

Grace through Faith

Sermon

preached on 2nd Sunday after Trinity (June 5), 2005
in Karlsruhe (Church of the Resurrection)

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Psa 50:7-15; Hos 5:15-6:6; Rom 4:13-18; Mat 9:9-13

Our gospel reading of today is taken from St Matthew. This whole year is called Year of Matthew because the Sunday gospel readings generally are taken from this gospel, if not a special occasion requires otherwise. Likewise next year the Sunday gospel readings will regularly be taken from Mark, and the following year from Luke, giving us the opportunity of looking at Jesus' words and deeds from different points of view. Only such a variety makes it possible to get an impression of the fulness of the gospel as Jesus preached it, and acted it out.

Fr Anselm Grün, Benedictine monk of Münsterschwarzach and a very prolific writer, some years ago wrote a little book entitled, "Biblical Pictures of Redemption", "Biblische Bilder von Erlösung". He shows that biblical authors use different concepts or pictures of redemption. Unfortunately, the little book seems not to have been translated into English; however, I cannot but stongly recommend it.

The emphasis of Matthew is on the relationship of Jesus to what we now call the Old Testament, and what for the Jews of the time, and also for the first Christians was "the Scripture". In Matthew Jesus is described as sort of new Moses who leads his people into the Land of Promise. In parallel to the five books of Moses – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – he assembles Jesus' teaching in five great sermons – the best known of them the Sermon on the Mount. But Jesus is more than Moses; he is the Son of God in whom the promises and predictions of the Old Testament, and

especially the prophets, are fulfilled. So the very first verse of the gospel already refers to Jesus as the Son of David, the Son of Abraham, and after the long genealogy, which firmly roots Jesus in the Old Testament, we read about the annunciation of Jesus' birth – not to our Lady but to Joseph surprisingly – and we learn that “all this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet,” which refers – without explicitly telling the name – to Isaiah.

What has been called “the second book of Matthew”ⁱ – in parallel to the second book of Moses – comprising ch. 8-10 of the gospel, of which today's gospel reading is a part, is concerned with apostleship. It has also been called “a handbook to meet the needs of the ordained Evangelist or prophet, or as he was sometimes called ‘Apostle’”ⁱⁱ in a wider sense of the word.

Today's gospel reading, which is to be found rather in the middle of that “book”, may be divided in three parts: the calling of St Matthew the Apostle, the meal together with tax collectors and sinners, and the dispute with the Pharisees.

The calling of Matthew, which forms the beginning, is reported in the shortest possible way. Jesus passes in front of a tax booth. He calls the official who is sitting there to follow him. The man gets up and does follow him. We are not told if that tax collector had already heard about Jesus. At least he appears not to be interested in Jesus in a way comparable to Zacchaeus, of whom we read in St Lukeⁱⁱⁱ that he ran and climbed on a tree to see Jesus. He just sat at his desk and did his work when Jesus passed by. But when Jesus called him he immediately got up and followed him. He did not say, “Let me just finish my accounts and call someone to take my place.” He got up and followed Jesus. He got up; he left his quiet, sitting, immobile position, and moved. “He followed him.” That is precisely what we are called to do also, not only when we leave

the pews later and draw near to the altar to receive communion, although that is part of what we are invited to. Even more when we get up and leave the church after the service. It may be felt as strange – at first sight at least – that the most churchy name of our service – the Mass – derives from the very last words of the Latin liturgy. “Ite, missa est.” “Go, this is the dismissal.” This name, not very meaningful in itself, can remind us that the meaning of the Divine Service just begins when the liturgy in the strict sense ends.^{iv} “Go in peace,” as the Deacon – if there is one – says at the end of the service, doesn’t mean, “Go home and enjoy a nice holiday,” but: „Go forth, and change the world.” Following Jesus does not only mean walking behind him and perhaps listening to what he says and seeing what he does, although this certainly was the first thing the apostles – and Saint Matthew – did. It also means going on in the way of Jesus even if he is no longer with us visibly, and doing the works he did.

“Now while he – Jesus – was at table in the house it happened that a number of tax collectors and sinners came to sit at the table with Jesus and his disciples.” The first experience Matthew makes following Jesus is not that he is ordered to do some work; he is invited for dinner. This is no coincidence. Likewise we, when we first will leave our pews, we are not going to work but approaching the Lord’s Table to be fed. They didn’t celebrate something like Holy Eucharist, then. That wasn’t possible before Jesus had sacrificed himself. But the Eucharist we celebrate is rooted not only in that “Last Supper” which Jesus celebrated with the innermost group of his disciples. It is rooted in all those meals he had with his disciples and with others, not least tax collectors and sinners.

