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Christ Church West Wimbledon
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THE CALLING OF MATTHEW
MATTHEW 9:9-13

Matthew was a tax collector, as we heard in today's Gospel.

You know, I've known a number of tax collectors in my life. Sometimes as a result of my work at the Institute of Chartered Accountants – Representatives of Accountants need to talk to representatives of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, so both sides can help ensure that tax is collected as simply and painlessly as possible. Not an easy process as you'll know, but believe me it could be a lot worse. For a start, most of our tax collectors are thoroughly respectable people. One particular HMRC employee I know is a personal friend with whom I have shared many a dinner party, a church warden. He was always irritated at the bad press that tax collectors get in the Bible. The words "tax collectors" and "sinners" are very closely associated in the Bible.

Collecting taxes is an area of life that can be very prone to corruption in any age and we are fortunate to have an orderly system here in the United Kingdom. It is not so everywhere. Taxes can be set at an unreasonably high level, in the belief that taxpayers will always cheat and pay less than the legal requirement. But the full, excessive, amount may be demanded, sometimes to support political objectives, because of personal enmity. Sometimes just to encourage a bribe for the tax collector.

In first century Palestine, tax collectors became rich by oppressing the poor. This situation was further exacerbated by the fact that the taxes were being raised to support a foreign colonial power who harshly enforced their position – the Romans. The local tax collectors were able to call on the support of foreign and doubtless violent soldiers. No wonder they were hated.

But Jesus called to Matthew, a tax collector, to follow him, and Matthew went, without question or comment. Just like that. And became a key part of Jesus's team of disciples, the twelve, the closest of Jesus' associates.

Jesus loved a tax collector, just as he loved and wanted to draw to Him the members of every community of people around Him. And so, after the call the dinner party. Jesus went to a dinner party at Matthew's house, so He could talk to, attract and convert, tax collectors in a familiar situation, over a meal table, where they would feel comfortable and able to listen without having to be defensive. We aren't told in the Gospel, how many of those other tax collectors instantly mended their ways and joined Jesus' wider group of followers. I hope and trust that it was a lot. I hope also that some of the Pharisees who had been questioning this odd behaviour also took the lesson and recognised the good work that Jesus was actually doing. As we know from later events told in the Bible, in general the Pharisees generally continued to reject Jesus' teaching – but some Pharisees did accept.

I hope that we also can recognise and accept the lesson, of loving everyone, whatever their reputation. Don't write people off, no matter how bad their behaviour has been. The most surprising conversions can be made.

Oh, yes, and don't condemn HMRC out of hand. They are almost always trying to do the best they can, at what can be a difficult and sometimes thankless task.

As Jesus said on another occasion, do not judge others, for fear that you may yourself be judged and found wanting.