

**Matthew the Tax Collector**

**Matthew 9: 9-13**

**Sunday 7th April**

Tax collectors were among the most despised people because they not only worked for the Romans but they also collected more than was needed in order to line their own pockets. They became rich off the back of this and this made them very unpopular. There were many kinds of taxes - besides income tax and poll tax (*paid by men & women*) there was tax on using main roads, wheels on carts, animals and certain food products to name a few. It was easy to abuse this system and they were notorious for this. The Pharisees, particularly, despised them, clumping them together with other criminal activity.

**Read: Luke 18: 9-14 The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector**

The Jews saw God as their King and to pay taxes to a mortal King who wasn't their ruler was in violation of God and a transgression. They were fanatical in their loyalty to the letter of the law.

Jesus comes along and shows favour to this tax collector, and even dines with him. This must have really riled the Pharisees. However he tells them that it is the sick who need healing. He clearly sees the Pharisees as like a doctor who won't touch a person they see as infected or ill but he was there to come to all who needed his help, who needed help to see past their sins and to find a way to being truly whole again. Jesus could clearly see the potential in Matthew to be released from his transgressions, to find his true calling. And this is the sign, surely, of a true physician, someone who can see beyond the disease, to the person you can potentially be.

When you can see the potential in this story for our salvation, it has a real depth to it. How wonderful it is to know that when we fall by the wayside, when we are led down a path of temptation, leading into selfish ways, to know that God can see the potential in us to repent, to seek forgiveness and to return to follow him, is truly humbling. And I think this is how Matthew saw the situation. He clearly saw, in Jesus, a potential for a better life. After all he had a wealthy living, he could afford to throw parties such as the feast he put on for Jesus, but was he truly satisfied, on a deeper level? I would suggest not. He clearly saw, in following Jesus, the chance to have a deeper, more meaningful life which brings its own riches; that of a fulfilling loving relationship with the Lord, and friendships that mean something. Surely this is much more valuable? Surely this is something to celebrate?

So what can we learn from this story? Well surely we all seek to have a life that is fulfilling, that is full of love and not hatred that is whole and enriching? When we are struck by times of selfishness and lose sight of the Lord, it isn't long before we realise that we are not truly fulfilled, that we are being led by our own greed, our need to meet our own interests. This never leads to true happiness. We need to rise up, like Matthew, to seek the Lord's forgiveness and guidance and likewise to follow him. We, too, will feel like celebrating or revelling in our deeper connection with the Lord.

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord, we thank you for this opportunity to have time to be with you and to be in your presence. Help us, like Matthew, to hear your call and to respond. Lord, we are easily led. We know that, and we stumble at times. Be with us as we work through times of doubt, as we work through times of temptation and as we come to feel enriched in living a life of service to you. We thank you that you are there with us on our journey. Your faith in us means so much. May we, too, put our faith in you and walk with you through all life's ups and downs and so feel truly blessed by your presence in our lives now and always. Amen.

**Palm Sunday - What about the Donkey?**

**Matthew 21: 1-11**

**Sunday 14th April**

It probably seems incredible, doesn't it, that Jesus chose to ride into Jerusalem, that day, on a donkey? A donkey seems such an insignificant animal to us, but in biblical times it was not so. It was seen as

traditional for a king to ride into his capital city on a donkey. This simple animal was seen as a sign of peace. However, it was rather different if you were seen riding on a horse. This was seen as a symbol of war.

Jesus had been preaching and performing miracles and building up interest among the crowds. Just prior to arriving in Jerusalem, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. We heard, then, that many people put their faith in Jesus. And so we come to Palm Sunday.

We hear how Jesus sent two of the disciples to fetch him a donkey to ride. Have you ever wondered what the reaction of the owner of the colt was, when the disciples came and asked for his donkey? Was he surprised when they said, **'The Lord has need of them'**, or was he honoured to think that this man, called Jesus, wanted to ride his donkey? This is something that has always intrigued me. It has always surprised me that when the disciples went, as instructed, there sure enough, was a donkey tied up as if put there, specially, for this occasion. And the owner appears to accept this and lets them take the donkey. We have no way of knowing whether the owner felt any animosity towards this or whether he questioned it at all. In the Bible it appears he simply let them take the animal.

