

Can you imagine what the neighbours must have thought? You can almost see the headlines in the Galilee Sun – ‘Local radical preacher seen with sinners.’

Jesus, as Saint Matthew tells us, having delivered the Sermon on the Mount went on to perform a number of powerful signs of his authority in acts of healing, of deliverance and the calming of the storm. All these would have impressed those who witnessed them. His teaching certainly impressed the crowd - there was a freshness, a vitality to his teaching that was in sharp contrast to what they were used to.

Then Jesus, in the eyes of respectable society of his day, blew it. He publicly chooses this as one of his followers a tax collector. We don't know what led up to this - had Matthew heard Jesus speak before, was he already struggling with an inner conflict in his soul? We do know the end result. Jesus chooses as one of his closest followers someone most people would have seen as at best a crook and at worst a collaborator.

And it gets worse - Jesus not only chooses Matthew, but he also goes on to mix with all his friends - he does the unthinkable, he shares a meal with tax collectors and sinners.

It is in the eyes of the Pharisees a scandal. Now to be frank I think there would have been an element of satisfaction on their part. For Jesus was probably beginning to become a bit of a nuisance, he was beginning to undermine their

position. And so, I would expect a certain pleasure on their part at the thought of Jesus' fall from grace in the eyes of the crowd.

Now they don't take the risk of confronting Jesus. Instead, they challenge his disciples, who may well have been confused by the sudden addition of a tax collector to their number. Why, they ask, does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?

Jesus, aware of the challenge, goes right to the heart of their self-righteousness, challenging them with words from Hosea, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'. These are words that come in the midst of a fierce denunciation of the hypocrisy of the society of Hosea's day, that hid behind the formal observance of the ritual of worship, continuing with

'(I desire) The knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.' (*Hosea 6.6*).

I think also of the words of Jesus to the crowd prepared to stone the woman taken in adultery; 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone,'

Jesus' drawing of Matthew into the fellowship of the disciples and the reaction of the Pharisees to this raises issues in our own day and in our own church life.

How do we respond to the Matthews, to those who seem to have placed themselves or who find themselves on the edge of our society?

How do we react to the single mother, the drug abuser, the asylum seeker, the prisoner those of different sexuality. For let us be honest with ourselves, we are

pulled in a number of directions as we seek to answer this one. I remember the one time Vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, Rev Sandy Millar, the home of the Alpha Course, telling a group of us of the appearance of a one time Page Three Girl in the Sun turning up at the Church and enrolling on an Alpha Course.

Let us begin by reflecting on how Jesus responded to Matthew and his friends in contrast with how the Pharisees reacted. What stands out for me is that they looked at the same person. Jesus saw Matthew. The Pharisees saw the tax collector. Jesus saw an individual. The Pharisees saw a category.

When faced with someone, it is much easier to respond to the category than to the person. To respond to the category, I don't have to think, I only have to draw on a common prejudice. Asylum seekers are after all only here for what they can get; drug abusers are just weak and pathetic and as anyone who has never been to Northern Ireland knows, all people living in Northern Ireland are bigots. These are all labels that we put on people - having put the label on them we don't have to think about them or relate to them anymore.

Whereas to respond to the person, we have to seek to understand the individual, to begin to understand their strengths and weaknesses, their hopes and their fears - to recognise a common humanity that we share with them.

Now this is more than just a matter of being nice to people. There is rather a Gospel imperative to this whole approach to people, to moving beyond the label to engage with the person. As I thought on this, I thought of the parable of

Jesus that has always made me feel uneasy, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. It tells, if you recall, of the nations being separated at the end of time as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats. The righteous are welcomed,

‘Come, O blessed of my father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me As much as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’ (*Matt 25.3ff*)

The response we are summoned to is, on the one hand of being Christ to the other, that of reaching out in his name in love and service; and on the other hand of recognizing Christ in the other.

Now of course, there are limits to the number of people we can be completely open to - the rest are inevitably going to be categorized in our own mind one way or another. What is not inevitable is that having categorized them, we dismiss them as having no claim on my concern or compassion or understanding.

In a divided society it is very easy to label whole sections of the community and demonize them. In a strange sort of way, as we discovered in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, conflict is much easier than reconciliation. When I am in conflict with someone, I don't have to engage with them -I only have to think of the justice of my position. When I move towards reconciliation I have to begin to engage with the other person, to begin to understand them.

I go back to the beginning. Both Jesus and the Pharisees saw Matthew. Jesus saw Matthew and called him to follow. The Pharisees saw a Sinner, one not worthy of any further concern. If Matthew turned up here, what would our reaction be?