

Sermon for 22 September 2019 (Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity)
Prov. 3. 13-18; Ps. 119. 65-72; 2 Cor. 4. 1-6; Matt. 9. 9-13.

“I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” This quotation from the Book of Hosea is one of some sixty-five quotations that the gospel writer Matthew made from the Old Testament. His purpose in using so many was to show that the scriptures of the Old Testament form the basis for all teaching concerning the kingdom of heaven. Jesus came to earth as the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets which foresaw the coming of the promised Messiah. This quotation is just as applicable today to us as Christians, as it was to the Jews of Jesus’s time. What God was and is looking for from his people is what lies within their, our hearts, and not outward signs of seeming to follow in His ways. The Hebrew word translated “mercy” means “loving kindness”. The Pharisees who criticised Jesus for his fellowship with “publicans and sinners” were zealous in their wish to follow God but they concentrated on the minute details of the Mosaic Law and not on the overall concept of mercy and love. We should ask ourselves, do we hold deep in our hearts God’s compassion and love for **all** our fellow human beings at **all** times, or do we leave that compassion and love behind when we exit the church premises? Do we try to follow Christ’s example and his teaching in our everyday lives, or only when we come into church? We have the encouragement, through the testimony of those hundreds of early Christians who saw Jesus’s resurrection life, as we read in the New Testament, of knowing that, if we try to follow Jesus’s teaching in the way we live our daily lives now, whatever happens to us in this mortal life, we can look forward confidently to that day when our Lord **will** return and we are all changed into everlasting resurrection life.

We are celebrating today the call of our gospel writer, Matthew, to join Jesus’s band of disciples. We can understand the calling of simple fishermen, but a publican, or tax collector! Such persons would have been hated by the Jewish population at large, because they were serving the purposes of the Roman overlords in collecting taxes as goods travelled from one province to another and were able to make a lot of money in the process. Matthew was actually sitting at a toll booth in Capernaum when Jesus called him. Capernaum lay close to the border between Herod Antipas’s territory and that of his half-brother Philip the Tetrarch, and was also on the trade route between the Roman port of Caesarea and the city of Damascus, so likely to be a very profitable position. Matthew apparently then invited Jesus to have a meal with him in his home, to which he also invited many of his colleagues in the same profession and other Jews whom the Pharisees considered to be ‘sinners’. So the Pharisees asked Jesus’s disciples why he met with such people, who to them were clearly beyond the pale. Jesus’s answer including

the quote from Hosea showed that to God nobody is beyond the pale; for God is a loving God and wishes that every one will at some stage choose life, by turning back to Him and pleading the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ, as our redemption.

Much later in his gospel Matthew records Jesus's reply to the lawyer who asked which was the greatest commandment: love God and love your neighbour as yourself. A lot of the sermon on the mount is just that, about loving one's neighbour: don't be angry with or insult your brother or sister; don't look at a woman with lust; love your enemies. And later in that sermon Jesus summed it up in the golden rule: ***"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."*** A similar rule was formulated apparently by the Chinese sage Confucius, who lived in the sixth century before Christ, and was echoed by the Buddha a century or so later. From Jesus it is of course a foundation stone for both Jewish and Christian faith, and the sentiment appears too in the Qur'an. Hindus also acknowledge and express their reverence for others when they greet one another by bowing with joined hands. How do we put this into practice, so that our love for our neighbour always transcends our desire to achieve the best for ourselves? If we were always able to speak and do and act with compassion, would not that be a great step on the way to making the world a better place for all to live in, while we wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ, the supreme example of selfless love?

My wife Jane drew my attention to the obituary in the Independent this week of a 99 year old Dutch lady, Deet Eman, who joined the Resistance at the age of 20, when the Nazis invaded The Netherlands in 1940. Her Group was known by the acronym 'HEIN', meaning 'helping each other in need'; and Deet did that throughout the war, helping for example at least sixty individuals find safe houses. This in spite of herself being held in a concentration camp for a time, having been found with forged papers; somehow she managed to talk her way out of that and was released. But by drawing on the faith that sustained her during her imprisonment she made peace with her Nazi persecutors. As she was later quoted to say: 'the greatest miracle was that in the end I could actually feel pity for those men because they were so deluded; they thought they had power and really they had nothing. It all turned around when I sat there thinking what poor empty souls they were.' As Deet's beloved fiancé wrote in his final message to her on his way to Dachau and death, "Love conquers all". That was Jesus's message to his listeners: God desires mercy, loving kindness, love.

Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.