

The Gospel According to Disciple

Sometimes God really pees me off! This morning is one of those times!

Knowing I was down to preach, a few weeks ago I did what I always do and looked at the passages for the Fourteenth Sunday of Trinity and my heart sank. Good grief they were uncompromising and dense to understand, the commentaries were going to have to do the heavy lifting. And then joy of joys I remembered that we are, rightly, celebrating the Feast of Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist. Thank goodness, a nice gentle sermon giving some teaching on the Gospel according to St Matthew, unfortunately dropping the bombshell that it is pretty certainly not Matthew the tax collector who wrote the Gospel; and if you're upset about that wait until we get to the three wise men! but celebrating how Matthew's is a Gospel of inclusion, of God with us; an encouraging sermon on how we are all called to leave behind whatever is the equivalent of our tax collector's booth and job done. And bonus the gospel gives us this interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees, I could rail against all those people who don't want inclusion the way I think God wants inclusion. I was looking forward to it.

And then I took the train down to the ordinations in Chelmsford diocese last Saturday, arriving in Kings Cross at the same time as the Unite the Kingdom

marchers were heading back via pub stops, shouting, swearing, saying some pretty offensive things. Then the train out to Chelmsford packed full of drunk, white men wrapped in St George's flags and Union flags, loudly swearing and shouting about how Charlie Kirk was right, about how lefties and lesbians should be rounded up. It was the most unsafe I had ever felt in my own country, and I longed for the bubble that is Berwick.

And then ... and then ... in my righteous indignation and judgement I wondered if the tables had turned on who was the Pharisee and who were the tax-collectors and sinners. Now let me be very clear, the venom Charlie Kirk spouted was anti-gospel, anti-kingdom, and anti-Christ. The denigration of other human beings for any reason is anti-gospel, anti-kingdom and anti-Christ. But can you imagine the other disciples' reaction when Jesus chose Matthew, especially Simon the Zealot who had formed his life around fighting the occupation not collaborating with it. Right here in the choosing of Matthew and the other disciples we see the kingdom Jesus wants to build.

And if we're going to build that kingdom and not just preserve a building, or a tradition then there are hard realities in play. But along comes St Paul in his second grumpy letter to the Corinthians who had been struggling with

divisions, with how to live distinctively from the society around them. In just three phrases he points us to some fundamentals for being disciple kingdom builders:

- We do not lose heart
- We refuse to practise cunning
- We refuse to falsify God's word.

We do not lose heart. We gather every week and during the week around this sacrament that tells us that our hope and our future is not based in this world, in our societies, in our politics or our economic system. It tells us that at the heart of our faith is the victorious victim, that when all seemed lost and sealed in failure, that when violence, hatred and death seemed to have won on Friday, Sunday came. We are Easter people and our cry is Alleluia! And it has to be: in the face of division, of demonising rhetoric, of our own judgements and certainties we shout Alleluia. Love and hope and life will win, that's the whole point of the rose window. The challenge is living that message in the world, in the parts of our society that feel abandoned, ignored, despised by the liberal elite. Where hope has been squashed because there doesn't seem to be any. Even here in Berwick, where is the hope of good, sustainable, well-

paid employment for our young people? But you and I are not allowed to lose heart about that, we have hope and somehow, we have to pray and work that that hope can be realised in even those very practical ways.

We refuse to practise cunning. Now elsewhere Jesus says be as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves. We are not being called to be naïve, but we are being called to be honest. Even in our disagreements amongst ourselves, we are called to be honest about them. There are no corners to fight, no winning strategies to develop, there is only joint discernment on what the Spirit is saying to us. And of course that's not easy, of course that's fraught with potential vulnerability. What if the Spirit isn't actually saying what I really want or think the Spirit is saying? Cunning can help us get the outcome we want, outmanoeuvre the opposition. Cunning can help us out argue or even conceal a gun and shoot our opponent, it can help us develop clever slogans that are easy to repeat and demonising. But we are called to a different way.

We refuse to falsify God's word. Walter Brueggemann the great OT scholar argues that the Church has wrongly narrowed down the ninth commandment, "thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbour." He says that the Church in its "accommodating timidity" has kept the covenant on Sinai to the

arena of personal morality when in fact it is much broader than that and takes in our capitalist societies. He takes that further in the context of God being our neighbour and how we bear false witness to God when we co-opt God onto our side.¹ When we try to control or manipulate God; when jingoism and nationalism claim the God of the X, God is on our side. We bear false witness to God, and we falsify God's word when we do not care for the orphan, the widow, the outcast, the stranger, the alien. We bear false witness to God and falsify God's word when we say that creation is not good, when we focus on original sin rather than original blessing, when we say the earth's resources are ours to do with what we want. We falsify God's word when we say there some beyond God's love because of their gender, colour, sexuality, ability or class. We are called to tell the truth about God, about Jesus, about this world

God Almighty it's hard. It's so hard. Most of us aren't decision makers, we're not influencers, we can't produce solutions to the ever-growing divisions amongst us. We are just ordinary people. But then I remember Matthew was just an ordinary person, as were all his fellow disciples. Ordinary people who

¹ Walter Brueggemann, Truth Telling as Subversive Obedience in *The Word Militant*, pp.167-176

saw something in Jesus Christ that re-imagined the world for them, that told them another world was possible. And they often misunderstood him, got him wrong, got his message wrong, and got themselves wrong but they followed him anyway. Even when he told them to stop inviting friends to dinner, even when he told them to hate their families, even when he told them they would have to give everything they had even their own lives.

It is often said that Matthew is a play on the Greek word for disciple, *mathetes*, that maybe the gospel should simply be called disciple, witness. I like that idea. That this isn't the Holy Gospel according to St Matthew, but the Holy Gospel according to Disciple, follower. And if gospel is good news about Jesus Christ the Son of God, if gospel is witnessing to the kingdom of God that has come near, if gospel is about re-imagining the world, then we each have a gospel to proclaim. The Holy Gospel according to ...

“For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” That’s what Paul wrote and that’s what Matthew and the other Gospel writers did. Part of the

reason we struggle with knowing who the actual Gospel writers are is because it's not about them, it's about Jesus Christ as Lord.

I sat on that train last weekend and I was scared and I judged. I got into my hotel room, and I stayed there not wanting to engage, longing to be back in the bubble that Berwick has become for me. I was wrong. We are called to write and proclaim the Gospel according to Holy Trinity Berwick: a Gospel that puts Jesus Christ front and centre, that challenges as much as it comforts, that doesn't let us lose heart even as it doesn't let us duck the realities, that opens us all to what the Spirit is saying to each of us and all of us, that demands that we tell the truth about God and grace and mercy.

A gospel that begins to be written, or continues to be written and proclaimed, every time you and I make a decision to answer Jesus' call to Matthew, "Follow me."