that doesn't take us much further forward. Some traditions have him martyred in Ethiopia. But basically he follows Jesus and then walks off into the mists.

The most moving ending to a film that I've seen recently is of the main characters, a small community of monks, walking up a mountain, off into the mists. *Of God's and Men* tells the harrowing story of the seven Cistercian monks who's lives were threatened by Islamic terrorists who took over part of the mountainous terrain of North Africa. The monks had to decide whether to stay with the villagers who looked to them to protect them, or leave the area as the authorities told them to do. They stayed and were captured. The French Government refused to pay a ransom and the last we see of them is them trudging off through the snow with their captors higher into the mountains. Silently they disappear into the enveloping mist; we strain our eyes as they disappear. And then the credits roll. History knows they had their throats cut and that the mother of the abbot received an extraordinary letter sent by her son which had foreseen their possible capture and death, and in which he forgives his future killer, 'my last minute friend who did not know what he was doing.'

But it's that end of the film that haunts me. These gentle men of God trooping off to their death. In a sense that's what the disciples all did. They trooped off, every one to his martyrdom except St John. But not quite. They may have wandered out of the pages of history but they hardly trooped off in silence. Rather they danced off in joy, telling everyone they could the fantastic news of the resurrection. We know more about some

than others – Peter for instance, crucified in Rome, Thomas said to have taken the gospel to India, James is celebrated in Spain (Santiago de Compostella), Andrew is associated with Greece, but also strangely with Russia and Scotland (what would he have made of his country's referendum result one wonders?).

But Matthew – where did he go? Who knows? And there perhaps is his strength. He can stand for all of us whose pilgrimage is unknown but who follow Christ with joy on a good day and duty on a bad one, but who stay part of the great body of believers, playing our part in our day and then climbing off to disappear into the mists of Christian history.

But where would the Church be without us, the Matthews of faith? Matthew's problem, as so often ours, is that he was addicted to himself. He was feathering his own nest with the opportunities put before him. He had a sharp mind and was good with figures. So he went for it. And so do many in our time, even church-goers. Feathering of nests is not unknown in every part of society. Sharp minds, good with figures could describe many Oxford citizens. And addiction to oneself is pretty well universal.

But out of that unlikely raw material comes a church made up of people who have seen something more, who have heard the gracious calling of the Lord, who have risen up and followed him, and who now seek to be disciples who'll stay loyal all our lives, even if we disappear into the mists of time, remembered only for a few scratch marks on the surface of history.

But be sure of this. The Kingdom of God is made up of Matthews, you and me. We are the great congregation, and we are those whose names are written in the book of life. Not because we're any better than any others, but because, like Matthew, we have run the race and kept the faith.

Our pilgrimage goes on throughout our lives. The pilgrimage I'm on at present, 100 miles down the Thames, is a faint echo of that Christian journey. It's a condensed form of fellowship, challenge, celebration, disappointment, hospitality, conversation, learning, reflection and ultimately, arrival. The weather will be what the weather will be, just like life. We've no idea what our life's weather will be.

But one thing we know, and that right well. Alongside us every step of the way in life is the Christ of the Journey, the one on whom we can utterly rely, not to guarantee success or smooth passage (how could he?), but never to leave us. As Mother Julian wrote years after her life-changing experiences of Divine Love: 'God did not say you shall not be tempested, you shall not be work-weary, you shall not be discomforted. But he did say you shall not be overcome.'

That's the guarantee on our pilgrimage. Matthew knew it. So can we.