**Jesus calls Matthew, a tax collector**  16/4/23 dkm

Read: Isaiah 58, Mark 2:1-17

Text: Mark 2:13-17

Psalms: 67, 36:1-6, 49:1-10, 117

In his ministry in Galilee Jesus had cast out a demon, healed a sick woman, and many other sick people, including a leper. Wherever he went Jesus healed the sick and preached the kingdom of God. The world into which Jesus was sent was, and still is, a fallen, sinful world. Sickness and disease are evidence of this sin. Death is the ultimate evidence of sin. So it was that when a paralysed man was brought for healing, Jesus declared his sins forgiven. Although not labelled a sinner, everyone understood that his sickness was because of his sin.

Before healing the paralytic, Jesus declared his sins forgiven. In doing so he upset the Jewish religious leaders because, ‘only God can forgive sins’. But when Jesus told this man to get up from his bed and go home everyone was amazed, and these scribes had no answer to the claim of Jesus, the Son of Man with power on earth to forgive sins (2:10). It was not long before Jesus again upset the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, by eating with tax collectors and sinners (2:16).

If Jesus could forgive a sick man, what about a 'real sinner’. What about a man labelled a sinner because of the work he did. In Jewish society there were people who were particularly sinful, people who were despised by everyone. Tax collectors and prostitutes were among such people (Luke 18:11). Such people were to be avoided. They were not allowed to attend worship. They were not allowed to join the feasts. Eating with such 'sinners' was completely out of the question for a religious leader, for a Pharisee who was very particular about his dress and being ritually cleanl, and who fasted and gave his tithes regularly. Eating with a ‘sinner’ would contaminate a Pharisee and make him ritually unclean.

**1. Follow me**

Jesus left the crowded house where he was preaching, and where he healed the paralytic; he went out towards the sea. With crowds following him, the seashore was the best place for him to preach the kingdom of God. As he went, he noticed a tax-collector sitting in his tax office by the road (2:14). We are going to call him Matthew, although Mark calls him ‘Levi, the son of Alpheus’; Matthew calls himself Matthew (Mat 9:9). Matthew was a Jew but was regarded by other Jews as a traitor because he worked for the occupying power, at least indirectly. He had a contract, or subcontract, for collecting a toll tax for the Romans. A tariff was collected on any merchandise that passed along the international highway between Egypt and Syria.

Not only were tax-collectors despised as traitors, they were despised for their extortion. A Pharisee referred to the tax-collector’s extortion as he stood and prayed beside him, thanking God that he was not like the tax-collector (Luke 18:11). Most of them used their position for personal gain. Tax-collectors became rich by demanding more than the set rate of tax. Another tax-collector called Zacchaeus was a rich man. Matthew had a big house and the resources to host a feast. Being despised and rejected probably contributed to this corruption.

Others Jews, especially Pharisees, would have crossed the road to avoid the office of Matthew, but not Jesus. He saw Matthew sitting there, went up to him and said, ‘Follow me’. Jesus did not despise him; he was a sinner like everyone, but was not beyond salvation. This man had a name. He was made in the image of God. He could be saved. The grace of God in Jesus Christ is sufficient to save the worst of sinners. Do you think there are people who cannot be saved? In Tonga our friend took us to see around the island. In his truck he had a couple of prisoners who he was taking to work on his plantation- for a small wage. I was once asked to fill out a survey form asking how I would feel about having a convicted criminal, a murderer or paedophile, living in my street after they had served their sentence. Many think such criminals cannot be changed. In fear they refuse to let them into the same suburb, let alone the same street. Do we believe they are beyond the power of God’s grace?

The power of God’s grace is seen in the change that took place in the heart of Matthew. He was more like a ‘white-collar’ criminal than a murderer; the survey did not ask me about having a white-collar criminal living in the street, a man who got rich at the expense of the poor. We must be careful not to give the impression that certain people are beyond reach of the gospel. Some people feel this way about themselves. They feel they are too bad to come to church because of what they have done. 'How can God accept a wicked person like me' they say. This is the tragedy of preaching salvation by works. This is the tragedy of portraying the church as a place for good, well-dressed people.

What did Matthew do when Jesus came up to his tax booth and said, ‘Follow me’? He would have been shocked that this Rabbi, this man who was preaching the kingdom of God and healing sick people, actually noticed him and spoke to him. Mark gives us the bare facts: ‘So he arose and followed Him’, followed Jesus (2:14). Jesus’ action and words had such power that this man, this sinner, left everything and followed Jesus. This is the power of divine love and grace. This is the power of the gospel, if we, by the power of the Holy Spirit preach it today.

Matthew knew about Jesus. He heard how he was healing people and maybe what happened to the paralytic. Matthew knew he was a sinner. Moreover, he knew that Jesus knew he was a sinner. Everybody knew this. Yet here was Jesus talking to him. Here was this holy person asking Matthew to follow him. We can imagine Jesus looking intently at Matthew, and Matthew looking at Jesus. It was weird. It was warm. It was working a great change in the heart of Matthew.

