

Matthew

You may recall that a couple of weeks ago John introduced this series on the Disciples of Jesus and one thing he said was that if he had been God then he would have done things differently! He did go on to say that it was a good job God was in charge as He knew best, just in case you were wondering.

I have to say ,however, that I echo that sentiment when we look at Matthew or Levi as he is sometimes referred to. He certainly wouldn't be in my top one hundred if I was looking for candidates to be one of my followers and to proclaim the message I was bringing as the Son of God. But as Nik said last week Jesus chose a widely varied group of disciples from different backgrounds and cultural customs. Each with a unique and distinctive personality, just like you and me. Do you sometimes wonder why God wants you as part of this Christian family we call NCF? What have I got that I can bring to use for God with this group of people?

Have a look around, what have we got that Jesus should draw us all together to form NCF as a body of Christians. We mostly come from different backgrounds, doctors, dentists, tax official, banker, scientist, electrical engineer, pharmacy, music teacher, industrialists, nurse, author, sculptor, students, retired, to name but a few. I'm also sure, I know I have, that pretty much if not all of us have things in our past that we would rather other people didn't know about, although, of course, God knows about them as well. And yet God in His wisdom brought us all together to form a group of Christians called Nuneaton Christian Fellowship to work together to declare the Good News of Jesus to those around us and to use our unique backgrounds, talents, experiences and giftings for the benefit of the whole group. Thus it has been for the last 28 years and except for one or two hiccups along the way it has worked pretty well, not because we are particularly good at it, but because God knows what He's doing and has brought people into the group as others have left for various reasons to maintain the work which He began in us and will continue until it is completed.

How does that compare with the calling of the first disciples? It's not that dissimilar I would suggest and is a model that God and the church has continued to use ever since.

So why did Jesus call Matthew to be one of the first disciples?

Matthew, sources tell us, came from a reasonably wealthy family of tax gatherers and was himself a customs collector in Capernaum. He was married with children and whilst there is no suggestion that he was dishonest in his dealings with people, the majority of customs duty collectors at the time reputedly were adding a percentage for themselves on top of the tax that the Roman authorities asked them to collect on their behalf and Matthew would undoubtedly be tarred with the same brush whether or not he was dealing honestly with people.

That brings us on to the next point that he was working directly for the Roman authorities who were ruling over Israel at that time and anyone who worked for the oppressors, as the Romans were seen, was immediately viewed with suspicion by the mainly Jewish population.

Conversely, his Roman employers would not, I suspect, look kindly on an employee who was openly following a teacher/prophet who was gaining a reputation for stirring up the Jewish people and his job as a customs collector, I would suggest, would not be available to him should he wish to return to it.

Not on the face of it good credentials to proclaim the Good News of Jesus.

Who might I have chosen if I wanted to spread my message quickly and to all the "right" people?

Putting on my banker's head, which I was for thirty three years if you didn't know, and putting a business plan together to achieve the best results and the widest distribution as quickly as possible I would be looking to appoint the leading influential members of Jewish society, the business leaders, the leading religious figures, the royal family, the leading politicians, who could open doors and exert influence in all the right places.

What do you think Jesus might have thought of my plan?

Not a lot do I hear you say? What did Jesus have to say about some of these people?

Matthew 23 is a chapter dedicated to telling the Pharisees and teachers of the law what Jesus thought about them. Perhaps the most quoted verse is verse 33 where Jesus describes them thus:

"You are nothing but snakes and the children of snakes! How can you escape going to hell?"  
(Contemporary English Version)

The NIV says, "You serpents, you spawn of vipers, how can you escape the penalty of hell?"

Perhaps not then the leading religious figures!

King Herod had set out to kill Jesus and had had the young children of Bethlehem murdered in order to try and achieve it.

Perhaps not then the Royal family!

Matthew 21:12-13 tells us:

"Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written", He said to them, " My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers."

Perhaps not then the local businessmen.

The politicians, the Sanhedrin and the Roman leaders, not all but most, conspired together to have Jesus crucified as they feared what He might become. Not likely to be responsive to a call to carry the message of The Good News!

Not exactly complimentary are they. Jesus also said, Mark 2:17

"On hearing this, Jesus said to them, It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (NIV)

The New Living Translation says:

" When Jesus heard this, He told them, Healthy people don't need a doctor - sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners."

