

MATTHEW – SERMON 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hands up if you're fed up. Last year Julie and I celebrated St Matthew's Patronal Festival with Harry and Sarah and a pile of other friends, at their wedding. It was a lovely day, and on the Sunday morning I had a lie in, then went off for a pub lunch with five of our closest friends – and someone else paid the bill for lunch. Now Harry and Sarah are in lockdown in the North East, we can't go North to see them, and it looks like – if we can go north to the cottage we've booked at the end of next month – we still won't be able to go and see them.

Patronal Festivals should be celebrated with music and choirs, and Festal Evensongs, and coffee and cake, and a glass of something later. We spent the last few weeks getting churches reopen – only to be told by some people that we haven't reopened the sort of service they want, and to be told by others that this is all unsustainable and we must change. I've had so many emails this week from Deanery and Diocese and various bodies resourcing the Church of England, offering me conferences and training and break out groups and opportunities to discuss the way forward, my mental health, and how we handle change. The “Delete” button is a wonderful invention.

I also had an email from York University asking if I'd like to do a ten week course (2 hours a week) on The Reformation in 15 Books – that sounds much more fun, and probably far more helpful to my mental health. Perhaps I could get through the next few years by modelling myself on Henry VIII. Step one, replace the old wife with a younger more glamorous model – step two, dissolve church property and take the money. My wife made a comment about how I have made a start by modelling my shape on Henry VIII, she also assures me that there is no young lady out there willing to take me on. O well!

I laugh about it – because without laughter I'd cry – we are all finding it stressful. Most of us are surviving, but of course there are people who are not, people from whom all this is very difficult. This is going to be a long winter, and we need to love and support each other. If there is anything Julie or I can do, please pick up the phone – although I balance that with a gentle reminder that this next week we are having a few days off. We're holidaying at home – and Julie has given me a list of places we are visiting. I think she's been through the National Trust website and found all the properties within a hundred miles where the second hand bookshop has reopened. If buying books is what gets us through, fair enough.

So 200 years ago, the good folk of Darley Abbey probably met to celebrate their second Patronal Festival in this church. No doubt someone in the congregation was heard to say “we didn’t do it like this last year”, and a church tradition was already born. There doesn’t seem to be any definite reason why Walter Evans had his new church dedicated to St Matthew – I checked with John Bishop that there wasn’t a great uncle Matthew it was named in honour of. John has good theories about Walter reflecting on money and naming the church accordingly – I think that perhaps he was facing a large tax bill, or had been a bit loose with his accounting, and hoped that dedicating a church to Matthew might get him a bit of divine support.

One of the pictures I used on the Order of Service which is on line, is a gorgeous carving from the chapel of the National Memorial Arboretum, of our saint, wearing his glasses, looking like a man of business, clutching two large money bags. It’s a lovely carving – one of a whole sequence showing all twelve disciples (do have a look at them on my blog - <http://www.northernvicar.co.uk/2020/08/20/nationalmemorial-arboretum-staffordshire-millennium-chapel/>). It makes them all really human.

I wonder if Matthew was content with his lot, or whether he was feeling fed up when Jesus passed by his tax booth. We know how the Roman tax system worked. You paid a price to your overlords for the right to gather x amount of tax. Then you collected the taxes, and collected some more, to ensure you made a handsome profit out of the system. One assumes Matthew, in a booth beside the Lake, taxing the fishermen, ensuring that the quotas were paid – one assumes he was doing well for himself. I found myself singing “When the money kept rolling in, you don’t ask how” (which is actually Evita, rather than Jesus Christ superstar).

One assumes, too, that he was not the most popular person in the community. Fishing quotas never make you popular. Working for the Romans didn’t make you popular. Collecting taxes didn’t make you popular. As a Jew, working for the Romans, certainly made you unpopular – you were betraying your people, betraying your religion, betraying God.

