

‘As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth’.

Apart from this sentence, the inclusion of Matthew in the list of apostles in each of the first three gospels, and a brief note in Acts that he was one of those who went back to the upper room in Jerusalem after the ascension, there are no other mentions of Matthew in the Bible at all. What’s more, although there are detailed and often conflicting later accounts of what most of the apostles did after the resurrection, where they went, how they died and what happened to their relics, there is almost nothing about Matthew. All we know is that he was called by Jesus and did become one of the twelve. Essentially, we simply know he was there.

There’s one other thing that people know about Matthew apart from his early career in government finance – that he wrote the gospel which comes first in the New Testament. But unfortunately he almost certainly didn’t. There are detailed technical reasons for saying this. The two most important ones are that, given that the gospel dates from some time between 85AD and 105AD, the apostle Matthew would have been extremely old by then, if he was still alive, and that there is internal evidence to suggest that the gospel was not written by an eye-witness to the events it recounts, but by someone who arranged, edited and occasionally elaborated earlier source material, not to make it more accurate, but more impressive.

So, on the face of it, we know so little about this person called Matthew that he seems a pretty unpromising subject for a sermon. However, I hope you’ll allow me a little licence this morning, to stick with the fact that there is a very important gospel to which people from very early days associated with the name of Matthew as author. We know that it was quite common for writings to be attributed in this way – the same thing happened to several of the Epistles. It made them seem more authoritative. The same thing happens today – books come out which have apparently been written by celebrities. Only when you look closely do you realise that a ghost-writer has done all the hard work.

Unlike modern celebrities, however, this ‘writer-Matthew’ wasn’t trying to increase his sales. He had a much more important purpose. He wanted to tell people about Jesus, and to do it in writing because a written record would be more permanent, more reliable and less easy to distort than word-of-mouth stories. He had access to earlier written material and in his opinion it wasn’t good enough. Some things had been missed out, and our ‘Matthew’ wanted a different emphasis. His belief in Jesus as Messiah, the Son of God and Saviour, was so strong that he intended to do everything he could to ensure that others received the message and believed it. He particularly wanted people like himself – intelligent, educated Jews – to realise what had happened and how Jesus’ coming was the logical continuation of what they already knew. Jesus was the Messiah promised in the Jewish scriptures. His birth, his activities, his promises, his death and resurrection were all foretold in the ancient scrolls: ‘For thus it was spoken by the prophets.’ Our ‘Matthew’ was fired with enthusiasm to get this message across. Over and over again he quotes the prophets and psalms to prove his point, from the first verse of his first chapter where he begins to set out the genealogy of Jesus to prove his descent from Abraham and David, to Chapter 26 verse 6 where Jesus himself tells the crowd who have come to arrest him that ‘all this has taken place so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.’

‘Writer-Matthew’ wants his readers, in today’s parlance, to ‘get it’. So, deliberately, he uses language that will be familiar to them; words they will have heard week in, week out at synagogue or in daily prayers. It’s revolutionary enough to be writing about the arrival of the Messiah – he doesn’t want any

artificial difficulties to get in the way. Stage by stage he sets it out and shows them: it says here - this proves it – it says here – this proves it.

One of the duties that we as Christians share with our writer called Matthew is to tell others about Jesus. This in itself can be a pretty cringe-making idea. We've all seen the chap with the slightly wild expression waving a Bible and shouting to passers-by that only Jesus can save them from the wrath to come. Nor are we likely to go from door to door, interrupting people's TV-watching to ask if they've been converted yet (to which, some thirty years ago, the best answer was: 'Are you the Jehovah's Witnesses or North Sea Gas?') But there is nothing to stop us, when an opportunity naturally presents itself at work, or with friends, or in the supermarket, or at the gym or the school gate, talking gently about something that God has done for us. Maybe how a prayer was answered, or someone offered unexpected help, a problem didn't materialise, or even how good it feels, at some point during a chaotic day, to sit quietly for a couple of minutes and remember that God loves us, even if everyone else is running us ragged.

Just remember – be like Matthew. Use the ordinary words you'd use for any other conversation. Use the same tone of voice. Don't suddenly go all unctuous on them. Make it sound normal and reasonable that God is here now, and busy alongside us in our world (which is his world too, of course), just as Matthew made it sound reasonable that God's regularly-repeated promises had been fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. Take the risk, and see what happens. After all, our writer-Matthew could hardly have realised that people would still be reading, studying and being inspired by his words two millennia after he wrote them.