

MATTHEW 9:9-13
JESUS WITH MATTHEW, MATTHEW WITH JESUS!

Belonging to the Church is a huge issue for lots of people today. Some are wondering to which church they should belong for a number of reasons; others are leaving the Church of Scotland because they are unhappy with certain decisions that have been taken over last few years. Others are having to choose a new church, either because their circumstances have changed or because the church's circumstances have changed: some of you have come to Juniper Green in the last 6 months because you have moved house and have come to live in the area and have looked around at churches and have decided to settle here and we're glad of that. For others, their church no longer exists and they have had to find a new church. That process is a lot harder than you expect it to be; many find it quite traumatic and are glad to be settled. For many people in Scotland, however, belonging to the church is simply not a question on their radar: why would they want to belong to a Church? For them, it is simply not an issue!

But there's another piece of this puzzle. There are some who have a deep desire to belong to the Church, but there are all sorts of reasons why they stay away. This was brought home to me a few years ago in a conversation with someone who was part of this congregation, but had been through some tough times in her past; life had been messy, with a divorce etc. At those times in her life, she had walked away from the church, because she said "I didn't think church for was for the likes of me at that time! My life's a mess, so I can't belong to Church!" That's what she thought. There must be other people out there who think that and who would find great benefit from belonging to the Church, but they stay away because they consider that they don't belong! Or can't belong! Or we won't let them belong! Where did they get that message from? Did we tell people that? Have we given people that impression?

Over the next few weeks we're going to have a look at some stories of the disciples in the Bible. Not all of the twelve are talked about in any kind of detail, but some are and these stories we're going to have a look at. Discipleship: there's a church word. What does it mean? Is it not just a fancy word for a Christian? Are we disciples simply by coming to Church? Is it not just another way of describing a church member? Well, you might realise from the way I ask these questions that being a disciple is more than just being a member of a religious group, but is about life and the way we live life. We will build up a picture of what it means to be disciple by looking at these stories of the disciples of Jesus, as they meet Jesus, talk with Him, travel with Him, and learn from Him.

Today's disciple is Matthew. We read Matthew's story from Matthew himself. Matthew who wrote the gospel is the same Matthew whose story we read in the gospel, though really the only part of Matthew's story we read is how he becomes a disciple in the first place. But it is fascinating! "*As Jesus...*" (*Matthew 9:9a*) Matthew's at work when Jesus comes along; Matthew meets Jesus when he's at work, not at church on Sunday, but at work during his normal working week. Work for Matthew is as a tax-collector. There was a number of varieties of tax-collector in Jesus' time: he could have been the normal type who collected income tax from the population on behalf of the Rom government; more likely, given the way in which the story is told, is that Matthew collected tax from people who were travelling along the road, charging tolls on goods as they were carried along the road through Capernaum and most of all as they crossed the border into the next-door territory. Remember the tolls on the Forth Road Bridge? That's the picture we need to have of Matthew. This was Matthew's work, interrupted by Jesus coming along road: "*Follow me...*" (*Matthew 9:9b*) It seems simple when we read it, but simple it was most certainly not!

Tax collectors were outcasts in first century Palestine, for several reasons. They are at the very least unpatriotic, at worst traitors: they were employed by the Romans, the unpopular, invading army, and so were despised as collaborators with the enemy. They were seen as thieves: the government asked them to collect a certain amount of tax or duty from the people, in Matthew's case from the traders passing his toll-booth, but it was generally accepted that these tax-collectors exploited their position and exploited the people by taking more; if the government said that the tax was £5, the collectors would take £7 and would keep the rest. They made themselves rich with other people's money. So they were despised; they were outcasts, "sinners", people who were lumped together with others and were seen as simply unclean. Anyone seen to be spending time with them would be contaminated by their sin. The Pharisees would go nowhere near them. Jesus says: "*Follow me...*" (*Matthew 9:9b*)

Jesus is with Matthew: "*While Jesus...*" (*Matthew 9:10*) This is extraordinary! Jesus goes to have a meal with Matthew and his friends. He does what no other religious leader would do, He goes to eat with tax collectors and other outcasts, to eat with Matthew and his friends. This is not just about a meal; by eating with them, Jesus is showing that He accepts them, that they belong in His kingdom. For the Pharisees, these people were outside the pale; for Jesus to eat with them is to show the world that He thinks they belong within the kingdom of God. Indeed, He even argues that these are the people for whom He had come in the first place: "*It is...*" (*Matthew 9:12f*) Jesus has a mission to people, to help people find life in all its fullness; for everyone that will mean repentance of their sin and some were happier to hear that message than others. Jesus ate with Matthew and his friends, He spent time with them and told the world that these outcasts had a place in the kingdom of God. Jesus is with Matthew. It sounds good. Jesus is showing grace to Matthew and his friends, love to people who don't deserve it.