As Jesus came to his town, did Matthew listen to him? Did he wonder what this man had to offer him? Was he excited, empowered, frightened – and when Jesus called, what did he think? Did he hand in his resignation to the Romans, did he sell the business on to another – we just don’t know.

The Pharisees didn’t know what to make of Jesus – after all, he was not dining with their sort of people – who is this holy man who spends time, who eats and drinks, with the people who are anything but holy. 200 years ago in this village,

we build a church, we build a church for the people, we employ a holy man, we build him a house – and we make sure his house is at the top of the hill, we don't want him mixing too closely with the ordinary people down at the bottom of the hill.

Jesus reminds those scribes and pharisees why he has come, who matters to him, who matters to God – and that's rather salutary to holy people like us, we want to feel special, we want to feel we are the most special to God, but God does not work that way. All of us are sinners, God loves us all, he doesn't love nice sinners us like more than he loves others. We are fortunate people, God loves us, God blesses us, and God uses us to show his love for others – emotionally and practically. Remember Jesus's teaching, an explicit statement in Luke 12.48, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked". Matthew knew that to be true as well.

We don't know much about the future of Matthew. He followed Jesus, he was there at the Ascension, we assume he was in the Upper Room at Pentecost. He doesn't get mentioned in Acts or in any of Paul's letters. Early church writers, and historian of the church, people with names like Clement of Alexandria and Papias of Hierapolis, say that he remained in Judea, the area around Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to Jews and Christians who were Jewish. The church historian Eusebius who lived between about 260 and 340 AD, wrote "Matthew collected the oracles (literally *logia*: sayings of or about Jesus, the word) in the Hebrew language (*Hebraïdi dialektōi*), and each one interpreted them as best he could." We'd love to think it was Matthew the tax collector who became Matthew the apostle and wrote Matthew's gospel – but it's odd that, even when he tells this story, he doesn't use the word "me". "I did this, Jesus called me". Perhaps that is just literary style, perhaps it was written by someone else – we just don't know.

On your noticesheet you have a picture from the Lindisfarne Gospels. The Gospels are kept in the British Library in London, and every few years they deign to lend them to the people of the North. They came to Durham in 2013, and we had a wonderful year of celebration. If you don't know the book, do have a look on the British Library website – it is worth exploring, an amazing product of the Lindisfarne monastery in around 695 AD. This community, on a tidal island off the coast of Northumberland, was rich – it had the resources to produce a book, that would have taken at least two years to produce. The parchment required, inks needing animal, vegetable and mineral pigments (if I remember right, the blue in the ink is from a mineral found on the borders of what is now India, traded round the world to this island). Written by a monk called Edfrith, you can imagine him, day in, day out, in his cell on the island,

writing, illuminating, working on this book “to the glory of God and St Cuthbert.”

Each gospel has a beautiful little illustration of its author, and here is Matthew. I love this picture of Matthew, scribing away, an angel on his shoulder ensuring, proclaiming that he is writing the Word of God. And I love the man, peering from behind the curtain. Scholars are divided – it could be Jesus, but many think it is Moses. Moses with his book of the Law, Moses the Jew guiding Matthew the Jew, looking at him, encouraging him, keeping him on the straight and narrow. I hope Eadfrith – doing an incredibly hard job - found strength as he portrayed the Evangelists, and I have this vision of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (and perhaps Moses too) looking over his shoulder as he wrote, and later lining up to greet him as he entered heaven, with a job well done.

I was quite chuffed that I found the Lent Course that Julie and I wrote for Ponteland in 2013, the year the Gospels came North. I sat and read it yesterday morning, and was quite proud of it. 7 years later, I can definitely say that was a good bit of work. None of us know where we will be in 7 years time, and we know what we will think when we look back. All we can do for now is keep going, keep smiling, and know we journey with others. Thank you St Matthew, thank you Eadfrith, thank you Walter Evans, thank you all of you.

Happy Patronal Festival one and all. Amen.