With the words, ‘Follow me’, ringing in his ears and pounding in his heart, Matthew left everything and followed Jesus. He did not say, ‘Let me first go and count up the days takings’. He did not say, ‘Let me talk it over with my boss and with my family’. He left all, there and then, to follow Jesus. On more than one occasion Jesus spoke about the cost of following him (Mat 8:18f, 16:25). Jesus demanded everything of Matthew. He demands everything of anyone who follows him. Luke writes that Matthew ‘left all’ to follow Jesus (Luke 5:28).

Zacchaeus the tax-collector was a rich man, so Matthew was probably rich also. But Matthew was not thinking about what he was giving up; his focus was on what he was gaining. There is nothing greater than gaining the kingdom of God. Matthew would never be able to go back to his occupation, like the fishermen did after Jesus was crucified; he burned his bridges as we say. Are you ready to burn your bridges to follow Jesus?

If you cannot commit your whole life to Jesus, you cannot be his disciple. The cost of following Jesus is too great for some people- what about my job, my friends, my family, or my fun? What about you? I wonder how many are fooling themselves about being a Christian. How many Christians say, ‘I love Jesus but I cannot give up my unbelieving girlfriend or boyfriend’ or, ‘I love Jesus but I cannot possibly give up my job for full time ministry’.

**2. Feast in Matthew’s house**

Did Jesus grab Matthew by the hand and drag him away from his tax office? No! Sometimes preachers want to drag people into the church, and into the kingdom of God. Sometimes they resort to offering attractions or incentives for people to come to church. For sure, Jesus went out of his way to speak to Matthew, but all he did or said was, ‘Follow me’, and Matthew followed him. Matthew went home rejoicing. There was rejoicing in heaven over this one sinner who repented, and there was rejoicing on earth in the home of Matthew.

A feast to honour Jesus was the way Matthew chose to express his thanks. His salvation was by grace alone. He wanted to show his thanks for the wonderful saving grace of the Lord. No doubt some of his friends and family thought he was crazy leaving behind his lucrative business. But Matthew was not worried; he invited them all to his feast, and they came in great number (2:15). This was the biggest feast Matthew had ever given, bigger than any wedding or birthday feast. Jesus was the guest of honour at the table. Matthew was bursting with joy, telling everyone of the new life he was given by Jesus, his Saviour and Lord. Mark indicates that many of his friends were joining him in following Jesus (2:15)

‘A converted man will not wish to go to heaven alone’ wrote J. C. Ryle. Matthew wanted his friends to meet with Jesus, and to follow Jesus as he was following Jesus. Are you inviting your friends to meet Jesus? Are you sharing the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ? If not, you must ask yourself if you truly know the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Maybe you feel weak and inadequate; but remember it is not you that changes people; it is the grace of Jesus Christ. You are simply called to live as one who is filled to overflowing with the grace of Jesus Christ. ‘We cannot but speak of the things we have seen and heard’ is what the apostles said (Acts 4:20).

**3. Pharisees horrified**

The Pharisees were on the scene again criticising Jesus, but not to his face. Last time it was murmuring; this time they spoke to his disciples (2:8, 2:16); they dared not enter the house of Matthew the sinner. These self-righteous, religious leaders were keeping a close watch on Jesus and his disciples. It was a case of shock-horror when they saw him feasting with ‘sinners’. They would never sit down and eat with a tax-collector. Sharing a meal expresses close fellowship- much too close for the Pharisees. How could Jesus, who preached the kingdom of God, do such a thing?

Jesus stepped forward to answer the question the Pharisees put to his disciples by way of condemnation. Jesus must have stepped out because they were no going to step in! ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick’ (2:17). He was stating what was obvious, and may well have been a proverb in the day. It is sick people who need a physician or doctor. A doctor must be concerned for the sick and be prepared to touch them in order to heal them. I hate the sight of blood and have been known to faint in a hospital! Imagine a doctor saying to those who came to his clinic, ‘If you are sick I don’t want you in my clinic’; strangely, it was a bit like this in the recent pandemic.

Jesus was concerned about souls rather bodies as he answered the Pharisees question, but the medical proverb was applicable. ‘I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance’ Jesus declared (2:17). What was true of those attending to the body was the also of those attending the soul. People like Matthew and his friends who know their souls are sick with sin are the ones who need spiritual healing. Jesus came to bring healing to broken hearts, not just broken bodies.

Jesus drew this parallel, but not without a twist. ‘I did not come to call the righteous’ he said, meaning those who are self-righteous, ‘but sinners to repentance’. The Pharisees thought that by keeping the letter of the law they were righteous. They were self-righteous men. Lots of people around us are self-righteous; maybe you are somewhat self-righteous. Many people make up their own rules for living, and pride themselves in keeping these rules- at least sometimes! So many are ‘self-made men who worship their creator’- a modern day proverb applicable to the Pharisee who ‘prayed thus with himself’ (Luke 18:11). The Bible gives us the names of two tax- collectors who followed Jesus, but only one Pharisee.

Do you, like Matthew, acknowledge that you are a sinner? Are you ready to admit your sin, repent and follow Jesus? Repent means to turn around, which is what Matthew did when he turned and left his comfortable but sinful way of life to follow Jesus. Repent and believe is what you must do if you want to follow Jesus. And as a follower of Jesus are you telling all your friends about Jesus, as Matthew did? Are you inviting them to meet Jesus?