

**Sermon Preached at the Installation of Canons
The Feast of St Matthew 20 September 2023
Grafton Cathedral**

Matthew 9:9-13

Dr Murray Harvey, Bishop of Grafton



Canons in Procession

It's a great pleasure to install some new canons today.

The word *canon* is an ancient one, with a long history which I won't go into, but in relation to cathedrals, and the ministers in a Cathedral community, it seems to have emerged in about the 4th century. The Latin word *kanon*, was basically the word for a list: in this case a list of ministers who needed to be paid. So if your name was on the list, or *kanon*, you were called a canon. Their main role was to assist the bishop (a good thing in my view).

We shouldn't be fooled by the negative spin about canons both leading up to, and during, the time of the reformation: at this time they began to be described as lazy and self indulgent. Archbishop Cranmer, speaking around this time, said they devoted themselves to "superfluous belly cheer, extravagance and gluttony". This would of course not apply to our Grafton Canons!

Modern writers have been more objective, and underline the important charitable role that Cathedrals and their canons played during medieval times. In the days long before the welfare state, they ministered to the needs of the poor of the city. Canons ran almshouses, hospitals, hospices

and refectories, offering food, accommodation, medical, end of life and spiritual care.

As we reflect on this ministry of canons amongst the poor, the outcast and the fringe, today's Gospel which refers to Jesus' ministry "at the fringe", is appropriate:

Mt 9:9-13 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. 10And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. 11When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 12But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

It seems to me that many today, including some very confident Christians, might want to skip this section of Matthews gospel. It's a bit edgy, and has Jesus in full fellowship (in full communion ie at table) with those who today would be seen as beyond the pale.

But we can't ignore it, especially as it doesn't just appear out of nowhere but describes this encounter with the tax collectors alongside many other encounters with those on the fringe.

Following the Sermon on the Mount, Chapters 5 through 7, there follows a series of healing stories and calling / discipleship stories:

- Cleansing a man with leprosy. (8:1-4)
- Healing a Roman army officer's servant (8:5-13)
- Healing Peter's mother and others at Peter's house (8:14-17)
- Casting out two violent demons (8:28-34)
- Healing a paralyzed man (9:1-8)
- Calling the tax collector, Matthew (9:9-13)
- New wine cannot be put in old wine skins (9:14-17)
- Healing a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years, and bringing back to life the daughter of a synagogue leader (9:18-26)
- Healing a man who is blind (9:27-31)
- Casting out a silencing demon (9:32-34)

Jesus was preaching, teaching and healing, (a spiritual ministry) but it was radical stuff, and inherently challenged the status quo and religious hierarchy of the day, so it was also political.

I've lost count of the number of times I've been told in the last few weeks that bishops, or the church, shouldn't get involved in politics. I have been referring people to this passage. Jesus was political. That simply means he challenged the cultural assumptions and social structures of his day, which is what we must do if we are going to have any integrity as ministers of the gospel or as a church that preaches the gospel.

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26 (The Message)

9 Passing along, Jesus saw a man at his work collecting taxes. His name was Matthew. Jesus said, "Come along with me." Matthew stood up and followed him.

10 Later when Jesus was eating supper at Matthew's house with his close followers, a lot of disreputable characters came and joined them. 11 When the Pharisees saw him keeping this kind of company, they had a fit, and lit into Jesus' followers. "What kind of example is this from your Teacher, acting cozy with crooks and riff-raff?"

12 Jesus, overhearing, shot back, "Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? 13 Go figure out what this Scripture means: 'I'm after mercy, not religion.' I'm here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders."

This really drives it home.

Verse 10 is of particular interest:

NRSV ... and as he sat at dinner in the house

Message when Jesus was eating supper at Matthew's house

KJV ... as Jesus sat at meat in the house

In English it's rendered "sat" but the Greek here is *anakeimenou*.

Literally *lying back at table*. He wasn't nervously or uncomfortably standing around, or under sufferance. He was relaxed and engaging with them in a natural way.

So in these encounters in these chapters following the sermon on the mount, if we note the **inter**-actions - the relationships - we see that what is going on is social healing.

Jesus receives everyone: Roman army officer, synagogue leader; tax collector; bleeding woman; leper. People who would otherwise be ignored

or avoided or who would despise each other; are connected because they connect with Jesus. The healing and forgiveness that Jesus provides restores relationships, restores the broken bonds of community.

The effect of Jesus' life and teachings was that people (Christians) should challenge the social brokenness of society. Jesus demonstrated that with God's power and authority, the injustices of society could be, and should be, challenged.

As one scholar writing about Matthew Ch 9 wrote, the most difficult "miracle" in chapter 9 is not the raising of the girl from death, nor the healing of the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. The most difficult healing was including the despised tax collector Matthew back into community. Don't believe it? Try thinking of a person your community despises and invite them to church with you.

Today's gospel challenges us to ask hard questions of our prejudices and confronts a naive, ignorant and arrogant bondage to simplistic narratives like *the church shouldn't get involved in politics*.

This is a Christian message that many have found threatening throughout the ages - we don't wear red vestments for nothing! May God give our new canons, and all of us, courage to continue the work of Jesus.