The Change-Process

Gospel Reading: Matthew 9: 9-13

What do you make of that story about the call of St Matthew? We are told so little. Jesus walks along, says to a bloke, "Follow me" and "he got up and followed him". It is so stark there must be more to it.

Matthew was one of the strong men in the border town in the north of Palestine. Capernaum was on the shores of Lake Galilee. The road carrying trade from Egypt to Damascus and other parts of the world, went through Capernaum. Matthew had one of the plum jobs in town. He collected taxes. He had many opportunities to enrich himself. The gospels of Mark and Luke call him Levi. He was a Jew by birth, but he worked as a public servant in the area nominally ruled by King Herod. Herod was a puppet of the Roman imperialists. Most of the ordinary people hated the Roman occupiers, and in particular they despised any of their countrymen who worked for the Romans. But there are always those for whom money and what it can buy is their top priority, even if it isolates them, undermines or destroys their relationships with others.

An occupying power needs to get people with local knowledge to do the unpopular jobs. It rewarded collaborators generously. The right to collect taxes in different areas was sold by auction. The highest bidder got the contract. He had to collect a stated amount and handover to the Romans. Anything he could raise over and above that, he was allowed to keep as commission. Obviously this system lent itself to grave abuses. In fact, because of too much extortion, the auction part of the system was ended in Palestine before Jesus’ time. But there were still plenty of opportunities for tax-collectors to make a rip-off.

We winge about taxes today. But our governments are only carrying on what the Romans did! In Palestine there were at least 7 forms of taxation! It was not difficult for a tax collector to line his own pockets. All that was needed was a little tampering with the weights and measures, or some threats and stand-over tactics.

Tax collectors were universally hated. They were notoriously dishonest. By Jewish law a tax gatherer was debarred from the place for religious worship and teaching, the Synagogue which was the social centre of every town and village. A tax collector was a social outcast. He could not be a witness in any legal case. Robbers, murderers and tax-gatherers were classed together.

That was the sort of reputation Levi / Matthew had before he met Jesus. We may conjecture that Matthew had probably heard Jesus’ previously. Maybe he had stood alone, as inconspicuously as possible, at the back of the crowd. He may have been mulling over what Jesus had said for weeks or even months.

The Gospel reading says Matthew "arose and followed him". What an unlikely recruit for Jesus’ leadership team! We can just imagine the tensions, the suspicions and the atmosphere, when the fishermen Peter, Andrew, James, John and the others had to sit down with this new guy at the next team meeting. For years they had had to pay inflated taxes to this powerful profiteer, and their wives and children had been deprived because of this scoundrel.
What a collection of 'all sorts' those disciples of Jesus were! It is strange, though, how frequently Christian churches behave as if they know better than Jesus. Our churches are often scared by diversity, and try to screen out from membership and leadership any who do not toe their ideological party line!

But there is something more important to notice about this story and others in the Gospels. Jesus did not play on peoples' weaknesses. He didn't make them feel more guilty about themselves or what they have done wrong. Jesus did not demean or 'put people down' in order to make them more susceptible to his message. Unfortunately many so-called evangelists employ that psychological technique: make people feel bad about themselves and then proffer a 'salvation package'.

The Jesus we read about in the Gospels understood how most people feel about themselves:

- their inner disappointments,
- their shame at failing themselves and others,
- their fears and guilt, their loneliness and pain.

He saw through to the real person within, and appreciated their strengths and possibilities.

I think Matthew got up and left his well-paid job because he sensed that Jesus had something better for him to do. I doubt that he suddenly had a dramatic conversion experience or instant enlightenment. What Jesus was saying was appealing and Matthew was ready for 'a sea change'. Matthew did not immediately become a 'good' person or 'a saint'. He wasn’t able to wipe the slate clean and start again. But drawn to Jesus, he became part of the change-process which is the Kingdom of God.

Wherever Jesus went he talked about 'the Kingdom of God' – about letting God into the centre of our lives, instead of keeping God at fringes of our lives. At some time in our lives, I guess, most of us have turned to that sort of fringe god – an emergency, panic-created 'god of the gaps. When we have desperately wanted help, when we weren’t able to cope with some situation, trauma, sickness or bereavement … we have prayed, and often miraculously in some way we have experienced some 'power beyond our own power’. That happens, but Jesus was on about letting God into our lives in a fuller and ongoing way.

The natural thing for human beings seems to be to start with ourselves, to be concerned primarily -

- with I, me and mine
- with what I want … what I must have … what I must do.
- with how I look … how I am doing … and my success …
- with 'My Career' to use the title of the Sydney Morning Herald’s supplement.
- with the increased $ valuation of our house, shares or belongings.

