

Sunday 7 June – First Sunday after Trinity

Sermon by Christine Newmarch

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk))

Well, they say there are only two certain things in life: death and taxes, but



there were plenty of taxes to be paid in the Roman empire. The Romans wasted no time in taxing the people they had conquered to pay for their wars and running the Empire.



The Romans had a complex taxation system. They delegated the collection of land tax and poll tax to the local governors who were responsible for paying the whole amount to the authorities and collecting it from their subjects. However, the collection of customs duties and market tolls was leased. The lessees were generally high-ranking Romans, but there were also Jews, including Matthew. The Romans understood that the local Jewish people could be very effective as they knew the language, the customs and most probably the very people they were taxing too.



As you might expect, tax collectors were not popular. The ordinary people considered tax collectors to be traitors because they helped the Romans bolster their wealth.

What's more, tax collectors were known to charge more than the Romans demanded and then pocket the extra for themselves. Well, of course they did, because they had to make a living themselves, they were not collecting the taxes and making themselves unpopular for nothing, many went too far.

This brings us to Matthew.

We know very little about him, we don't know why he had become a tax collector, but he would have been considered unclean by the Pharisees, because he would have had to associate with Gentiles to do his job. The Jewish leaders would have regarded him to be a sinner, along with criminals and prostitutes, but Jesus was not like them.

As he walked along, he saw Matthew sitting at the tax booth.

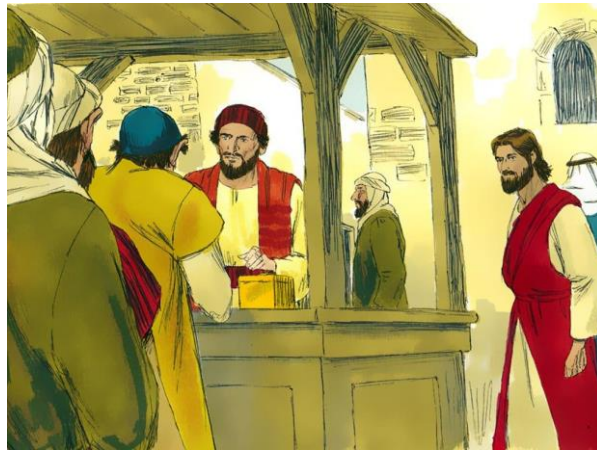


This is just one of many illustrations reimagining the scene.

I wonder how you imagine it.

Was Matthew sitting there all on his own with no clients?

Was it busy? Was Matthew having a hard day? We can only imagine.



Jesus saw something in Matthew that others had not and simply called him to follow him.

This is the most famous depiction of the scene, painted in 1599. It is by Caravaggio, and remarkably still hangs in the same church, San Luigi dei Francesi, in Rome for which it was commissioned.



In the picture Jesus and Peter have entered the scene, and Matthew and four other men are sitting at the table.

Jesus points to Matthew as he calls him. His hand has been painted to evoke memories of God's hand in the Creation scene on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. This is Caravaggio telling us that Jesus is God, the second Adam, as St Paul calls him in his letter to the Romans.

Jesus, the Second Adam, bestows new life on Matthew and a beam of light shines on the men's faces representing the moment of spiritual awakening.

Matthew, the bearded man, is pointing to himself, 'What me? He asks.

Scripture tells us that Matthew simply got up and followed Jesus.

Luke's gospel, in which Matthew is known as Levi, tells us that he then threw a great banquet for Jesus. There were many other tax collectors at the table.



When the Pharisees complained, Jesus overheard them and asked:

'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.'

He meant that his ministry was to include healing the ways of Matthew and other people in a similar position.

Today's gospel reading ends with Jesus saying:

'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'

There was more than a touch of sarcasm when Jesus told the Pharisees to go and learn what it means. They may have believed themselves to need no help, but we know that there is not a single person on earth who does not need help and healing from Jesus.

We are blessed to be here, to have heard Jesus' call to follow him, but know that it is not always easy. We know the risk of following what we might think

best rather than Jesus is never far away. However, if we remember his desire is for us to have mercy, mercy towards one another, but more importantly to those most in need of mercy, we shall gladden his loving heart.

Amen.