
He Saw A Man

**An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Eve of the Feast of St. Matthew**

Jesus was walking along.

He wasn't going to the tax booth. He was simply passing by. And out of the corner of his life, he *saw* a man.

Everyone saw Matthew. He sat at the booth all day; he was impossible to miss. But no one saw *him*. They saw the toll. They saw the collaborator, the hand out for Rome's cut with his own laid quietly on top. A tax booth is a machine for turning persons into amounts — and the man who sits inside one becomes, to every passer-by, a sum. A category. A sinner. That is a way of seeing, too: the kind that makes a person smaller, that empties them out until only the label is left.

And we have not stopped doing it. We still have a hundred quiet ways of turning a person into a number. We reduce the man across the counter to what he costs us, the woman on the phone to how long she is taking, the stranger to the trouble he might be. It is efficient. It is even, in its way, comfortable — it lets us move through a crowded world without the weight of every face. But it is a lie. Because no one, ever, is a number. Every reduction is a small refusal to see.

There is, when you think about it, another way to look. A patient way. The kind of looking that lingers, that treats a person as worth the trouble of being known — and under that gaze a person does not shrink. He comes to life. To give someone that kind of full and unhurried regard is one of the rarest and most generous things we ever do for one another. And I want to say something plain about it: that regard is what love actually is. Not a warm feeling about people in general. The decision to see *this* one, the one in front of me, as real.

So watch what happens on the road. Jesus looks at the one man everyone has reduced to a function, and he does not see a sinner. He sees a person — so completely that a life comes loose. "Follow me," he says. Two words. And Matthew gets up. The booth had told him who he was for years. One look told him otherwise, and he believed the look.

And then — this is the scandal — the look does not stay in the street. It ends at a table. Jesus goes in. He sits down. He eats, with the whole disreputable company of them, in the house of a man he has known for an afternoon. And what cannot be forgiven is not the seeing. It is the sitting. *Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?* He has crossed to the wrong table. He has let their name become his name. He is not reaching in from a safe distance; he is *with* them, all the way down.

I desire mercy, not sacrifice, he says. Sacrifice is the machinery of the booth — it sorts, it settles accounts, it keeps the clean and the unclean on their proper sides. Mercy does the opposite. Mercy crosses over. Mercy sees a man, and then mercy pulls up a chair.

Now here is the thing I have been circling. We think of this seeing as kindness — a soft thing, a comfort. But it is the hardest and most creative thing there is. Because you cannot mend what you will not look at. You cannot love a person you have turned into a figure, and you cannot repair a world you refuse to see clearly. The reducing gaze does not only wound the one reduced. It blinds the one doing the reducing. It forecloses the question before the question can even be asked.

And we are so good at calling things inevitable. We say *that is simply how it is* about arrangements that people made — and what people made, people can see, and question, and imagine otherwise. But only if they look.

Awareness comes first. It is the ground that every "what if" grows in.

So let the questions stay open — unanswered, and honest. What if the person I have written off as a cost is a neighbor I have not met? What if "the way things are" is not weather but a decision, still being made? What if the very word I use to make someone disappear — a number, a nuisance, a line to be trimmed — is exactly the word Jesus refused at the booth?

I do not have the answers. That is not the sermon. The sermon is that the answers are impossible for people who will not first see — and that the seeing is not a technique. It is love. Love is what opens our eyes, and open eyes are where every new possibility begins.

And there is one last thing to see — the thing only this table can teach. The world will look at a person the moment that person becomes useful. It sees the worker once there is profit in him, the guest once there is something to gain. But Jesus saw Matthew when Matthew was worth nothing to anyone. That is the seeing we are given here, and it is the seeing hardest to give away: the regard that does not wait for usefulness. So the last "what if" is the one that costs the most. What about the ones for whom no use will ever be found — the ones the world has quietly stopped counting? Do we see them?

In a moment some of us will rise and move to the front of the nave. And you are not coming forward because you are well. *Those who are well have no need of a physician.* You are coming because you are the sought, the seen, the very ones he came to call — to be looked at, all the way down, and joined at his table.

Take that look with you when you go. Because to see is to love, and love that truly sees begins, at last, to imagine.

And God knows — we could use some of that now.