

A sermon by David Wilbourne for St Matthew's Day

Desiring and achieving

Stuart was a big lad
who was spending a month in East Leeds
as part of his ordination training.

One day he was shadowing the Vicar
as he toured his roughest of parishes
baptism visiting.

After four or five visits,
a clear trend emerged:
a chat about this and that,
the birth,
the sleepless nights,
what they'd had for dinner,
problems with noisy neighbours.

The visit ended with the same question:

'Now the baptism's at 10 o'clock on Sunday;
you are coming, aren't you?'

Stuart was an able person with high intentions,
so after the fifth visit
he took the vicar on.

'Look, this is terrible,
you should be asking questions about their commitment,
you should be explaining the faith,
not just chatting.'

'OK,' replied the Vicar, a kindly man.

'Next visit you take the lead and I will observe.'

The next visit was the roughest house on that rough estate,
topping a considerable short list.

The place was filthy.

Stuart strode in,

too single-minded to notice

that the remains of their greasy breakfast

had been strewn on the uncarpeted floor.

He inadvertently stamped on a fried egg

and slithered across the room,

slamming into the wall

and landing in a dark corner,

piled with fetid rags.

Painfully he picked himself up,

looked the baby's mother in the eye and said

'Now the baptism's at 10 o'clock on Sunday;

you are coming, aren't you?'

before making a hasty retreat.

In east Leeds that day

what was desirable met what is achievable.

Every priest desires what Stuart desired,

may even let what he desires skew what he actually

achieves

when he gives glowing account at clergy gatherings,

yet the interface between what is desirable and what is

achievable

is a very significant one.

That interface is there in Matthew,

our Saint for this first day of autumn.

Matthew was a tax collector,

and by definition corrupt,

taxing the fruit of a land which was promised by God

and handing it over to a brutal pagan occupier.

Yet Matthew was no more or no less corrupt

than the modern taxman,

who levies taxes for war

in a world where God desires peace.

What was achievable for Matthew the Tax Collector

was to follow

John the Baptist's injunction,

'Take no more than your due,'

don't add your cut to an already crippling system.

'Whatever you are, be a good one,'

as Abraham Lincoln quipped.

That was what was achievable,

unexciting stuff.

What Matthew desired emerges in our Gospel for today,

as Jesus meets him and he says,

'Come, follow me,'

and he leaves all and follows him.

Achieving one's desires involves a necessary leaving,

a most painful leaving.

We're probably rather good at the achievable,

spinning several plates

tolerably well.

But do we ever run with our desire,

run after our lonely Lord?

We can reflect on that running

in the Gospel which bears Matthew's name.

A young mum told me last Tuesday

how one of her boys aged four

had once piped up,

'Mummy, I'm going into the garden to reflect.'

'What a wise, pensive child,' she thought.

The she watched him out of the kitchen window

as he sat on the grass

with a mirror

reflecting the sun's light!

On Wednesday I used that story

when I was lecturing new vicars

on how to be reflective.

How do we reflect on our call,

on the interface between the achievable and the desirable?

Are we imperfect reflectors,

do we only see through a glass darkly rather than face to

face.

Or are we just a plane mirror,

are we WYSIWYGs,

What you see is what you get,

no more, no less, no frills,

and probably no thrills.

Or are we a concave mirror,

magnifying what is before us?

The drawback to concave mirrors

is that you need to be close to them,

otherwise hideous distortion sets in.

And even close to,

magnification is won

at the cost of field of view being reduced.

Or are we convex mirrors,

which scale things down,

but increase the field of view?

As he runs with the Christ he desires,
what mirror does Matthew hold to him?

There's the plane mirror about the Gospel,
harsh un-toned down detail:

'Woe to you, Pharisees,' Jesus spits.

'My God, my God why have you forsaken me,'
he cries in utter dereliction from the cross.

There's the concave mirror,
massively magnifying an instant,
such as the coming of the magi,
some would say a distortion,
an elaboration.

There's the convex mirror,

wide field of view,
setting things in context.

The context of the past,
'This was done to fulfil the prophecy of whoever.'

And the context of the future,
an infinite future in Matthew's Gospel's final words,
'Behold I am with you always,
to the very end of the age.'

As we think on how Matthew
reflects the Christ of his desires,
it's worth asking
'How do we reflect him?'

For quite a lot of the time,
Matthew reflects a Jesus who does nothing,

who steals away to a lonely spot to pray,
who sleeps during a hurricane at sea,
who refuses to be panicked into action,
time and time again delaying addressing the obvious crisis.

If Jesus manned the ambulance station at KMS,
he'd be sacked!

In the crucial, literally crucial,
final act of the Gospel,

Jesus does nothing,
but is rather done to,

betrayed,

arrested,

flogged,

crucified,

silent through it all.

Matthew reflecting all that
should drive our following of Christ.

Simon,

Goodman not Peter,

was telling me on Thursday

about his daughter's time as an air-traffic controller at
Rheims.

For such intensive, crucial work

their shifts are limited to two hours,

and they are on duty no more than 36 hours per month.

I guess the practice has been drawn from hard-won lessons.

I wonder if such a regime as disciples,

as heavenly traffic controllers,

might be more effective than the 24/7 we pretend to.

A weary air-traffic controller

is a dangerous person to have around,
because they miss the critical signs.

A weary Christian

is a dangerous person to have around,
because they so easily miss God,
blinking at them on their life's screen.

'She never ceases doing good,'
that great father of the Church Oscar Wilde quipped,
'You can tell those she does good to by their hunted look!'

So how about that as an autumn resolution
on this St Matthew's day,
as we seek to desire as Matthew desired.
Our track record has been the achievable,
not the desirable.

How about limiting our Christianity
to two hour shifts
and no more than 36 hours per month,
rather than wearing ourselves and others out
with all the 24/7 stuff?
Spend your two hour shift today
reflecting on Matthew's Gospel –
it takes less than an hour to read,
reflecting on what sort of mirror he holds up to Christ.
And finally looking into Christ's eyes,
and see what sort of you is reflected therein,
and desires and possibles meet.
If they can meet in East Leeds,
they can meet in you.