

Matthew: Drawing in the Outcast

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- [0 : 0 0] I don't know about you, but I really like it when I can see myself in the Bible.! And I'm in this reading this morning. I'm right there. It says this,! Many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.
- I'm not a tax collector, but I'm a sinner. I think you might be too. I don't mean to be rude. But I can be full of anger and envy and jealousy and lust and just human.
- But what I find stunning about this passage is that it's us, everyday people, who are right in there with Jesus having dinner. I think it's just remarkable, as Jesus approaches Matthew and a tax collector, which is synonymous with the word thief and untrustworthy and excluded out of that community because of their greed, that Jesus just says, follow me.
- And it tells us that we don't need to have five years of training or be very careful about not sinning for five days before we preach. Oh, sorry, did I say that?
- Before we meet with Jesus. Or that you need to have got something right to be acceptable to Jesus. But we are as we are. And all it takes is an open heart, an open mind.
- [1 : 2 1] And I think the sense of Jesus seeking us out is incredible. The living God, not waiting in a distant location, but actually proactively coming forward and inviting us and saying, follow me.
- So whether that's for the first time for you to give your life to Jesus. Or whether Jesus is saying, follow me.
- You've been a bit distant for a while. Or whether Jesus is saying, follow me close in this chapter of your life. I want you to take a moment to consider actually how Jesus might be speaking to you right now.
- The Bible is really clear. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. And just notice if a little lie creeps in that says, well, maybe others, but not you.
- I had a bike ride yesterday morning that was a little unusual. A friend of mine has persuaded me to go and do the King Alfred Way with him in two weekends' time, for which I'm wholly unprepared.
- [2 : 3 8] And it's 350 kilometers over three days. And I mentioned this to a colleague of mine, and she just went, oh, yeah, I did that in a day once. I was, oh, thanks for the encouragement. I planned the route to make sure that each day we were in a location where we could get on the train and get home if we need to.
- That's how confident I am. Anyway, I'm out for this ride, training, pushing myself to make sure I'm not completely disastrous in two weekends' time. And I noticed this dog just standing on the path through all the cars over at Portishead Docks.
- And it's quite a sort of web going through there. And I looked around. There's no owner. And I carried on cycling. And about a mile and a half down the road, I came across a gentleman of mature years, we may say.

And he had a dog whistle. And I was blowing the dog whistle, thinking, that dog can't hear a mile and a half away. And he said, have you lost your dog? Like, hello, Sherlock Holmes here. He said, yes.

I said, it's small, black, with a white front. Yes, that's it. I said, it's like a mile and a half back there. He went, oh, thank you. Turned around and walked tiny steps with a big bandage on his foot. I can't leave him.

[3 : 43] I said, shall I get the dog for you? He said, yeah, please. That'd be great. And I said, what's his name? And he paused. And there was a look on his face. And I thought, is he about to say, murder dog?

Or something like this. But he never said, there's toga or something like that. I got the lead. I said, will he come with me? Another look of blankness. He went, he might jump up at you a bit. It wasn't promising. And it wasn't a sort of fluffy dog.

It was quite a big teeth dog. Anyway, I went back. And I found the dog. And I got the lead. And put on the lead. Let me do that. But then he wasn't happy at coming at all. And I was pulling on the lead.

And I was trying to cycle along while pulling this dog that was resisting me. But this is going to be a disaster. Got off the bike. Clipped along in my cycling shoes. Pulling this dog. Who was jumping and jumping and jumping. And pulling away.

Eventually found the chap. Who managed to move about 10 metres closer to where we started. And handed the dog over. And he said, thank you, thank you. He said, he got distracted by a deer and ran off.

[4 : 44] And funny enough, as I was out there pulling this dog. I was just chucking to myself. Thinking, this feels a bit like Jesus. Who does go out of his way to find us.

When we are stuck and lost. And I certainly, I'm not trying to say I'm some version of Jesus to the canine population of Portishead and Clevedon. But I definitely got distracted by a deer when I was, a different kind of deer when I was 19.

And Jesus came and found me from that one. So when Jesus said to Matthew, follow me. I just think it's remarkable. He got up and followed him.

I was running a leadership program this week. Which is the day job. And on it, pretty regularly, one of my clients sends team members to it. And those team members say things like, Chris is an amazing boss.

I love working with him. And often will say things like, I would follow him anywhere. Which is pretty amazing, isn't it, for a leader to get that kind of response. And he's a really lovely person.

[5 : 44] And he's incredibly intelligent. And very helpful. But he isn't Jesus. And here, it isn't just charisma. It isn't just warmth. It is, I think, the living presence of God in Jesus is the most compelling encounter we can have.

And I can see when Matthew would get up and follow him. I think he's captivated by the presence of God. And as a staff team, as an ECC, as we've been praying recently, we feel really stirred that as a church community, we need to increase our responsiveness to the Holy Spirit.