In context, this is the occasion where Jesus has called Matthew also known as Levi to follow Him. Having accepted Matthew's invitation to dine with him, Matthew invites what are described as "many tax collectors and sinners" to dine with them. It is the Pharisees, who seeing this gathering ask Jesus' disciples, Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Jesus answer is given in verse 17 where the New Living Translation clearly implies that Jesus considers the Pharisees to be full of their own self importance and too good to associate with such people, whereas Jesus says, these around this table are the people I have come to save, who will admit that they are sinners in need of forgiveness and turn to God to receive it.

It is the message that the disciples eventually took all around the known world and which is still the message we preach today to all those who are prepared to listen;

Romans 3:23 in the New Living Translation tells us this:

"For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when He freed us from the penalty of our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed His life, shedding His blood. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when He held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, for He was looking ahead and including them in what He would do in the present time. God did this to demonstrate His righteousness, for He Himself is fair and just, and He declares sinners to be right in His sight when they believe in Jesus."

It is the gospel message that Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, Paul preaches here in Romans and which each of the disciples would have preached as they travelled around the world.

Matthew would be able to add his own powerful personal testimony of how he was removed from a dubious lifestyle as a tax collector and brought into God's presence by Jesus and taught the truths of faith by Jesus. His lifestyle would have shown the truth of his conversion and the fact that he, a tax collector, one of the most despised professions in Israel, had been accepted and embraced by Jesus as one of His closest followers would have encouraged many who thought themselves too steeped in sin to be worthy of accepting Christ as their Saviour, to think again.

There are many today who feel the same way and part of our responsibility, through our testimony in some cases, is to show them the truth of Romans 3:23. That we can come to Jesus just as we are, warts and all, and He will turn no one away who truly repents and asks for forgiveness of their sins, whatever they may be, and however dark we may think they are.

Remember David that great man of God from the Old Testament , he was in his weakness also a murderer, an adulterer, a schemer, a liar and had to live with the consequences of his sins; but God forgave him when David came to Him with a contrite heart and continued to use him.

Hopefully not many of us can match the severity, in human terms, of David's sins but I'm sure that each of us has a few of our own that we've had to seek forgiveness for and it's reassuring to know that if God continued to use David then He will continue to use us as well. We are not any different to those first disciples, we all come from different backgrounds, we have all fallen short of the glory of God, remember John reminded us that when Jesus was crucified, all of the disciples ran away initially, afraid for their own lives, Peter denied Jesus three times; would we have done anything different in their place?

But God in His grace and mercy brought them back together and at Pentecost endowed them with the gift of the Holy Spirit and they were emboldened to speak out the message of the Good News of Jesus. It wasn't easy and they were all apart from John martyred for their faith. The same is true for us today, we have accepted Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, we have received the Holy Spirit and we have Jesus command to go into all the world and make disciples. It is as true today as it was for those first disciples and in many parts of the world Christians are still being martyred for their faith. Do we take the opportunities as God gives them to share the Good News with those He puts in our path?

Matthew, we are told, was at first viewed with suspicion by the other disciples in view of his background but his obviously changed lifestyle meant he was quickly accepted and trusted by them

When the persecutions of the Christians in Jerusalem forced the disciples to leave and travel around we are told that Matthew travelled north continuing to preach the gospel of the kingdom and baptize new believers despite the dangers of persecution that still existed. He travelled extensively through Syria, Cappadocia, Galatia, Bithynia and Thrace. It was in Thrace that he was martyred when we are told unbelieving Jews conspired with the Roman soldiers to murder him.

But Matthew gave himself wholeheartedly to Jesus and his followers, and believed totally in the message which Jesus brought such that he was prepared to give up a lucrative job to follow Him, to preach the message of salvation even in the face of persecution and to make the ultimate sacrifice of giving his own life for his faith and belief in Jesus.

We, hopefully, will not be called upon to make that ultimate sacrifice, although some may, but as Matthew, having accepted Jesus as his Lord and Saviour, was given things to do for the kingdom, then as part of the family of Christians called Nuneaton Christian Fellowship, or your own church if you are visiting, we also have a role to play in promoting God's kingdom right here, right now. It is our responsibility to seek God for what that role is and to operate in it. When we are all doing that we will see amazing things happen as God blesses us.

John and Gill have sought God and are now moving into the role they and we believe God has given them. We need to move into our roles so that we can lovingly support them to carry out that role to God's glory.

AMEN