This tendency to be preoccupied with ourselves has reached epidemic proportions in the increasingly prosperous part of the world in which we live. It poses a huge threat to the survival of the earth as we know it.

By getting up and following Jesus, Matthew learned a different way of looking at everything, including the teachings of religion. In the Gospel named after Matthew there are very full reports of the things that Jesus actually said. Matthew being a Jew was particularly interested to record the ways in which Jesus, as a Jew, took the Jewish religious teachings and the Law and pushed them a bit further. He extended the ancient teaching, revealing their underlying meaning.

Jesus’ focus was on what it means to be part of the change-process of the 'Kingdom of God'. He told parables and used word-pictures

- about living here, not trying to escape into fantasies about the future or life after death.
- about acting on the responsibilities we have now.
• living totally in this world, but differently to many people around us.

We are Christians in so far as we consciously allow the Spirit of God to prompt and guide us – living as if Jesus was standing beside us.

Jesus spoke of the need to change inner attitudes and to move on – beyond doing what comes naturally. In Matthew’s Gospel there is a very condensed section of Jesus teaching, which is often called 'The Sermon on the Mount' – please take time to read those three chapters, 5, 6 and 7 again.

In Jesus’ teaching and life there is no simple or clear divide between the spiritual and the physical, the sacred and the secular. Jesus call to us is to live in this material, secular world now in tune with the Spirit of God pulsing through our body, mind, spirit and soul – and to leave the future in God’s hands.

Jesus was once questioned by the Pharisees about "when the Kingdom of God would come". He dismissed their curiosity about the future or what might happen. Jesus cut them and their speculation short. He said, "The kingdom of God is in the midst of you" or in another translation "the kingdom is within you".

For me it has been what Jesus did and taught that has been the main thing in my spiritual journey. I have never discovered anyone, or any set of ideas that gives such a comprehensive and fulfilling way to live. I am very conscious of how far short I have fallen of Jesus’ way of living. Time and again I have failed, and still do. But for me "Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life".

I think the Christian preachers, especially in the Western catholic and protestant denominations, took a wrong turning when they began focussing on individual "personal salvation" with the stock-in-trade question "Are you saved?" I do not find in Jesus teaching such a self-centred focus on finding salvation for oneself, or a longing to escape from this life and its problems "into the bosom of the Father" or "the arms of Jesus" (as some of the old hymns put it). That type of pietism has no appeal and seems far from the robust call of Jesus to become part of the 'Kingdom of God' – not some 'pie in the sky by and by' but beginning now.

Jesus was a Jew steeped in the Hebrew thought. In Judaism there is great stress on what is to be passed on to the children and to their children’s children, down the generations. We have reached a crunch time for human life on this planet, which requires humanity to make a 'sea change' echoing what Matthew experienced. Greed, pollution, exploitation, destruction of animal species and the eco-system, and the present rape of the earth, puts us and all future generations at risk.

The hopeful sign is that already more and more people making a 'sea change'. A recent US visitor to Australia, Al Gore, former Vice-President of the USA, had such a sea change after his so-called ‘defeat’ in the Presidential election. He didn’t sit and lick his wounds. Al Gore took up the challenge of influencing the direction in which our greatly endangered world chooses to move. If you haven’t already, I encourage you to go and see the documentary into which he has poured all his passion and which we ignore very much at our own peril. The film is called An Inconvenient Truth and hopefully it will be part of the change-process which is the Kingdom of God.

As Christians, because of Jesus, we believe that God gives new life beyond the grave. But Jesus in his teaching did not cancel out the truth expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures, that our life also goes on by influence and heredity down the generations.

To respond to the call of Jesus Christ means allowing God’s love and compassion to flow through us, so that

• we express our joy, delight and thankfulness for creation – by caring for the earth.
• preserving and creating beauty.
• we seek to heal broken relationships.
• we work for justice and peace now.
• we struggle with others to help those who are oppressed or suffering.
• we encourage others to *let God into the centre* of their lives.

We can't do that unless we allow God to be central in our own lives.

That deeply spiritual man, Dag Hammarskjold, international public servant and Secretary General of the United Nations from 1953 to 1961, put it this way:

*The road to holiness necessarily leads through the world of action.*

Enquiries, comments and criticisms are invited; also requests for additional copies of sermon scripts or permission to quote / reproduce. The Reverend Clive H. Norton, phone (02) 9411 8606; fax 9410 2069 7 Dulwich Road, Chatswood West, NSW 2067. Email: chnorton@bigpond.com