I wonder - had he known the outcome of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem and the events to follow – whether he would have been so willing? We will never know. In the scheme of things it probably seems such an insignificant action, but that donkey may have meant a lot to the owner. In Jewish times it was quite something if you could afford to have your own donkey. Most people would have hired a donkey as they were expensive to buy.

So what about the donkey? A donkey is a stubborn animal and it signifies natural reason – our common sense if you will. We go along in life with our eyes on the natural world, following our own selfish path and we don't always like to admit that it would be better to be unselfish. And so, like a donkey, we stubbornly refuse to accept, that the Lord's way, following an unselfish path is better. I might be hell bent on spending my time in leisure pursuits, when it would be better spent on helping out a friend who is struggling or caring for an elderly relative who is sick. Now Jesus, being connected to the Divine or heavenly life is able to subdue the donkey. He is Truth itself. So if we act, with the Lord ruling us, then we reason that it would be better to be selfless, to help our friend or relative rather than to be selfish. So in this instance the donkey here stands for obedience. The donkey is serving the will of its rider and is obedient to his will, that is, the Lord's. So we need to act with the Lord's guidance and be obedient to his will.

We can certainly see this trait reflected in the owner of the donkey who showed willingness in allowing the Lord to use his donkey to ride into Jerusalem. And we, too, can show our willingness to share what we have with the Lord, to obey his will and to act selflessly, sharing what we have with others.

So, like the donkey, we can be stubborn and follow our own path, but in order to bring about a change we need to let the Lord in, let him rule our hearts and minds and help us to see a less selfish path - sharing with others and putting the Lord first. And, remember, it is not about how much you do, how big a change you make. What is more important, more significant, is your willingness to change - your willingness to allow the Lord into your life and to make a difference.

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord, we are selfish creatures, ever focused on our own needs and wants. Come into our lives, Lord, and help us to be willing to see the broader picture, to be able to look outside ourselves and to act with love in our hearts, putting others first as you would wish us to do. Lord, when we find ourselves focused on self and stubbornly following our own motives, be with us, guide us, help us to see beyond ourselves, to open our hearts to you, allowing us to be willing to follow a more selfless path. Amen.

I wonder how the women were feeling that morning when they came to the tomb to anoint their Lord. It seemed that no matter how much time Jesus spent preparing his disciples, preparing the people, none of them had taken in that his death was going to happen. It went in one ear and out the other. Just as our parents endeavour to prepare us for life, for what is to come as we grow up - but do we always listen? Of course not! And this is how the disciples reacted. They either didn't want to hear or they couldn't believe what they heard.

So the women must have been feeling somewhat bewildered, upset, lost without the man they saw as their Saviour. But instead of simply mourning their loss, they decide to come to the tomb and anoint his body. But arriving at the tomb he is not there. The stone has been rolled away and they are told by an angel that he is risen. Can you believe it? It must have been so hard to take in – this man whom they had followed, this man whom they had loved – firstly dying on the cross and now gone.

You may remember that 'stone' stands for 'truth'. Now there are all sorts of truth and in the case of the sepulchre that Jesus was placed in, we are talking about facts – Jesus was rejected, he was crucified, the people did not want someone who would not fight like a king for their country. They did not want to know about their spiritual life and so they were cold like the stone sepulchre that they buried Jesus in. And we can be like this when we refuse to believe that the Word of God is inspired, when we refuse to follow the Word. None of us is perfect and we can easily betray the real truth and so bury the Lord, as he was buried on Good Friday.

So the women come to the tomb; despite being upset, their love for the Lord is clear; they come to anoint him. It was their love that allowed them to believe what they couldn't see. And it is our love for the Lord which guides us too. We can take in the Lord's truth in the Bible when we love him, when we are open to him. We don't have to see everything all at once, to believe. We simply trust what the Lord tells us.

If you think about the resurrection it is the proof we have that Jesus exists. It is unlikely we would have heard anything about Jesus, but the resurrection story is a really strong case for this. It is like modern day news. We don't hear about things that are ordinary, everyday news but anything that is out of the ordinary, sensational or dramatic is splashed all over the paper. In Jesus' time they didn't have reporters as we do today but they had scribes who wrote down the stories, and something like this was a real story - a story which the disciples did not believe at first. They needed some convincing to believe that Jesus had risen (**read further into Mark 16 to find out**). When are we like this, when do we not believe, when do we need real hard evidence?

