

Before I became one of the earliest pioneers of homeworking some 35 years ago, I spent something like six or seven years commuting from Wellingborough into London St. Pancras for work. By and large the train journey only had a couple of stops and then we would approach London St. Pancras. At this point the train announcer would say words to the effect of, "The train is now arriving at London St. Pancras station which is our final destination. All change please, all change."

Quite why the announcer said that I never really understood. Why didn't he or she just say, we've arrived so get off. And I say that because those of us that did that journey five days a week, at this point of our journey we did the same thing every day. It wasn't a change at all, we were simply getting off the train.

All change please, all change. There are many times in our lives when such a command is rather more appropriate than when we are simply being told to get off the train. What about when we move house? What about when we change jobs? What about when we get married or have children? What about when we turn to God? These are times when our change in circumstances often causes us to change.

Our gospel reading this morning is almost demanding change from several groups of people, the first of whom is Matthew.

Each year the lectionary takes us on a different journey through the bible, and this year, each Sunday during the next 6 months, we are travelling through Matthew's gospel, and Angela and I, certainly for the next three months anyway, will be preaching each Sunday on the Matthew reading for that day. So, just for a couple of minutes, let's remind ourselves a bit about this gospel.

Matthew's gospel is the first of the four gospels you find in the New Testament, but it is almost certainly not the first gospel that was written. The first gospel to be written was Mark, and then Matthew, as did Luke, used as one of his main sources of information when writing his gospel, Mark's gospel, to which he added other sources of Jesus' sayings and his own experiences.

But the biggest mystery about Matthew's gospel, as is the case with so many books of the bible, is who was Matthew? Having read a number of possible answers to this question, I feel most convinced by the arguments of the commentator Dick France who writes this in his commentary." It often seems to be assumed that whatever the early church said about the origins of the New Testament books must be treated with suspicion unless it can be independently proved but I do not share that assumption. Of course authorship cannot now be proved, and for practical purposes of exegesis it does not matter very much, but the contents and tone of the gospel, including its love hate relationship with Judaism, seem to me to make someone like the apostle Matthew as likely a candidate as any, once it is accepted that the gospel is likely to have been written well within his lifetime."

So, for the purposes of this sermon, our gospel reading starts with the calling ... of the author of the book himself – and here, "All Change", cannot be more appropriate. Never could there have been a more unlikely candidate to be a disciple, one of Jesus' chosen 12 closest followers, than Matthew. Jesus certainly knew what he was doing when calling him – after all Matthew was sitting at the tax booth. You see there were a great number of taxes to be paid. There was a ground tax by which a man had to pay a tenth of his grain and a fifth of his fruit and vine to the government either in cash or in kind. There was income tax which was 1% of a man's income. There was a poll tax which had to be paid by every male from the age of 14 to 65, and by every female from the age of 12 to 65. In addition to these taxes there were all sorts of other taxes.

There was a duty of anything from 2 1/2 to 12 1/2% on all goods imported and exported. A tax had to be paid to travel on main roads, to cross bridges, to enter marketplaces and towns or harbours. There was a

tax on pack animals and a tax on the wheels and axles of carts. There were purchase taxes on goods being bought and sold. And there were various other statutory taxes. So, if you think we have a complicated tax system, it's a lot clearer than in those days. And Matthew was by the tax booth, collecting – well – what he was required to collect by the Romans, and what else he could get for himself.

And from this position Jesus called Matthew to be a disciple. When Jesus called Matthew he called a man who all men hated. Here is one of the great instances in the New Testament of Jesus' power to see in someone, not only what they were, but also what they could be. No-one ever had such faith in the possibilities of human nature as Jesus had. But also what had just happened to Matthew? He had lost a comfortable job, but found a destiny. He had lost a good income but had found honour. He had lost a comfortable security, but found an adventure, the like of which he had never dreamed. All Change Matthew.

Then there was the meal. Those watching what was going on were scandalised by the company that Jesus was keeping. "And as he, Jesus, sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples." We don't know what the other "sinners" had done wrong but the implication was they were as bad as the tax collectors in people's opinion and to good religious people it was simply wrong that Jesus kept such bad company.

But Jesus' answer to this was really clear – "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Jesus will talk to anyone and everyone – not just those who think they are the good guys. Under Jesus the social rules surrounding who you meet, who you talk to, who you eat with are being re-written. All Change.

