

St Matthew's Newcastle

# Resolving a clash of interests

*Sermon for St Matthew's Patronal Festival 2011*

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Assuming that the majority scholarly opinion is correct, the Gospel attributed to Saint Matthew was crafted in the first couple of decades or so after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Judaism was in supine shock at the events, which led to its initial demise - Hadrian would later endeavour to stamp out the memory of Judea once and for all after the Bar Kochba revolt in AD135 even to the point of changing the name of the land.

The growing tensions, which led to the open conflict from AD70, were the result, if not of a misunderstanding, then of differing interpretations of unfolding events. After Pontius Pilate had been recalled to Rome, subsequent Roman officials sought to draw the sting of the tensions, which his rule had created - returning the high priestly vestments to the custody of the Temple, greatly reducing the military presence in Jerusalem and so on. In these gestures, they were trying to find the balance, which would achieve the lowest cost whilst maintaining their imperial control. They recognised that for the Jews there was an idiosyncratically dense interweaving of religion and secular government, and, therefore, a bespoke model of occupation - an early example of light-touch regulation - would serve their interests best.

The Jews perceived it all very differently. Naifs, perhaps, in the ways of the world, they thought they detected a weakness in the Roman resolve - a lack of commitment to continuing the occupation - in a similar way, so the narrative tells us, the Argentineans thought that the United Kingdom was

abandoning the Falklands. At first, the Judeans pushed their luck in seeking ever more indulgence; but in the end, in the manner of these things, disappointment morphed into indignation and indignation into violence - and violence into the bloody destruction of the Temple and the mass suicide at Masada.

What we might call the Judean Spring quickly ceded to nineteen hundred years of bleak Jewish winter punctuated by some very, very grim episodes.

The story is, perhaps, instructive for the response that we make to the various springs - in Tunisia, in Egypt, in Libya and elsewhere - blossoming in our own time. Generally, of course, there is no occupying power; but the world, or much of it, is egging on the movements of revolution and change, both in words and sometimes with much more tangible support.

We say that we are doing this, because we want the people to be free - free, by democratic means, to determine their future. However, there is a danger that their notions of self-determination and those, whose voices encourage them, may not be harmonious. There is a nascent clashing of national, cultural and religio-philosophical interests.

These, of course, are not confined to tensions between established governments and the emerging administrations in the Middle East - nor even what we might consider the long-standing stresses in the geopolitical guidebook.

The mess, which is the Eurozone crisis, is underpinned by apparently irreconcilable differences between domestic political considerations and the economic imperatives of the single currency's survival.

Reconciling conflicting interests and aspirations at any level of society is so often a forlorn undertaking; and the reason for this is that people are not really looking for reconciliation at all, but for victory - or as much triumph as they can reasonably achieve relative to the cost.

Jean Baptiste Colbert, Minister of Finance to Louis XIV once observed that, "The

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art of taxation consists in so plucking the goose as to obtain the largest possible amount of feathers with the smallest possible amount of hissing.” Something similar, in fact almost exactly similar, could be said of much human commerce - the pursuit of the maximum benefit for the minimum price: the desire always to show a profit of one sort or another in our dealings with others - even to the point of wilfully misinterpreting and misrepresenting facts and circumstances - either in our own minds or in our debate with others.

This approach to life not only earns the hostility of those who perceive our true intent, but it also propagates a culture of mistrust as we are encouraged by serial experiences of duplicity always to be looking for the sleight of hand in the actions of others.

I dare say that the unregenerate Matthew was able to rationalise the dubious means of individual wealth creation in which he indulged himself. None-the-less, for him to extricate himself from the web of resentment, even hatred, which his activities had spun around him, he had to walk away: not just from the job, but from the attitude that the other people were simply a potential source of personal profit.

We can only speculate as to why he so readily responded to Christ’s call. Perhaps he was weary of the antipathy of his victim-clientele; maybe he was just curious; or it might have been that something of what Jesus represented had already begun to resonate in his mind.

Whatever the reason for his initial attraction to the apostolic circle, membership would change his life by changing his perspective on life. No longer would he pursue the sort of personal gain that can only be bought with others’ loss. Rather, he would look for what was right; he would search for the sort of flourishing, which enabled others to flourish equally. He would lift his eyes from his personal agenda of wants and gaze at the wider horizon of the Common Good. As Saint Paul might have put it, he would abandon the worldly art of sophistic self-

justification as he journeyed towards true justification, which is peace with God. Following his conversion, it was for the proclamation and promotion of this perspective that Saint Matthew lived and for which he died, imitating his Master's resolve. It is the knowledge of this perspective, which is bequeathed to us through the apostolic tradition, of which the Gospel bearing Matthew's name is a foundational element.

It is this perspective, which should guide us as Christ calls us from the selfish pursuit of gain, which sees us drawn into a clash of personal interests with those around us. This, of course, supplies no instant remedy for the world's ills. It is not a command to step aside as others perpetrate all manner of iniquity. Rather, through a sequence of incremental steps - and engagements not always free of tension - we slowly re-orientate our lives and those of others to this perspective of the greater good, as defined by the divine Will.

It might seem a long way from the drawing rooms of Tyneside, Northumberland or Coventry to the corridors of international diplomacy; but the process has to start somewhere. Even the mightiest rivers start as trickles of water springing from the earth.

Christ, of course, is the spring from which the potential for true peace flows. As we are caught up in the currents which will one day overwhelm the hostility of this world, we are also shaping our own characters in preparation for the time when we shall hope to take our place in the next.

It is interesting to note that for all his professional success and the luxurious surroundings of Tivoli, the Emperor Hadrian ended his days psychologically paralysed by perpetual paranoia; whereas Saint Matthew found such peace of

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mind in answering Christ's call that he readily paid the ultimate price for his choices and enterprise. For that we honour his memory today - and insofar as we follow his example, we honour it everyday.

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