At that time not only in Israel but among ancient peoples generally, a meal was much more than just an occasion of eating and drinking; a meal was a sacred occasion. That is

perhaps hard for us to understand in this time of “fast food”, when eating is very often not more than a biological function. The fact that grace before a meal has become something of a rarity nowadays is symptomatic of the change that has taken place. However, there are occasions even now which show us that a meal together with others is more than just satisfying our biological hunger and thirst. We need only think of the celebration of special birthdays with greater families and friends. These occasions show that eating and drinking together symbolize something spiritual: communion. A union between the participants which is more deeply rooted than mere words can express.

No surprise that the Pharisees were indignant, very angry. They were well aware of the religious connotations of these meals Jesus had with those people they utterly disliked. He made common cause with unrepenting sinners, men who committed treason against their own country, their own people. “Why does he ...?”

This brings us to the third part of the story, the dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees which reaches its climax with Jesus’ concluding words, “Go and learn the meaning of the words: Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice.” “Go and learn.” That’s strong words. And he quotes a sentence they should have known, and did certainly know. Words from the Prophet Hosea. We heard them in our first reading today.

“Faithful love is what pleases me, not sacrifice.” That is what we read. Mercy, faithful love. In Hebrew, the word is *Hesed*, or *Chesed*. This word is variously translated as “mercy,” “covenant faithfulness,” “kindness,” “loving kindness,” “steadfast love” – it’s all the same word. And it is a good word for – what it is like to be God. For it is the nature of God to deal with us mercifully – with loving kindness.

God does not treat Israel, or the tax collector in the Gospel, or us, the way God should, or the way we deserve, or the way that is just. God treats us with Chesed, with faithfulness to the covenant, to the promise, that he has made with us.

Now, there are two things that need to be said about this – they are very different, but related. The first is that God’s faithfulness really has no limits. The tax collectors and sinners were not secretly nice people with hearts of gold who were misunderstood victims of an uncaring society. They are people who have intentionally chosen to crawl just that way – and for the sake of nothing but their own profit. That’s the first thing. God’s faithfulness extends not just to fallen robins, but to real scum. And it does not end. That’s the first thing.

The second thing is that God is not indifferent to our behaviour. God cares very much about how we act and what we do. Our behaviour has consequences; it matters – it matters to God and it matters to us. It is a whole lot better, for a lot of reasons, not to be like the tax collectors and sinners than it is to be like them. There is no doubt about that, and God makes that clear over and over again. Still, it is God’s nature, first and foremost, to treat us the way Jesus treated the tax collectors and sinners.

But this business of Chesed, of loving kindness, is not just about how God acts. After all, central to what is going on in both Hosea and Matthew is the command of God that we are to act towards other people the way God acts towards us.

God says to Israel, and Jesus, carefully quoting Hosea so everyone will get the point, says the same thing to us, “I desire steadfast love (that’s Chesed) and not sacrifice.” God desires of us what God reveals to us. God wants us to be like himself, to act as he himself does. God wants us to treat one another, even (if not specially) the worst of one another, the way God treats us.

Deserving has nothing to do with this; bringing out the best in other people has nothing to do with this, being fair has nothing to do with this, winning friends and influencing people has nothing to do with this. None of that matters. What matters is acting like God acts – because God wants us to, and we decide to do it.

It is the nature of God to reach out to us with steadfast love, with covenant faithfulness. And it is of our nature to choose. We really don't have any excuses. God will help, and the question is not about who other people are. The question is about who we are.

And there's one more thing, and it brings us back to the beginning of our considerations. God treats us the way Jesus treated the tax collectors and sinners. And nobody could have guessed; nobody could have figured that out by himself. The only way that the world around us, the only way a world desperately without mercy, can ever know that this is the way God is, is if we show them. Otherwise, the world will never know. We know what God desires. This is about our identity, but it is also about our mission. This is what "following Jesus" means. Going out into the world and showing people the love of God. We are the only way the world will know. Amen.

ⁱ F. W. Green, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 1964, p. 155.

ⁱⁱ F. W. Green, *ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Luk 19:2-10.

^{iv} John A. T. Robinson, *Liturgy Coming to Life*, 1960, p. 70.