

Sermon – Canon George Bennett

St Matthew's Day – 21st September 2008

One of the joys of being Canon in Residence is to enjoy the music – which at the Cathedral is going “O nerth I nerth” from strength to strength. Music reveals what words cannot. I was intrigued the other day to read that Messaien, the great composer of organ music – incorporated birdsong into his composition. The writer went on to remark that many of those birdsongs are now never heard. This is directly the fault of humanity. We have become so noisy since Messaien's day that wild birds can no longer hear each other and learn their songs. They and we are impoverished. This repertoire is smaller. Our world is that much poorer.

That set me thinking. A saintly priest of the Diocese, Evan Morgan had a wonderful story about a country boy and his town cousin. The town cousin came to visit the country boy and found country life odd and perplexing. He was especially frustrated to sit in a chilly field and to be forced to strain his ears to listen to birdsong and to differentiate one from another.

A few months later the visit was returned. The country boy visited the town cousin. They walked together down a busy street. Suddenly to the country boy's amazement all the passers by turned around and looked at him and looked down at the pavement.

A coin had fallen from his pocket. Everybody had heard the chink of the coin on the pavement. Later the country boy complained to his town cousin “You failed to hear the birds in the meadow. Yet straightaway you heard the chink of money as it fell from my pocket” What we hear, what we really notice, what we focus on. That is the test of our priorities in life.

St Matthew reminds us of the many in our own time who are spiritually deaf. They are deafened by the noise and hubbub of our materialistic world. The still small voice of God has been blotted out.

I remember many years ago visiting a man in a private ward on my rounds as a hospital chaplain. He quickly showed me the door. He had no time for me or the God I represented. He was engrossed in watching the television and a teletext to check how his shares were doing. He was dying of terminal cancer but he couldn't let go of his material wealth. Matthew perhaps had a lot in common with that poor man. In becoming a tax collector an agent of an alien power he had cut himself off from devout Jewish society. No doubt he turned a deaf ear to the disparaging remarks made about him but he found it more difficult to silence the voice of his conscience. Within him must have been a deep yearning for something better, a yearning Jesus awakened into life without one look.

Matthew not only heard the voice of Jesus saying “Follow me” but he leapt to obey. He left everything and followed them. The Pharises refused to listen to the voice of God in the man from Nazareth. They criticized Jesus for choosing such an outcast as a follower. They despised Jesus for calling a quisling and a collaborator with the Romans.

The disciples felt uneasy about the new recruit. If Jesus is going to call people like this to follow him, where will it all end? There are three strands in the story of Matthew which are important for everyone of us as disciples of Jesus. I'll put those three strands in question form:

How good are we at hearing?
How good are we at following?
How good are we at risk taking?

I've said a lot already about the essential link between what we hear and what is important to us. The whole point of this Cathedral Church is to carve out a space where we can come and listen to the voice of God, free from distraction and noise of modern life. Here if we will be attentive in the music and the silence, the words and colour and beauty, God speaks the word to us. We need to allow the

Holy Spirit to train us to listen, to attune our ears to the message of love, challenge, comfort, warning which he brings.

Then how good are we at following? In this Cathedral we have heard two outstanding Inauguration addresses in the last few months. At his Enthronement in May, Bishop John spoke directly and personally about his faith. He reminded us in his text of the personal nature of our call, quoting from St John “the Teacher is here and is calling for you”.

Well, do you follow Jesus? Do you intend to follow him but somehow so many things get in the way. Its easier to fall back into old habits than to strike out a new path. Remember it is Jesus who goes before you and Jesus who accompanies you on your way, giving you in his Sacraments the strength to persevere. Renew your promise to follow him today.

Lastly, how good are we at risk taking? In his installation sermon Dean Geoffrey spoke of the Cathedral as an umbrella. When there is a heavy downpour and you happen to be holding a golf umbrella, its amazing how British reserve will dissolve and perfect strangers come and shelter with you. This Cathedral is here to welcome everybody. It is especially for those who are timid and shy about exploring the Christian faith. Here they can sidle in quietly which is sometimes difficult to do in a parish church. The Cathedral has to be a very big umbrella indeed to provide spiritual shelter for all sorts of people – including outcasts like Matthew. The glory of Matthew is that he really yearned for something better than the things that money can buy. The glory of Matthew is that he really listened to Jesus and was ready to respond. The glory of Matthew is that he risked everything and followed him.

May that be your glory too!

To listen, to follow, and to risk everything for Jesus our Lord.