Jesus is with Matthew. We want Jesus to be with us. This is the positive message of the gospel that Jesus came into the world to be not only one of us, but to be one with us, a human being who knows us and who promises to be with us all through life. This is the kind of picture that encourages us when life is hard; we are kept going in our faith and through tough times by the idea that Jesus is with us. Jesus being with us, He helps us when life is hard and He gives us strength to cope. We like that idea. Maybe we don't take it far enough, however. We like the notion of Jesus with us when we come to Church and when life is tough, but here's a question: is life like a peach or an orange? Some of you know the answer because I've asked the question before. The orange is full of segments and the peach is same all way through. The question is asked by Mark Greene, who runs the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity. Life is a peach, because Mark Greene wants us to see that Jesus cares about all of life, rather than just the religious segment, or the piece that is connected to faith. So Jesus is with us in church and in our religion, in our faith, but He is also with us when we go to work, when we're at the gym, when we're looking after our grandchildren, or an elderly relative, or when we're visiting a friend; He is helping, guiding, and leading us. Jesus is with Matthew; Jesus is with us, all of the time.

Matthew was with Jesus. This is different! "*As Jesus...*" (*Matthew 9:9*) Matthew went to follow Jesus; he left his toll booth beside Capernaum road, and followed Jesus. What did that mean? Well, simply it meant that Matthew would go everywhere Jesus went, he literally would follow Him around the countryside, into the towns and villages. Everything Jesus saw, Matthew saw; everything Jesus did, Matthew saw; everything Jesus said, Matthew heard and so he learned things from Jesus. Matthew went with Jesus. He left his toll booth behind. But he also left something else behind: we said that being a tax-collector, Matthew exploited his situation and exploited people, that he was a thief, and made himself rich with other people's money. He left that lifestyle

behind. We have to imagine that Jesus challenged Matthew and that Matthew repented of that lifestyle, said sorry for his sins and changed; Matthew gave up his sinful lifestyle, left his past behind and went with Jesus to learn what life should be like in the kingdom of God.

"Follow me!" Imagine. Put yourself in Matthew's sandals. You are travelling with Jesus, watching, listening. What's happening to you? Well, you're learning. You are learning what it means to have faith, what it means to pray, what it means to love other people. You are hearing Jesus teach, but you're also watching Him in action, seeing Him, so you are learning to be like Him. So this *"Follow me!"* has two threads: first of all, it does mean to go everywhere with Jesus; secondly, it means to copy Him, to imitate Him, to learn to be like Him. Matthew is doing both. This is what it means to be a disciple; this is what makes the disciple different from the camp follower; the disciple is learning from his master, is learning to be like Him and to put His teaching and His example into practice. Matthew followed Jesus; later he wrote down this ordered account of Jesus' life that bears his name; we know very little, if anything, of what happened to him after that.

Matthew with Jesus! This is when we find it hard to see how we can do that. We can't follow Jesus, in the sense that we can't travel round with Him, we can't even see Him. Matthew spent time with Jesus, but how can we do that? There are two ways: first of all, we can spend time with Jesus by reading the Bible: a much undervalued activity in the life of the Christian in Scotland today is reading the Bible; this is the nearest we will ever come to walking round with Jesus; we can read the stories of Him healing; we can listen to Him teach; we can get a grasp of what Jesus was like by reading the Bible. Matthew wrote down the things he saw; he was an eye-witness of these things and so we, through Matthew and the others, can spend time with Jesus by reading our Bible. You're not sure where to start? Well, start with Matthew or one of the other gospels. Find something to help you understand, some notes, a book, that will help you understand what you're reading. Spend time with Jesus by reading the Bible. Secondly, by praying, thanking God for what you read about Jesus, asking God to help you learn to be like Him. By reading the Bible and praying we can spend time with Jesus, listening, learning.

The outcome? The disciple learns to be like Jesus. Have you ever had a role model in life, someone that you'd like to be, someone on whom you've modelled yourself at work, in family life? It might be a colleague, or an older generation family member. Here's the greatest role model we can ever have: Jesus. Learn to be like Him. This turns us from being members of a religious club into becoming disciples, that we spend time with Jesus and learn to be like Him. Paul wrote to his young friend Timothy; his last words are in 2 Timothy; he is writing to encourage him in his faith: *"So do..." (2 Timothy 1:8f)* There is nothing to be ashamed of in the Christian faith; we are called to be followers of Jesus; all this is of grace because it is not something we deserve, but Jesus loves us and calls us to follow Him everywhere we go. The outcome? A faith that shapes the rest of our lives!

Jesus was with Matthew: Matthew found that he belonged, that Jesus loved him, graced him and he belonged in Jesus' kingdom. Matthew was with Jesus: he went everywhere and learned to follow, to be like Jesus. Jesus is with us and we can have this deep sense of belonging to Jesus and His Church. Are we with Jesus? Do we spend time with Jesus, reading of Him in the Bible, praying? That's where we start to be the disciple, learning to be like Jesus at church, at home, at work, everywhere. Jesus was with Matthew; Matthew was with Jesus!