The women, however, come to the tomb and seeing the empty tomb and hearing the angel tell them, 'He has risen! He is not here', they believe. The women represent the simple innocence, that which is there with us right from when we are young, before we are influenced by outside forces. The simple truths which are with us all the time, and when we doubt, when we struggle to believe, we need to draw on these, we need to remember this and to trust, trust that our love in the Lord is all we need to lead us forward.

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord, we thank you for this Easter time when we hear of your Resurrection. Help us to remember your presence is always with us and when we feel doubtful, to draw on your strength, your love to guide us, to remind us that you are always there. You never leave us. We thank you for this opportunity to reflect on the women, who came to the tomb, determined to show their love by anointing your body and who, instead, find you have risen. We thank you for their innocent belief in you. Help us to learn from their example and to find true comfort in your love for us. Amen.

How many of us are affected by doubt? How many of us can say, that with absolute certainty, we totally believe all the time? People tell us things and sometimes we can't help ourselves. We don't always accept what we hear. We have to see it for ourselves. We have to witness it first-hand. Even seeing things for ourselves doesn't always dissolve the doubt completely. In nature flowers die, fields become bare and there is the appearance that the freeze has caused the earth to die; but in spring new growth emerges, new shoots appear on trees, flower buds bulge and there is an abundance of new growth on the earth. I became aware of this through a couple of small trees that I have growing in pots in my courtyard. During a bad spell of windy weather the leaves disappeared. One of the trees still had green buds so I believed it still to be alive; however the other tree looked like a dead twig and I doubted it still had any life in it at all! So I was completely amazed when spring arrived, to find new leaves growing on this tree. A typical example of only believing what my eyes could see. The cycle of nature is well known and despite knowing this, I still didn't trust it.

In the aftermath of the Lord's death and resurrection Jesus appeared to his disciples. They, too, needed to see to believe. They would not accept the word of Mary Magdalene. It is interesting to note that on some of his appearances to the disciples he is not immediately recognised, even though they have spent a lot of time with him. When he appeared to them as they were fishing, having not caught anything that night, Jesus stood on the shore but the disciples did not recognise him. It is only after he tells them to cast their net onto the right side of the boat and they haul in a large number of fish, that recognition dawns. How often are we slow to realise the Lord at work? How often do we need a nudge in the right direction - just as Peter did? Thomas went one step further. He didn't only need to see him to believe; he wanted to touch his wounds. He wanted extra proof that it was him. He doubted what the others had come to believe. As I said previously, Jesus had prepared them but it had 'gone in one ear and out the other', so to speak.

Anyone who is sceptical could find all sorts of excuses to say that the events recorded in the Bible never took place. The child born with no human father, water changing to wine, miraculous healings, a man brought back to life after four days and even Jesus himself rising from the dead. Can we believe these things really happened without physical or scientific proof? Certainly Thomas could not, despite the fact that he had been with Jesus for several years and had been taught so much. If Thomas couldn't believe without seeing for himself, how hard is it for us two thousand years later? Can we believe in the existence of God and the Spiritual World when science cannot prove their existence? I am sure we have all asked this of ourselves at some stage or another. I guess most of us here have decided in favour of God, or we wouldn't be reading this. We each need to find our own way to this belief. Unlike science, which tries to be objective, our spiritual beliefs are deeply personal and linked to our experience.

**Read v29 of John again.**

This is generally interpreted to mean that it is blessed to believe in Jesus, despite not fully understanding him nor knowing how he really works in our life. What Jesus is trying to say is that belief is about seeing with our spiritual eyes and that accepting what we see with our physical eyes is not true faith. It is the inner sight of the spiritual eyes that leads to true faith. Therefore faith is not about believing that which we do not understand. This is blind faith. Faith is about seeing and understanding the Lord - opening up the inner sight. Doubt is, in essence, an essential part of our journey of faith - a journey to discipleship and to deepening our relationship with the Lord.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, we do not always believe as we should. We too, like Thomas, find ourselves doubting, wanting irrefutable proof before we dare accept what we are told. Help us, when faith is hard, to put our trust in you, knowing you will not fail us. You are always faithful to us Lord, and we thank you. Amen.