

Sunday 22nd September 2024
Feast of St Matthew

300th Anniversary of the Foundation of the [Society of Cambridge Youths](#)

Readings: [Proverbs 3.13-18](#), [2 Corinthians 4.1-6](#), [Matthew 9.9.13](#)

Today's Gospel Reading, set for the feast of St Matthew, is a very short extract from the middle of Matthew 9, in which Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector to be his disciple. This encounter has no introduction, and so it can seem, at least in the NRSV, an almost incidental encounter: as Jesus is walking along, he spots Matthew in his tax booth, invites him to follow, and Matthew gets up with barely more than a, 'Why not?'

But there is nothing incidental about this encounter. This extract follows on from Jesus healing a paralysed man who has been brought to him on a stretcher, so there is nothing incidental even about Jesus walking about. His ability to walk about is something that he very aware of. And so he is able to greet Matthew, seated at the tax booth.

The verb, 'seated at' (καθήμενος), is a very deliberate verb too. Matthew has already used it to describe the people of Israel, 'sat in darkness', quoting Isaiah. The idea is that there is something in being seated in a particular place that defines a person, and informs their identity.

Notice that Matthew is not described as a tax collector here, we have to wait until the list of Jesus's disciples in Matthew 10 for that. He is simply seated at the tax booth, and so we assume the reason for his being seated there. Matthew's identity is found not so much in what he is doing, but in where he is located. And Jesus calls him to follow him, away from the tax booth, and the money books and bags of coins, from which he has up until now derived his identity, to find his truer self.

So this is much more than a chance encounter, but one which has far deeper significance, and reveals a far deeper truth about how God watches over us, invites us to share in the gift of his mission and ministry, and helps us to discover the truth about ourselves by placing us where we can discover our true identity.

That sort of encounter, and that sort of relationship, is described by a Hebrew word, hesed. It is a word which is used throughout the Old Testament, but is notoriously difficult to translate and to express in English. It is often translated, 'loving-kindness', but in truth means the sort of love God has for us, and we should have in turn, not because we have to but because we choose to. It is the word behind the 'mercy' in the saying that Jesus uses when he explains why he is seated at the table, quite deliberately, with tax collectors and sinners, quoting this time from Hosea. So when he says, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' he is reminding the people that they should love God not because they have to, or because God holds any power over them based on whether or not they fulfil certain religious ritual, but because they want to, and they recognise that that is why God loves them.

This sort of love is much more difficult to live out, because it reveals the deeper truths about our choices and desires.

Bellringing can help us to understand this sort of pursuit of truth too. When ringers talk about truth, they usually mean a very particular sort of mathematical truth. Change ringing has developed as a performance art, created by ringing bells in different sequences or permutations.

Methods are produced to aim to ring as many possible different permutations as possible, without repeating any, in ways which are musically and artistically interesting.

Students studying the mathematical tripos today still learn about change ringing as a way to understand and investigate set theory, and so the mathematical and philosophical truth at the heart of change ringing is of a particular demonstrable nature. But the beauty of bellringing is that this is not sufficient. The truth is not revealed in sets of numbers pricked out on a piece of paper or fed through a piece of truth-proving software. It is only revealed when the hypothesised performance is actually rung, sounded out on tower bells or in hand, for all to hear.

So it does not matter so much what the bell is doing – whether it is ringing Bristol Surprise Maximus or doing a 3-4 dodge – but where it is to be found in the sonic space formed by the art of performance. Its true identity is in the relationship between the ringers, a very deliberate and significant relationship; as well as with those listening, which is perhaps more significant than it might first appear.

One of the things that I am particularly interested in is the way in which the sound of the bell, emanating so often from a church tower or steeple, connects people to an awareness of the presence of God in their lives. For me, this expression of the truth and meaning of life is worship. When we gather to ring, perhaps before a service or at another time, it is not a part of worship or a prelude to worship, but it is worship in and of itself.

This expression of truth is also revealed in the very existence the Society of Cambridge Youths over its 300-year life. The Society exists to promote the art of change ringing, and to seek new and creative ways to express its truth and beauty. It is a society that has its own identity, not part of the church but working closely with it, not part of the university but connected at various times and in various places. If you look back over its history, there are points when the Society has had to defend its independent existence, which it does, quite rightly, because it is this group of people who know and trust each other enough to find new and beautiful ways to make music together.

Our predecessors of 300 years ago were in pursuit of new methods of revealing truth. They may not have recognised today's [particle peals](#) or [compositions of Stedman Caters arranged according to the digits of pi](#), but they would recognise the desire to continually improve and refine our collective understanding of what bellringing is or could be.

That is what it means to derive our identity by where we are located, and by whom we make our relationships with. As a church, we are part of a network of people called to find our true identity in choosing to follow Jesus Christ and living according to his love. As the second letter to the Corinthians, from which we also heard today, puts it, 'by the open statement of truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.'

We all have a calling to help each other discern what is good and true and honourable in our lives, and when we do, something beautiful can happen: the 'light of the knowledge of the glory of God' shining in our hearts.

Let us live according to this knowledge of our true self, each of us chosen by God in his loving-kindness, called to recognise the truth revealed in where we find ourselves.