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Sermon : Feast of St Matthew ~ September 24, 2017

One day there was a shepherd with his dog looking after his sheep on the side of a deserted road in the Highlands. Suddenly, a brand new bright red Porsche 911 appears and screeches to a halt beside him. The driver, a woman wearing a Chanel suit, Ray Bans and a Cartier watch, steps out and says to the shepherd "If I can guess how many sheep you have can I keep one?" The shepherd thinks this is rather strange, but looking around at the huge flock spread across acres of hillside and thinking it would be impossible to count so many sheep, replies "Okay". The woman connects a laptop to a mobile phone, scans the field using GPS, opens a database linked to files with logarithms and pivot tables, then prints out a two hundred page report on a high tech mini printer. She studies the report and says to the shepherd "You have exactly 1,586 sheep". The shepherd replies "That's correct. You can have the pick of my flock". So the woman packs away her equipment, looks at the flock and picks up one of the animals. As she is about to leave, the shepherd stops her and says "If I can guess your profession, will you return the animal to me?" The woman thinks for a moment and then agrees. The shepherd says "You are an economist for a government think tank," says the shepherd. "Amazing!" responds the woman, "You are exactly right! But tell me, how did you deduce that?"

"Well," says the shepherd, "'You turned up here although nobody called you. You want to get paid for an answer I already knew, to a question I never asked, and you don't know anything about sheep farming. Now give me back my dog."

That is such a silly story – and don't worry if you didn't get the joke – I had to read it twice. Why do I start my reflections on this St Matthew's Day with that frivolous and probably irrelevant story? Well, I suppose it is because I have been thinking about St Matthew and his role in the apostolic band. Unlike the mythical economist who has little real knowledge of the subject, Matthew, a 1st century Galilean, was, as a tax collector, a very bright and intelligent man, who would have been literate in Aramaic and Greek. Matthew was a publican who sat at the "receipt of custom" in Capernaum. He is also called Levi, son of Alpheus and indeed he may well collected taxes from the Hebrew people for Herod Antipas himself. But of course even more significantly, it is more than likely that he was skillfully clever at levying more tax from the people than was strictly called for – which is why they were generally regarded as an unpopular breed – which reminds me, HMRC owes me 35p from the last tax year. However the difference is that I know for certain that I will be repaid by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which is more than could be said if Matthew had been dealing with my tax affairs.

Matthew was among the early followers and apostles of Jesus – yet Jesus would have been well aware of the murmurings and grumblings in the crowds against such a person, which is probably why Jesus noticed him in the first place. We'll never know why exactly Matthew was called out to be a follower – but Jesus clearly saw something in him – maybe his intelligence, undoubtedly his potential and certainly his persuasive way with people. Matthew was also clearly taken by Jesus which must have been why, after his call, Matthew immediately invited Jesus home for a feast. On seeing all this going on, it was the Pharisees who got irritated and cross and who then went on to criticize Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners. This prompted Jesus to answer, "For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

What did Jesus want from his new band of disciples? Clearly they had to be transparently honest, full of integrity, men whom the crowds would instinctively trust. Of course they turned out to be a pretty mixed bunch – but nevertheless they began to build up the followers of the Nazarene. It might have been Paul's words to the Church in Corinth at the start of Chapter 4 that would have been their byline: "Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God....For God, who said "let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

We are called to the same high standards in our lives as Christians. We are called to be transparently honest, full of integrity, people whom others instinctively trust, people of light. We do not use deception – rather we commend ourselves to everyone around. There is no second best here. Yes, we are human and at times we fail and sin – but through the grace of God, we can pick ourselves up and carry on, never losing heart.

The calling of Matthew, indeed the calling of all that motely group of disciples, reminds us that God has a place for us all in his Church; that each one of us is here for a reason – to help make God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Unlike the economist in my story, who wanted to get paid for an answer that was already known, to a question that was never asked, and who didn't know anything about sheep farming – we are here on earth to help guide others to know something of the love of God in their lives. This is something we do know about (however faintly) because we know that the love of God is in our own lives and we are called never to be afraid to chat to others, when appropriate, about what being a Christian means to us. The Pharisees criticised Jesus, through his disciples, for eating with tax collectors and sinners. It was Jesus who heard the criticism and answered. Today, if we are asked about our faith, it is us who have to answer.