To create more space for God to move in our services and our meetings. To really explore what it means to get that powerful encounter of the fullness of the presence of Jesus.

Here, when we're together, and in our lives outside of this church community. And how we can take it to others as well. My experience of Jesus saying, follow me, kind of, I think, has three different themes.

One is the moment when I really met with Jesus at age 18 and gave my life to God. And direct, follow me for your life. There's a follow me as well, which is actually helping with key moments and sort of life choices.

[7 : 03] And there's also a follow me, which is a nudge of the Holy Spirit, in terms of actually do this for me. That God is saying, respond now to others. I want to give you just three examples of this.

And then ask you to consider what might God be asking you to consider. The first one is that whenever we have big life choices, Helen, my wife and I, will often do this process we call a facilitated conversation with God.

What we'll do is, Helen might say to me, what's your question that you have got for God? And I'll say, well, I think it's this. And she'll say, well, ask God now. And I'll ask God. And then about eight seconds later, she'll say, what have you heard?

And it's a way of outworking that verse when two or three of you are gathered together, I am there also. And so two of us start to pray. And we trust that God is going to speak.

And because she says after about eight seconds, you know, what have you heard? It stops me starting thinking about cars or other ridiculous things and stay focused on the question that I have.

[8 : 07] So then if I haven't heard anything, I'll say, I've not heard anything. We try again. And Helen's listening at the same time. And we've had this experience when we've had these big life choices that we want to have God's hand on, to know God's guidance, that God speaks really clearly to us.

This is the path. Follow me in this. And we had an experience when I was trying to work out big career choices. Do I get another corporate role? Do I start a business?

Both of us thought I should go and get another role. We're praying. And we're walking through some National Trust property with Isabel in the pram, wondering, I have this prayer. And we ask God the question, corporate job next or go independent?

Both expecting God to say, get another job. And God said to us, clearly, go independent now. And I looked at Helen and said, what have you heard? She heard the same.

And then we're filled with the kind of the joy and fear that that generates when you're going, oh, let's walk away from the payback and just try and generate money yourself. Good. But that sense of knowing that God was breathing life into a direction, and we've seen the fruitfulness of that for the last 14 years, you know you can call on God when the times are tough, because you're following the path that God has given you.

[9 : 25] We had a second example where we were facing a particular challenge, and a situation that was very disruptive to us as a family. And we were trying to work out what is our response? Do we intervene?

Do we push? Do we challenge? Are the risks that the thing would escalate? And so we prayed in the same way. God, what are you saying here? We need your wisdom. And as we prayed, God said and gave us the verse, the battle is the Lord's from 1 Samuel.

So we said, okay, we'll back off. We'll pray. We'll trust you, God. And the situation did resolve in a way we could never have imagined. The third one is a very sensitive story, and I've never shared it publicly, but I felt prompted to do this this morning.

And there's an element of threat in the story, but God really moves in it. When I was at university, a girlfriend of mine went home from having been at my horrendous student accommodation, and she came back within five minutes and said, I've seen a bike on its side by a park.

And actually, I felt the Holy Spirit just nudge me and say, get Alex. So I've driven back to get you. So I jumped in the car with her, and we drove up past the park. And where she had seen the bicycle, you couldn't see it from the road.

[10 : 47] I mean, it's just of this high bank on top of the bank. But as she's driven, she had seen it, and the Holy Spirit had clearly revealed it to her. Jumped out the car, climbed up the bank, saw the bike, saw a glove there, saw a light there, in the dark, pitch black.

And I just instinctively knew where to go. And I ran across this park, and it was clearly the Holy Spirit just guiding me. I sprinted right across this park, huge black park, and then came across a woman where a guy had pulled off the bike and was attacking her.

So I shouted at the guy. He ran off. The girl pointed out where my girlfriend was at the time. He said, go over there. Under that light, she's waiting. She'll make sure you're safe.

And then sort of followed the guy. And instinctively, I didn't attack him, but he jumped into a car. I got the number plate and called the police. And it turned out later that he'd got a knife out and was about to attack him with a knife.

So it's wise not to tackle him. And the Holy Spirit was obviously nudging. And when we then chatted to some of our friends at church, they'd just said that in the prayer meeting the night before, they'd had this picture, and someone had a word, of there being a battle over Chichester, of angels and the enemy fighting out.

[12 : 06] And there was obviously something of this happening on the ground that God used us to respond to. And Unconscious is a very sensitive and very dramatic story, but I share it because of that sense that we are in a spiritual battle, and we can trust God to intervene.

And so that's part of our prayers today, that where you need the Spirit of God to move, that God will move. The second part that stands out for me as I read this is when it says this.

When the Pharisees saw this, they asked the disciples, why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners? And on hearing this, Jesus says, it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

But go and learn what this means. I desire mercy and not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. Now, it's pretty easy to think about those pesky Pharisees judging others.

