

Matthew 9:9-17

“Bigots” - “persecutors” - “a baying pack of ignoramuses”. Those are just three public descriptions of evangelical Christians gleaned in a few minutes from the Times, the Guardian and Richard Dawkins’ latest book. Hostility, anger and even fear of evangelical Christians is mainstream and seems to become more and vehement as each year passes.

Evangelical Christians are viewed as wild-eyed fanatics. Obsessively repressive. Horribly bigoted. And determined - in the eyes of some commentators at least – to do for Britain what the Taliban did for Afghanistan.

As we have studied Matthew 8-9 so far you could be excused for thinking that Jesus was attempting to create just such a people. His calls to follow him have been absolutely uncompromising.

“Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” (Matthew 8:20)

“Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.” (Matthew 8:22)

As the waves were about to overwhelm the disciples little boat Jesus rebuked them for their cowardice.

“You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” (Matthew 8:26)

He is calling them to calmly trust and follow him no matter what. He has backed that up with the most extravagant demonstrations of his power. Healing people, driving out demons, calming the storm, and supremely claiming to forgive sins – which makes him the gateway to a relationship with God, the gateway to eternal life.

So if we believe those things, and respond to Jesus’ call we will be an unstoppable force. It is not surprising that some people call evangelicals – who take the bible seriously – the “Christian Taliban.”

Matthew however paints a very different picture of the people whom Jesus calls. They take Jesus absolutely seriously. But taking him seriously does not create hard-eyed fanatics, it creates a community of joy and celebration and peace.

1. New people – 9:9-13

The call of Matthew – v9

Almost certainly Matthew who wrote this gospel

Tax-collector

Roman system of tax-farming

Authorities set an amount of tax that had to come to them

Gave powers to local officials

Didn't ask too many questions about how much tax they actually levied.

So wealthy

Hated.

A Jew entering the customs service cut himself off from decent society. He was disqualified from being a judge or even a witness in court, and excommunicated from the synagogue. The members of his family were considered to be equally tarnished. Because of their exactions and extortions, customs officials were in the same legal category as murderers and robbers. NIDNTT

About the same status as a pimp – wealthy but reviled.

Amazing that Jesus should call him

Always expected that the Messiah would care for the “poor of the land”

But they thought that mean “humble virtuous peasants”

Not – lazy, avaricious, thieving, vicious parasites

Equally amazing that Matthew responded

He was leaving everything

The fishermen amongst Jesus' disciples could go back to their nets

This was walking away entirely from his previous way of life

He was joining a group who would naturally have hated him

May well have levied taxes on catches of fish.

He did not know where he was going – simply “follow me”

Jesus goes and eats with Matthew – v10

Shocking for Jesus to go – an unclean house

More shocking the other people who turn up

And they were shocked! – v11

Jesus explains – v12-13

Doctors go to sick people – spiritual doctor Jesus goes to spiritually sick people – to sinners.

Stern rebuke – “go and learn” – what the Pharisees said to those who did not know their bibles well. But he says it to them.

“I desire mercy not sacrifice” – Hos 6:6

Not mere formal conformity – but mercy.

Jesus is forming a new people

Enemies are being united

Sinners are being forgiven

Mercy reigns

- God's people are not just vagrants and criminals – it is the variety which is stunning
 - A rich, powerful Roman centurion
 - Possibly a “teacher of the law” 8:19
 - Demon possessed lunatics
 - Numerous solid ordinary folk, small businessmen – fishermen in particular
 - Now Matthew
- THAT IS US
 - Wonderful variety
 - Leave our status in the world behind – we are sinners in need of Jesus' forgiveness
 - We do not treat one another like the world – honouring, despising, mixing only with our friends – we practice mercy.
- A friend who is not yet a Christian came once - “not my kind of people” – EXACTLY!

2. New habits – 9:14-15

Confusion arises among John the Baptist's disciples – v14

The Pharisees fasted routinely – Monday and Thursday

It seems John disciples followed similar practice

Jesus' answer – v15

A claim about himself – he is the “bridegroom”.

In the OT God was the bridegroom who would come to his bride – his people.

His presence means people must celebrate

Like a wedding – not a moment for mourning.

He begins to predict his death

the time will come when he is taken away

- Far from seeking wild eyed fanatics – he expects his people's lives to be characterised by celebration.
- Today – a time when he is taken away and not taken away
 - Taken away – because he has ascended into heaven
 - Not taken away because he promised “surely I am with you always to the end of the age”
- This means that Christians live similarly ambiguously
 - The NT expects that Christians will fast
 - E.g. Acts 13:3 – fasted and prayed before sending Paul and Barnabas off on missionary journey.
 - Not called to fast routinely – like the Pharisees
 - More at particular moments
 - But the NT also expects Christians will also live lives of celebration
 - Jesus has come – he has died for our sins – we are completely forgiven – we are destined for eternal joy.

3. New structures – 9:16-17

Jesus expands the subject – vv16-17

Unshrunk cloth – will tear if it is used as a patch

Old wineskins – hard and brittle

New wine – effervescent

His immediate point:

He is replacing the old wine of Judaism – must have a new form to express it.

A wider implication:

The gospel is forever renewing

Structures can become like old wineskins

- 150 years ago – Cottage meetings in the “new town” of East Oxford
- 130 years ago – a first building
- 6 years ago – moved out of our building
- Now elders asking questions:
 - What are the essentials of “church”?
 - How can we best reach out to our neighbours?
 - Should we think about planting a new church?

4. So what kind of community is Jesus creating?

NEW!

New kind of community – uniting people and living mercifully

New habits of celebration and joy

New structures – constantly changing to reflect what god is doing.