Thursday 21 September 2017, St Matthew
2 Corinthians 4.1-6 Matthew 9.9-13

+ Jesus said, ‘For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’

The parish church of St Agnes at Cawston in Norfolk has a wonderful, and justifiably celebrated rood screen. This tall wooden construction separates the chancel of the church from the nave. Painted in two different sequences, the panels date from between 1490 and 1510; they depict St Agnes, to whom the church is dedicated and St Helena, mother of Constantine, together with the 12 apostles, including the pair illustrated in your order of service: on the left St Simon (the Zealot), and on the right, wearing the spectacles, St Matthew, the apostle whose feast we keep today.

In our gospel reading we heard the story of Jesus’ peremptory calling of Matthew away from his despised role as a collector of taxes on behalf of the Roman state occupying Palestine. Just as he had called the fishermen away from the Lake, so Jesus drew Matthew out of his tax booth with the unexpected command to follow him. We might note the normality of this encounter. Jesus deliberately engaged with the day-to-day life of his disciples, entering into their secular spaces to call them away from their regular work into his service.

That should remind us that Jesus can and will call and touch each of us in our normal daily, working lives, not necessarily (or at least not exclusively) in the rarefied spaces of churches and cathedrals. Jesus’ teachings speak most vividly and relevantly when we can apply them to our own secular lives and alter our behaviour accordingly, casting aside the comforts of this world on which we too readily rely and which also drag us down, in order to focus on the kingdom and things above. The obedience that Matthew showed in abandoning what we might assume was precious to him (the money that he made from his job) to enter into the unknown and potentially dangerous life of a disciple early church commentators saw as a miracle, transforming him from degeneracy into a just man.

All the gospels testify to the extent of the Jews’ dislike and distrust of tax collectors, portraying them as morally and politically irredeemable. Their collaboration with the Roman colonial powers made them socially unacceptable, while the fact of their (necessary) interaction with Gentiles, together with the widespread belief that they profited personally from the money they collected, made their morality questionable. Even more seriously, tax collectors were barred from the synagogue by Levitical law, which grouped them with unclean beasts; they were also banned from acting as witnesses in court cases, being compared to robbers and murderers. Matthew the tax-collector was therefore just as much of a scorned outsider as were the lepers, gentiles and women with whom Jesus also consorted, to the Pharisees’ disapproval.

In medieval representations of the apostle, Matthew is often depicted wearing spectacles as he is realistically in the image in your service sheet, an allusion to the damage done to his sight by the constant consulting of his account books. If you look closely, you can also see the money box beside his right foot, for the collection of paid taxes. But the Matthew we see
on this rood screen is no longer the tax collector. While his right hand holds his glasses to his failing eyes, his left holds an open book, the gospels written by the evangelist Matthew. Modern commentators no longer associate Matthew, the tax collector, with the author of the gospel that bears his name, but in the medieval church it was assumed that the evangelist and disciple were the same man.

It can be difficult for us fully to recognise just how transgressive Jesus’ behaviour was in insisting on sitting at dinner with reviled tax collectors, and with other sinners and so to understand why the Pharisees became so exercised about it. The psalmist praised ‘the man who walks not in the council of the ungodly’ (Ps 1: 1). Yet Jesus sat with precisely those whom he should have spurned.

And, as he so often did, he used a quotation from Scripture (the verse from Hosea, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’ Hos 6: 6; cf. Mt 12: 7) to explain why: ‘For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’ The spontaneous act of compassion and generosity would always, for Jesus, trump rigid adherence to Temple discipline. In reminding the Pharisees to go away and re-read their Scripture properly, Jesus teaches us another important lesson: his mission was not exclusively to the virtuous, and still less to those who believed themselves to be morally superior, but to all humanity. Those who lay at, or beyond, the social or moral edges of any given society were those to whom Jesus felt a special affinity, and with whom he calls us, also, to consort.

I have struggled to find an obvious parallel in our own society for an occupation viewed with the same opprobrium as that of the tax-collector in occupied Palestine; surveys may demonstrate our distrust of politicians, estate agents, or bankers but none of these groups is socially shunned like robbers and murderers. Yet, we can have no doubt to which sorts of people in our wider society Christ would be most strongly drawn: the homeless, the prostitute, the drug addict, the disabled, the food bank claimant, or the asylum seeker.

Our society has done much to vilify such people in recent years, affecting to make them morally responsible for their social and material misfortunes, sinners whom the righteous should shun. The story of how Matthew responded to Jesus by casting aside a despised occupation and accepting his call offers a valuable model for each of us. The more conscious we are of our own limitations and sinfulness, the more welcome Christ and his gospel can be for us, and for those whom we touch through our own lives. Our image from the Cawston rood screen encapsulates the message of today’s gospel and the merits of recalling the example of St Matthew. The redemption of the short-sighted tax collector is made manifest to all who look at his image because of the gospel book that Matthew, the evangelist, holds open before him. Jesus said, ‘I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’
St Agnes, Cawston, Norfolk: Detail from rood screen; SS Simon and Matthew