

INTERCHANGE PLAYERS The Rt Rev'd Jeffrey Driver

We are heading towards footy finals time. And even though this year the finals will be played in another place, away from the sacred turf of the MCG, day by day in the Media there is speculation as to who will make it through, who will be fit to play, who will be available, and who will be dropped.

If the heroes of faith were playing football, then you might be excused for suggesting that some of them would definitely be starting from the bench. They run on occasionally, and the commentators struggle, to remember their names. They appear on the field briefly, and are gone again, as the focus returns to the big-name players.

Matthew is a bit like that .

Matthew was sitting in his tax booth. He was a tax collector and if there were any people in biblical times who suffered from a stinking reputation, it was the tax collectors.

So for the gospel writer to note that Matthew was a tax collector meant that no further introduction was needed. Everyone knew about tax collectors: they were by definition outcasts, for their job meant that they worked for the conquering power. They were the professional collaborators, the turncoats, the traitors.

Because they needed to be in frequent contact with Gentiles, they were often ritually unclean, and because of the structure of their job, they made their living by extracting a margin over what Rome demanded and the temptations to corruption were manifold. So they were not just outcasts, and traitors, in the popular mind they were all of them cheats.

We have little idea whether Matthew himself was corrupt or a cheat. That made little difference to the popular mindset. Matthew was a tax collector, so ipso facto Matthew was a sinner. That's the popular logic of it and that's what stereotypes do to people, whether those stereotype are linked to what we do, where we come from or the colour of our skin.

Matthew is a sinner. That's it. He's definitely not likely to get a glowing reference from his Anglican Rector, or be seen as a likely candidate to enter the seemly ways of Anglican ministry.

And Jesus came to him with the words that change:

"Follow me!"

Jesus calls him from collecting taxes to become a disciple. For some it was a shock and scandal, that Jesus should choose someone so despised, but Jesus does not call people because of what they have been, but because of what they might be.

Jesus calls, and Matthew responds.

And here Matthew speaks to each of us, for Jesus calls each of us in different ways, but always to follow and always to make a difference to the world in which we live.

Our contribution may or may not be noticed, it may or may not make us famous, or popular, or recognised or rich, but it is ours to make, and we are called to make it.

After Matthew the tax collector is called, we hardly hear of him again. We think it is the same person who was also called Levi in the other Synoptic gospels and is named among the 12 disciples. He could well be the same Matthew that wrote the Gospel of Matthew, but we are cannot be 100 per cent certain.

Tradition has it that he preached to the Jews and may have been martyred in Ethiopia. Maybe. Possibly. In any event, Matthew gets the briefest of entries in the biblical "Who's Who", and most of it is vague.

It would be nice to know more about Matthew and some of the other disciples. I am sure we would be edified if we knew more of the struggles and joys that filled their lives, as they sought to follow their Lord on his way. We know so little.

But we do know the most important thing.

We know that they were called by Christ and they followed and gave their lives for him.

This is Vocations Sunday. So hear the call of Jesus today.

Today we are challenged once more, to offer our gifts, our lives, in the service of God, lay and ordained; and to seek the strength of God's Spirit that we might fulfil his purpose for our lives.

It is not about how good we are, or how intelligent or talented, sophisticated or capable; because Jesus calls people not for what they have been but for what they might be.

Always God calls us as we are, where we are, and into something we can become. Many would have looked upon Matthew and have seen nothing more than a despised tax collector.

But Jesus saw more. He saw what Matthew could be. And he called him into becoming that person.

So in the journey of faith it is never what we've done in the past that disqualifies us, but our unwillingness to grow; it is never where we've been, but where we are prepared to go; it is not the sinfulness of its people that makes the Church unfaithful, but the comfort that halts the journey of growth; and the denial that will not face the truth and receive healing.

These are difficult times for our Church. We no longer enjoy the prominence and popularity that was ours not that many years ago.

We've been diminished, and even shamed. To many young Australians we are almost irrelevant. There are times when we might well despair, and wonder whether there is anything we can do, any capacity we can bring, to make things different.

On this Vocations Sunday we are reminded that what matters most, is not what we have to offer, not our own strength, our own capacities, or qualities, what matters is the call of God and our response.

What matters is your openness to the love that accepts who you are, calls you into what you can be, and empowers you to be all you can be.

Beyond our capacities.

Beyond our weaknesses: the call of God

Beyond our strengths,

beyond our failings: the call of God

Beyond our dreamings,

beyond our doubtings: the call of God

So in the mundane, the compromised and the tawdry,

the doubtful and even the dubious,

the Christ came to Matthew and disturbed him

with the call that we, too, hear today:

"Follow me!"

This is Vocations Sunday. So hear the call of Jesus once more today.