

Well, what a week to drop back into the Gospel according to St Matthew.

We made a big thing of Matthew being this year's Gospel, some of us read through the whole gospel on a cold, dark November night, just about staying awake. We journeyed through Advent with him, heard bits and pieces from him between Christmas and Lent and then pretty much radio silence, until today, and for the next twenty or Sundays he will be our companion on Sunday mornings.

This morning we dip back in as Matthew the tax collector is called to follow Jesus. It's this character that many people assumed was the author of the Gospel, although scholars are less likely to think that today. Matthew's calling is important though, because the Gospel writer, the evangelist Matthew, includes it in a lot of stories of Jesus' healing miracles, only two of which we hear this morning. And in true form Matthew takes us back to the Old Testament to understand what was happening.

He takes us back to the prophet Hosea, mid to late eighth century BC, so may have overlapped with the likes of Isaiah and Amos. By the time Hosea is called to prophesy the threat of Assyria was very real, Israel would finally fall in 721BC with some its people being exiled and some fleeing. As Assyria grew

and the threat grew the leaders of Israel had tough choices to make, and the prophets generally agree that they make the wrong choices! They choose political expediency, treating the people, and usually the most vulnerable, and their faith as pawns in a bigger game. Hosea is called to not only speak but to live out some kind of parable, marrying a prostitute who was continually unfaithful to him, to symbolise how Israel was treating God.

In our passage this morning, Hosea is mimicking the rulers in God's voice, before God finally speaks. The rulers gather and say let us return to God, yes we've not been great, but God will forgive us. And God says either wistfully or frustratedly or both, "what shall I do with you?" What shall I do with you, your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early. Hosea has God say, yes I have punished you because you need to learn, I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Israel's whole religious system is built on sacrifice, the right offerings at the right time in the right place. And yet here is God with a shake of a head, saying, what shall I do with you. Israel had become so blinded by their ritual, their liturgy, their tradition that they had forgotten the God who it was supposed to be for. What shall I do with you?

I know that in certain contexts over the last few months we have struggled with the Old Testament, hearing readings that are being played out in front of us, genocide, oppression, and hate. It's easy to say let's throw it out, these aren't our scriptures. And yet sometimes the clouds part and we see a picture of God that we can cling to, I desire mercy and not sacrifice. Relax.

But we are in danger of doing what the Israelite leaders did, using God for our own advantage, if we skip the opening words, "what shall I do with you?" I imagine God looking at me everyday with a shake of the head and saying, what shall I do with you? I think we surprise God every day, with every decision we make, either right or wrong, I imagine God leaning over to the nearest angel and saying, "oh he went for that, oh she chose that, oh I didn't see that coming."

Matthew picks up on this divine question and answers it, what shall I do with you? I will become one of you. He is at pains in the birth and infancy narrative to locate Jesus in the lived experience of not just Israel but the world. And here in amongst the healing miracles, he delivers the killer line from Hosea, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice," straight from Jesus' lips.

Which is why he tucks the tax-collector's calling in here. Everything that Jesus does in this section crosses social boundaries and norms that are deeply entrenched, indeed even written into the Law. Tax collectors were viewed suspiciously, even hated. If they weren't lining their own pockets they were believed to be so they couldn't win either way, collecting taxes on behalf of an occupying force meant they were collaborators. They were outcasts, with the sinners. Women who were bleeding were unclean, dead bodies were unclean, being in contact with them meant you lost your connection to the community.

In every case Jesus crosses that boundary. Matthew wants us to see Jesus as the living embodiment of Hosea's prophecy. It is the mercy of Jesus, God with us, which sits at the foundation of the calling of Matthew, of the healing of the woman with the haemorrhage, of the raising of the dead girl. In Matthew mercy takes precedence over ritualistic practices and religious traditions.

But Matthew's Jesus doesn't just declare it, or demonstrate it, he invites us into the living out of it, the wrestling with the implications of it, "go and learn what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Well hang on a minute Vicar, he says that to the Pharisees, we're not the Pharisees. Well, my friends we are, in small ways and big ways we are. We all have our sacred cows, we

all have the things that come between us and God's mercy, we all have the things that make God look at us and say, "what shall I do with **you**?"

And God does what God always does, shows us mercy. That's what Abraham has to learn as he chose to follow God, that God meets Abraham's need not because of who Abraham is but because of who God is. Paul is quite rude really, Abraham is as good as dead, yet God's mercy transforms him into a life-giving father of faith. Matthew, collaborator, out for himself, selfish, gets called to follow the one who will show what mercy means. Calling the outcast, healing the sick, raising the dead, seeing every boundary and not just crossing it but ultimately erasing every single one as he stretches his hands out on the cross.

Much is made of the call of Matthew to follow and his immediate reaction to do so, which isn't unique to him, in Matthew's gospel true discipleship is demonstrated by a desire to fully follow Jesus. We get less certain about what that following means. Here we are given the first step, go and learn what this means, I desire mercy not sacrifice.

Go and learn it in our own lives, the things we judge ourselves on or blame ourselves for. We know ourselves; we know the areas we wouldn't dream of asking for mercy for because we don't want to name them. But if we can't do that for ourselves then we won't do it for others.

Go and learn it in our worship and our practice. If our liturgy, our hymns, our practices are the only way we express our faith and if they have to be unchanging then we lose something of God's mercy when something different could release us into a new way of discipleship.

Go and learn it in the way we live out our lives, in the way that we pray for others, in the way that we respond to the news, in the way that we engage with our community and **beyond**.

Abraham, Hosea, Matthew the tax-collector, Paul and Matthew the Evangelist all had to learn that the God who calls us to follow is the God who desires mercy and not sacrifice; is the God who takes our norms and our assumptions and overturns them in the cross and the empty tomb. It is that God that calls us afresh as we dip back into Matthew's gospel the gospel of the disciple, follow me and learn what mercy means.