



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (7th June) 2026

One of the features of reading the Gospel accounts as we do is that we can get caught up in the momentum of the narrative rather than pausing to contemplate the broader context in which events might have occurred. The call of Matthew is, perhaps, a case in point. We know that he ended up holding, as it were, three of the great offices of the ecclesiastical state - Evangelist, Apostle and Martyr; and maybe this helps us rather skate over the moment when he responded to Jesus' invitation to follow Him, focusing on the overwhelming Grace, which saw a man, whom, we might suppose, was embedded in the venality of his work, leave it all behind for a life interwoven with the foundations of the earthly Church; but I wonder whether it was quite that straightforward.

We might reflect that there was more to being an Apostle than the one-to-One relationship with Jesus: he would also engage with the other Apostles and we are told that there could be a bit of bickering between them: Matthew might well have found himself the object of some of this.

Rather like some of Tony Blair's cabinets, a significant number of the Apostles were connected by family ties, but, so far as we can see, Matthew was a man alone; and given his previous career, it is unlikely that he had been friends with any of the rest of the Twelve, even if they had known him.

However, it is that livelihood as a tax-gatherer, which it is easy to suppose created the greatest potential for friction; and not just because of the character of the work itself; but as the office hymn for his feast-day says, the job made him a tool of the foreign master's hated rule: he had been an agent of the Roman occupation; and in a society where you did not know whom you could trust, maybe some of his Apostolic colleagues were wary of him: though, of course, as it transpired, their mistrust was looking in the wrong direction. It is not difficult to imagine others of the Twelve muttering questions of what he might have been up to - not least Saint Simon, whose zealot background would have given him a rather different political perspective than that of the erstwhile collaborator with Roman rule.

His situation might have been similar in some ways to those of the Thomas-es Wolsey and Cromwell. Commentators frequently observe that Henry VIII liked to promote men of what was then considered low social origins, because, as both of them were to discover, they owed everything to him and survived by his consent and goodwill alone. Whilst I do not impute any such cynical motivation to Jesus, it might be that His support of Matthew stood between our patron saint and any latent hostility from others of the Apostolic band.

Equally, of course, we need to look at things from the other end of the equation. On the one hand, Matthew might have felt quite at home with Jesus. It is a feature of life that those who are ostracised by what considers itself respectable society find themselves thrown together with others who have been similarly shunned: so associating with prostitutes and others might have been a familiar experience for him. On the other hand, the ethos promoted by Jesus' teaching - what we might succinctly describe as a self-sacrificial concern for others - would have been alien to a man, who had been governed by an impulse to self-advantage and the exploitation of others. Over time, his career will have developed perspectives and habits, disinhibiting him from imposing burdens and misery on others. It will have taken him time to adjust his responses to others in a way that conformed to the character of Jesus' example. Of course, we know next to nothing of the interpersonal dynamics of the Apostolic college and so how that this transformation might have grasped Matthew.

All of this is of more than mere historical interest. Whereas once, most in this country were born into Christianity and we usually knew or knew of the people who walked through our doors, now strangers appear - people, very often, who have been shaped by philosophies very different from that which inheres in the Gospel. Responding to them - and supporting them as they adjust to the life of Christian discipleship - is a much more acute challenge than once it was. Contemplating what Saint Matthew's journey of faith might have been like, could offer us some insight into that task.