And we can see ourselves on the inside, the sinners with Jesus. And if we've had the revelation of our need for Jesus, and that it's written in Romans 3, we've all fallen short of the glory of God.

[13 : 18] And amazingly, nothing can separate us from the love of God. Then our next challenge is to not be looking out at others with that judgment of making others wrong and ourselves right.

And this is a lot harder than often we think it is. There's this really interesting psychology. It's really well tested this theory called the fundamental attribution error.

I'll give an example. I was driving back from Leeds, having been running a program in the NHS. Later on a Thursday night, I want to get home. I pull onto the M1, and I'm trying to move into the outside lane so I can go fairly quickly back home.

And there's a gap. And I think it's a big enough gap. And so I pull into it, I think, with care. The person in the car behind me doesn't agree with my assessment and likes to flash their lights and wave at me in an unfriendly manner.

And I think, it's fine. I'm not worried. My judgment is fine. And I took care. A little bit further down the road, probably within 30 seconds, a white van driver pulls their van into a gap in front of me that is actually larger than one that I have pulled into.

[14 : 26] But I say, idiot, and I flash my lights at him. And this is one of our problems, that we judge others on their actions and ourselves on our intentions. I could see my intention, my care, my personal needs of getting home to my family.

But for the white van driver, none of those exist. He's just an idiot. And so that sense of this pattern of where we can make ourselves right and others wrong very easily and very naturally, it's called an unconscious defensive routine.

And I think that's a challenge for all of us as we hear this, how easily we can be the Pharisee judging others. And I think the challenge for us is to consider how might we be gracious and loving, spot the defences and relax them, look for the positive intent in someone else, and really take care that we're not falling into a place of making others wrong amongst our community, with our neighbours, with others we meet around the town.

In that sense that we are the arms and legs and voice of Jesus. And as I mentioned the last time I spoke, my lovely friend, who's a vicar called Tony, says, remember, you're probably the only Bible that they are reading.

Such a beautiful challenge. Helen and I, in our first home, when we lived in Chittister, we rented this flat in this block of council flats, and some had been bought privately and sold, and we were renting one of those.

[15 : 58] And in the flat above us was a mother and her son, a son called Els. And Els was in a very troubled period of his life, and he was playing some of the most, to me, horrendous music, at incredible volume, to the very thin floor or ceiling to us.

And there was one time when Helen telephoned me when I was up at work, and she was working from home, and she said, Els is throwing all his mum's property out of the window, and some of it's on fire.

So I kind of rushed back from the university I was working in, went up and knocked on the door, and had a good talk with Els, and got them to sort it out. It got worse, because he was really upset and angry with his mum for taking some of his music, and limiting him in some ways, and he'd managed in her sleep to draw a moustache on her face in permanent ink, and then put a cigarette in her mouth, and taken a photo, and saw the legs off her bed, but propped it up, so when she got into bed it collapsed.

Things weren't going very well. And then one night there's a kerfuffle outside the flat, and Helen went out, and he'd managed to get some vodka, and then was trying to sell his skateboard to a 90-year-old to raise more money for more drink.

It wasn't going very well. It was pretty annoying, and it was in really enclosed quarters. And very easy to get annoyed, like most of the neighbours, who were petitioning to the council that they get removed as a family out of this block.

[17 : 24] Helen in particular was great at enrolling Els, and connecting with him, and he'd often come down and have a chat. And then she invited him to one of her gigs, where the band she managed, a bunch of Christian lads called Steve, the band's called Steve, were playing at a gig.

Els came along, loved it. So she got one of the musicians to write out the music, and give it to him, and then we had eight months of listening to him murdering this music through the floorboards, which was challenging, but it definitely got better.

And then a few years later, we heard Els, married, young family, and a worship leader. Leading other people to God.

So I just want to encourage us to respond to how the Spirit might be saying, follow me.

Maybe the first time to really give your heart to God. Maybe God's saying, follow me, come closer. You've gone distant. Maybe the Holy Spirit is saying, hey, follow me in this way right now.

[18 : 41] Nudging us, prompting us to respond, to be his hands and feet and voice to others. Let's just take a moment to pray, and let the Holy Spirit nudge us in this moment.

Okay. Lord, we thank you that there isn't a barrier to coming to you, the living, loving God.

You don't require some special religious ceremony. You don't require a set of qualifications, but there is no barrier to any of us to access your love, your forgiveness, your grace, and your involvement in the very essence of our lives.

And so we come before you now and say, Holy Spirit, would you be with us? Would you fill us? Would you speak to us? Would you be in the very challenges we are facing?

Would you bring breakthrough where it is needed, however much in the dark we may feel? Would you tune our ears to hear your voice and guide us in this week with our friends, neighbours, and those we're frustrated with?

[20 : 03] Lords, would you bring your light to the darkness and give hope and restore? Lord, would you reveal to us that we are chosen, that we're not forsaken?

Lord, Lord, Amen.