

Matthew: Hosting Jesus

Today's Gospel reading features the briefest account of the calling of Matthew from his tax-collector's booth. "Follow me," says Jesus, and Matthew gets up and follows him. It's a kind of conversion: a *turning* from sin to salvation, from ignorance to faith, from darkness to light. We think of other conversions: Saul on the Damascus Road, the wayward Augustine, the self-righteous Wesley, the sceptical C.S. Lewis; or the coming to faith of a drug-dealer, or someone in prison. But is conversion something that happens to other people? Can you speak of your own conversion?

Some of us might be able to, whether focussed on a particular moment, or over a period of time. But the likelihood is we'd be talking about an event or a time *in the past*.

But isn't our conversion – the action of turning to Christ, our reorientation towards God, making our will God's will – isn't that an ongoing process? I don't mean that we discount our Christian faith, or doubt that God has forgiven and redeemed us in Christ; but that we recognise that we haven't yet arrived, but are still on the way; that we continue to fall short of the glory of God; that like Ananias selling his property in the Acts of the Apostles, we don't yield all to God, but still hold something back. Can we separate our conversion from our sanctification: that work of the Holy Spirit within us that makes us more like Christ?

Matthew the tax-collector left his booth and followed Jesus, but we then find Jesus a dinner guest at Matthew's house. I wonder who'd issued the invitation? Maybe Matthew, in celebration of the change this man had brought in his life. Or maybe Jesus had invited himself, as he did with another tax-collector, Zacchaeus? What's it like to have Jesus as a dinner guest? ... We might remember other occasions in the Gospels when Jesus had something to say to his host: Simon the Pharisee, Martha. What if Jesus were a guest at your house? What would he notice? What would he say?

At the end of the account, Jesus says to the critical Pharisees, quoting the prophet Hosea: "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" The peril of any religious activity, whether Jewish sacrifice or membership of the Christian church, is that we can seek to use it to keep God at bay, at a safe distance. We come to church, we sing our praise, we ask forgiveness of our sins, we help our neighbour – perhaps by so doing we can prevent God invading our lives?

Jesus is disregarding of social and religious protocol. He heals on the Sabbath, eats with tax-collectors and sinners, turns over the tables of the temple money-changers. He sees through people's pretences, breaks down their barriers and gets behind their defences. "Show me a coin: whose head is this, and whose inscription?" "Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor." "Who was neighbour to the man who fell among thieves?" He not only calls Matthew to follow him, he comes to dinner at his house.

And there he finds many tax-collectors and sinners. That's probably what we fear: that when we invite Jesus into our hearts, when we let him in behind our defences, he won't help but notice the tax-collectors and sinners that lurk there.

And yet it's the tax-collectors and sinners in us who need to meet Jesus. If we hear his words that he comes, not as a judge to the criminal, but as a doctor to the sick, we'd lose some of our fear. Why *do* the tax-collectors and sinners come to the dinner with Jesus? Because they've heard he's good company? Quite possibly! Because they've learnt he won't condemn them out of hand? Quite probably. In fact, some of them must be *longing* to meet Jesus, because of the liberation he brings. They've seen it in Matthew and others and they want it for themselves.

Holman Hunt painted a famous picture: *The Light of the World*. It might have been titled, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." It's often remarked that the door Jesus stands outside with his lantern has no external handle: it can only be opened from the inside.

Maybe Matthew *did* open the door: maybe he *did* invite Jesus to dinner that day. If he's the same Matthew who became member of the Twelve and an apostle, or even if he isn't; if he went on to write the Gospel which bears his name, or even if he didn't, I'm sure it's an invitation he never regretted.