

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. [Matt 9:9]

We Scots are great at putting down people who have become a success of have changed their lives for the better. My friend Stan who was here a few weeks ago is a Dundonian, and he told me that people would comment about him: *Aye, I knew him when he wis' naethin*. There's this strange need for us to keep people where they were when they were insignificant or nothing. We don't like to see people be transformed from sinners to saints! Before we go any further, let me explain the Biblical definition of a saint; saints are Christians like you and I. Some traditions think of saints as those who have died in the love of Christ, but the Gospel's repeatedly speak of saints on heaven and earth, so saints are those who have given their entire lives to Jesus Christ.

Our text is a one-verse biography of a man who God transformed from sinner to saint; the Apostle Matthew. He was a tax collector who was considered a super-sinner because he was a traitor to his country by collecting taxes from the Jews to support the Roman occupying force. Jesus came to him where he was and made him an apostle. Now the world knows him as Saint Matthew. It was quite a transition for Matthew to move from being a sinner to becoming a saint.

Do you think it is possible to become a saint? In Christ, it's possible for us to become saints providing we earnestly follow Him. There's an old story of a man who was caught stealing sheep, and he was branded on his forehead with the letters ST; *sheep thief*. He changed his life around and became a model citizen and people forgot that ST stood for *sheep thief* and thought it symbolized *saint*. This is what Jesus wants to happen in our lives. He associated and ate with sinners, and he came to call sinners that they might become saints. How can we cover the long distance from sinner to saint? In our text we have an example in Matthew. The journey from sinner to saint begins when Christ confronts us, as happened with Matthew.

*As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office. Jesus confronted Matthew face to face in a such a way that Matthew couldn't avoid Jesus. Imagine us coming face to face with Jesus; how wonderful that would be! There would be so many things we'd want to say to Jesus, so many requests to present to Him. **Of course, unlike Matthew, we don't need to a face to face meeting with Jesus because His Holy Spirit is present with us right now. So we can know Jesus as though He were physically in the same room with us.** Physical proximity does not necessarily mean that we get to know someone, there are people I with every week but I don't really know them, nor do they know me.*

We can know Jesus more intimately today than some who were present with Him physically. When Jesus was with a crowd during the days of John the Baptist, John said that there was one who stood among them they did not know. Philip the disciple was with Jesus for three years but still didn't know Him. Jesus said to Philip: *Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip?* Through the Holy Spirit and scripture, we can be as close to Jesus as those in the 1st century. We can know Jesus personally through faith and He can confront us today, just as he confronted Matthew.

Jesus can confront us through His Word and through His Spirit. When we read or hear scripture, Christ confronts us with his presence. John Wesley was confronted by Christ as he listened to one reading Luther's preface to the book of Romans and for the first time he felt that Christ was really his Saviour. Everyone who's begun this mission from sinner to saint has had a real and personal confrontation with Christ. The confrontation may come in different ways but it always takes place. For Paul it happened on the Damascus road. St. Francis met Christ when he was looking at a crucifix and he heard Christ say: *Sell all and give to the poor and come and follow me.* I know a number of people who were confronted by Christ at Billy Graham rallies, and this was the start of their transition from sinner to saint.

Many people know so much about Jesus but don't really know Him. Our learning about Jesus about has been formal and objective. For many, Christ has never become the personal reality that he was to Matthew in the tax office. I've said this before but because I'm a huge Beatles fan, I know a lot about Paul McCartney and I've even visited the house he grew up in. I know his birthday, the names of his family, the schools he attended. When I was young, I had posters of Paul McCartney on my bedroom walls. I know a great deal about Paul McCartney but I don't know him, I've never sat down for a chat with him. I don't know how he deals with his low times or what his worries are. ***Knowing about Jesus and knowing Him personally as our Lord and Saviour are two very different things. Jesus is waiting for us and He wants to get to know us personally.***

The first mile in the transition from sinner to saint is to be confronted by Christ. But it's not enough just getting to know him. Matthew went another mile in his trip from sinner to saint: As Jesus saw Matthew sitting at the tax office, He said; *Follow me*. It's not enough to be confronted by Christ; we must be called by Christ. What do we mean by being called? A call may imply that we are asleep and need to wake up, for many Christians are asleep spiritually. Many folk have been Christians since infancy. They've been brought up by Christian parents, attended church since childhood and have been worshipping faithfully for years. But they've never woke up to what God may be calling them to do with their lives.

This may be the time for us who've been in the church from infancy to wake up and realise whose we are. We need to wake up to the fact that we're children of God by His grace, and as children of God we have a mission in life. I think much of the church is asleep today, and needs to be called by Christ. Sleep is a method used by Satan to frustrate the work of God, and Jesus is calling us out of our spiritual slumber to follow him in service. Jesus said to Matthew; *Follow me*. Today Christians likewise are called to serve both in the world and in the church and the world is crying out to Christians for help.

Jesus is calling Christians to go into the world and serve Him according to the calling and talent He gives us. Christ has a vocation for each of us, and it's His will that our lives have meaning and purpose. We're not merely working for wages or to make a living; we are designed to be out in our world glorifying God through our service.

We've all a way to go from sinner to saint, and our journey isn't complete until we go another mile in our spiritual pilgrimage. We see this final step in Matthew. ***As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office; and He said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed Him.*** After that Matthew was a changed person. He turned from tax collector to soul gatherer, from a sinner to a saint. When Jesus confronts and calls us, we face that moment of decision: Will we follow or not? If we say yes then our lives are radically changed, just like Matthew's.

Just what is the nature of the change that Christ causes? It's essentially an internal rather than an external change. Some think that being a Christian demands certain outward changes such as changing certain habits or our appearance. But it's not an external change that is needed but an internal one: We need a change of attitude, love instead of hatred. There should be an about-face in our values. The change that Christ makes in our lives goes to the very depths of our beings. There is a radical change of heart as the changed person is being made new in Christ. This change is usually slow and gradual as we grow in fellowship with Christ. The change may take place so quietly that the person himself does not know he is changing.

Of course, some people are changed immediately, and this was the experience of St. Paul on the Damascus road. But this change will not take place until like Matthew, we leave our old life behind and follow Jesus. It calls for complete and total surrender to Christ, and we will never know what good God can do with your life until we surrender to Him.

We don't have to ask what a sinner is, because each of us comes into this category. But how do we define a saint?

A saint is a person, who's like a stained glass window and lets the light of Christ shine through themselves. They do this because Christ lives in them, and they in Christ. *Luther once said: If you should knock on my heart and ask, 'Who lives there?' I would not say, 'Martin Luther lives here.' Rather I would say, 'Jesus Christ lives here.'* When we can say that, we've gone from sinner to saint! ***Amen***

(1695 words)