



never outsource the essentials

Outsourcing is not so modern a business practice as you might think. The Roman method of collecting taxes was to auction a franchise within each province. The highest bidder paid a fixed sum to the authorities and in return was authorised to levy as much tax as he could extract from the people. So that, it seems, is how Matthew landed the job of tax collector which made him a central player in the stories we know as the Gospels.

This approach of outsourcing seemed to work well for the Romans. They had little trouble getting their due – or we might say their 'not-due'. Their outsourced tax collectors were often heavy handed unscrupulous men good at extortion and menace.

This is useful background for us on this Feast of St Matthew. It means that the tax collectors of scripture were not at all like our friends working in today's HMRC. To be a tax collector in Jesus' day was something quite different. More a licensed thug; certainly an exploiter and oppressor of a generally exploited and oppressed people. Perhaps the closest we get today are the menacing doorstep lenders operating in the unregulated shadows of urban housing estates, or gang members offering 'protection' deals.

Matthew is sometimes described as a publican but not in the sense of having a side-line in running an off-licence. In antiquity 'publicans' were public contractors, and this one was collecting taxes for Rome. By the way, Matthew is called Levi in the gospels of Luke and Mark where they describe the same event which

we hear of in this morning's gospel, the Gospel of Matthew but which is not likely to have been written by Matthew. It can be confusing, I know.

"As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, [Jesus] said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." [today's Gospel]

I love this short text, especially the exchange at dinner with the Pharisees (and don't forget we all have our own inner-Pharisee; some of us even have several since you never know when you might need a spare).

They see Jesus spending time in the company of the out-sourced exploiter, the tax collector, who would be an object of real hate and loathing in those times. And not just with Matthew but with a collection of tax collectors and publicans and other disreputables. This offended the Pharisees. In their eyes Jesus could not keep such company and also keep the Law. Hence their question to his disciples: "Why does your teacher eat with [these people]?"

And whoever wrote this gospel – the one we describe as Matthew's – has

Jesus reply epigrammatically like this: “Those who are well don’t need healing, just those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”

What might we take from this which could be of help or at least of interest to our 21st century hearts? Some wonder whether anything in the Bible can be of help. It is, after all, ancient and foreign, it has been translated and mistranslated, it has often been appropriated and used in ways we just might describe as ‘theological outsourcing’ by those who have (as we like to say) ‘an agenda’. If you are a regular here this cautionary health warning will be familiar. It can be hard (for some impossible) to read anything from the Bible without a very cloudy lens and all sorts of sensibilities intruding.

But there is a line in this morning’s Gospel which seems like a tremendous invitation: “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” The second part, about mercy rather than sacrifice, refers back to a similar phrase in the Old Testament book of Hosea [6.6]. And it is a very important insight into the nature of God. But what really speaks to me is the ‘*go and learn what this means..*’. And it could be an important clue to how we are to go about life and living, in this as in any century and with whatever cloudy lens we are saddled with.

Let me try to explain. Regimes, governments, businesses and organisations have often outsourced certain functions. We heard about Roman tax collection and we have heard about the outsourcing of many contemporary services from home help and street cleaning to prisons and policing. Firms might outsource their HR function or their accounts department. It has become a popular trend, all part of the obsession with reducing costs and headcounts.

Outsourcing has its place in many of the services we need. But it has *no* place in the greatest adventure we shall ever know, that of being human. And for those who seek to know God this is just as true. ‘Go and learn what this means..’ is an invitation to live adventurously, to live enquiringly, to live experimentally, to think and feel *for ourselves*, to get our fingers sometimes burnt, our senses sometimes bruised and also to make discoveries, find truths and to grow and to flourish.

Perhaps you think this is what we do anyway. But consider how we so often unconsciously outsource these functions to experts and gurus, priests and pundits, celebrities and politicians, theologians and ‘personalities’ of one kind or another. Or we outsource them to some tribal identity which we mistakenly think says all there is to say about ourselves, and instead of living as a responsible individual before God we identify solely with our nationality, gender, class, race, sexual orientation or perhaps a professional group.

Better by far to cultivate a *dependent independence*. *Dependent* upon God who made, shaped and created and who loves and sustains. *Independent* in our response to that and our approach to life. One of the great aspects of the various accounts of Christ that we Christians have is the mix of assertion and challenge, questions and riddles, subversive messages and tenderness we find attributed to him in the gospels. ‘Rise up’ he seems to say, ‘rise up and discover your true standing in God’s eyes. Think and feel for yourselves. Be authentic’.

Another way of seeing this is the demand that we are to take responsibility: responsibility for ourselves, for each other, for our political and economic and social systems, for our planet. Don’t outsource these responsibilities to the experts, the vested interests, the governments of the world. We ourselves must become

engaged, as far as our abilities permit. The People's Climate March today and its rally in Parliament Square at 1.45pm is an example of many good signs of our taking responsibility for matters once happily (and recklessly) left to others.

Matthew was a self-centred exploiter of the people, operating with the licence of a violent occupying power. And yet all was not lost in him. The gospel offers the briefest hint of his ability (indeed his longing) to turn to the light and to take responsibility for himself. 'Follow me' says Christ. And follow him he does, becoming an Apostle of Christ and a saint of the church.

We can infer that whatever character flaws Matthew had, a sense of being righteous was not one of them. The self-righteous can never see in Christ anything of value, hence his observation that the well have no need of the medic, only the sick. A skilful way of making the point.

'Go and learn what this means'. An injunction I'd put on a par with the great commandment that 'you shall love one another, as I have loved you'. We are to 'go and learn'; to live adventurously, to live enquiringly, to live experimentally, to think and feel for ourselves, to get our fingers sometimes burnt, our senses sometimes bruised and also to make discoveries, find truths and to grow and to flourish. Amen.

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