And then we come to the two miracles – a life restored, and a woman healed. Let's start with the leader of the synagogue. Well – what's going on here? A leader of a synagogue would hardly be expected to be a follower of Jesus. Yes, by this stage of the story we have had Jesus' amazing preaching in the Sermon on the Mount, he has healed many sick people, he has stilled the storm, amongst other things. And remember we are talking about a people whose only real method of finding out what is going on around them is by word of mouth – so this leader of the synagogue would almost certainly have heard of these happenings. ... But he is hit by tragedy and turns to Jesus, "My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live." He has most certainly heard of, and he believes in, Jesus. And his faith sees his daughter restored to life. He will surely never be the same again. All change.

And then the woman who has been haemorrhaging for 12 years. Again – it is her faith, it is her belief that makes her well. She thought that by just touching Jesus' cloak she would be made well – but that is not what happens. Jesus feels her touch his cloak but then turns to her and says, "Take heart, daughter, your faith has healed you." Not a magic cloak but her faith. But with both these stories there is something else going on. Jesus took the "dead" girl by the hand.

Touching a dead body would make Jesus unclean according to Mosaic laws. The woman who was bleeding, because she was bleeding, was unclean, and she touched Jesus' cloak – again it would have made him unclean. But that clearly did not matter to Jesus. It was no longer relevant. In the same way that making sacrifices for sins as described in the Mosaic laws was no longer necessary, nor were the rules about uncleanness. All Change.

And what more recent times?

"The train is now arriving at London St. Pancras station which is our final destination. All change please, all change."

Do you ever wonder in your life what is going to change, or perhaps what needs to change? I really enjoy reading biographies of, shall we say, famous Christians, as they often really inspire and encourage me.

Alan Mortlock was a martial arts expert who always wanted a reputation on the streets of London's East End. And he got what he was looking for when a brutal fight outside a night club led to him being imprisoned. The harsh experience of jail failed to change him and a combination of drugs and alcohol sent his life into a downward spiral and his marriage to the brink of collapse. But things started to change the night a friend – who himself was an ex-drug smuggler – came to visit. Something extraordinary happened, turning Alan's world upside down.

Endowed with rare determination and a wry sense of humour, C.T. Studd unceasingly pursued a life devoted to God. A star English cricketer in his youth, C.T. did nothing by half.

When challenged by near tragedy and the words of an atheist, the wealthy young man, instead of pursuing his sport and his search for riches in the UK, became a missionary of extreme devotion.

"I'll see you there at 4:00", said Sam, reflecting my cynical grin as we accepted yet another invitation. David Watson had just started at Cambridge University with his school friend Sam. They had been urged to join every conceivable club, from tennis to tiddlywinks, fencing to philosophy. All were offering free Sherry or tea parties to entice people into membership. So, says David, Sam and I decided to go to everything and to join nothing. Like Sam, I was a cynical unbeliever - a humanist, as I called myself. The same David Watson became one of the most inspirational evangelists for Jesus of his generation.

All change?

Three people for whom an encounter with Jesus changed their lives – but each in different ways. For Alan Mortlock it was a dramatic conversion; for C.T. Studd it was the development of an existing faith. For David Watson it was something of a gradual process as he encountered Jesus through weeks and months of studying in the academic world of Cambridge. But in each case the result was a huge change in their lives.

We've heard about Matthew, the leader of the synagogue, those 1st century Jews who encountered Jesus and found their whole approach to Mosaic laws changed, and we have heard about three 20th Century Christians, for whom all had a change to their life after an encounter with Jesus.

So what about you and me?

It is quite unusual for people to be called to make the sort of changes in their lives that I have talked about this morning, but sometimes the little changes that we feel called to make are just as important. I'm not going to stand here this morning and suggest ways in which we change our lives, because that is between each and every one of us, and God. But what I will suggest is that it is really important that we regularly ask God in our prayers, "Is there something about my life that I should change?" And perhaps that change may not only make a difference to you, but to someone else as well. But perhaps that all sounds just a bit too scary. Perhaps we don't feel strong enough to open up to God and ask.

So, to finish, let me share with you this, from the introduction to the late Selwyn Hughes' autobiography.

A story that has come to mind often as I have looked back, is one that seems to sum up my life. I have not been able to find the source of the story but it tells of a man who had a dream in which he saw himself standing on the top of a cliff and, because of his fear of heights, felt greatly alarmed.

Suddenly he heard God's voice boom out of the heavens saying, "Go to the edge."

"It's dangerous there", he answered.

"Go to the edge."

"But I might fall."

"Go to the edge."

Eventually he made his way to the edge. Suddenly he felt the hand of God push him from behind ... and he flew.

Time and time again, says Hughes, throughout my life I have felt God calling me to do things and fear has risen up to prevent me from trusting myself to the divine commands. But each time as I have moved to the edge I have found that instead of falling ... I flew.

If you hear, "All change", be prepared to fly.

Let's pray.

Amen.