

Sunday 19 September 2021
St Matthew's Day (transferred)
Homily preached by The Rev'd Canon Philip banks

Let light shine out of darkness – the light of God in the face of Jesus Christ. [2 Cor 4.6]

Telling jokes is not my forté – I usually get the punchline wrong or whatever. But humour me if you like this story of the woman who has a dream in which she's gone to the gates of heaven and saw lots of clocks. As is customary with these stories, St Peter is attending the gates of heaven. When asked what the clocks were for, Peter replied that "every person on earth has a clock here, and each time you sin on earth, the hand on your clock moves just a bit". The woman said, "Where is my clock?" Peter replied, "It is in the office, Moses has been using it for a fan."

Two thoughts, as we keep St Matthew's Day today.

First. That story, quite funny, reinforces the erroneous image of God, that so many people have: of a judgmental God – God who always has his eye on you (and not in a good way), who is counting up my sins, trying to trip me up.

That's not the beautiful, generous, inclusive, creator God of light and love, is it, which people have encountered - in all life's changes from birth to death - for so many centuries in this holy space.

Sadly, so many people's view of God has been of a rule-maker and judge. It's a picture painted by so many religions, including I'm afraid, plenty of Christians

The secret is - that God is not like this at all. God has created his creation, which of course is far more than just this world. It's one reason why so-called 'Creationism' is so pathetic: it makes God into a little god whose only achievement consists in c6,000 years of this tiny planet.

But God has created his whole creation – and loves it. And as love implies, he respects it – and as a crucial part of this creation, he has made the human race, you and me, which he loves.

If people want to know something about our Christian faith, all they need to know is that God loves you. You are precious to him. He has formed you in the womb and holds you in the palm of his hand. And when life feels sometimes like it is rubbish, we gaze on the cross at the suffering God who suffers with you – and loves you so much that he was prepared to die for you.

Today, on St Matthew's Day, we get this beautiful gospel reading: the Pharisees are portrayed as a bit 'up themselves' – guarding God's love and mercy – hoarding it just for themselves or so-called holy people, keeping others out. Jesus bursts their bubble, sits with people on the outside, those on the edge. One of them is Matthew, the tax-collector, the sinner in their eyes, who tells the story of his own calling to follow Jesus – he got up/arose. It's the same word in the original Greek used for resurrection. Matthew's life is transformed because he has learnt first-hand of the love that God has for him.

Second thought.

Once we understand that God is not the harsh oppressor but our friend and brother, does not threaten punishment but promises life and fulfilment, doesn't diminish but rather lifts up and enhances our understanding of whom and how we are:

once we understand that, the call is to live it, really live it. When you pray, to pray with that sense of who God is, our encouraging companion who delights in you.

And that's the other half of the Christian faith: living with and for one another in the world. God did not create the world to be a battleground of competing interests, but to be an opportunity for my best to contribute to your best, and our best to contribute to the best of others, our neighbours, those outside and on the edge.

I read the statistic in the Economist this week about the vaccine roll-out. That three-quarters of the world's covid vaccines have been distributed to just ten of the world's nations. Ten (out of c200). Should we be compared to the Pharisees, hoarding the amazing creativity and genius which God has given to us to create a vaccine so swiftly?

I have a friend who met Mother Teresa of Calcutta years back when she was alive, before her canonization of course. Perhaps I've shared this story with you before. He said his encounter with her was something he's never forgotten. Her warmth of welcome, her smile her embrace, he said made you feel as if you were the person she'd been longing to meet and that you were precious to her. But her gaze and the questions she asked - which quickly went to the heart of things: 'what are you doing with your life', 'who are you - really', 'how will you make the world a better place', 'what are you doing to make the values of God's kingdom - love and justice and mercy - come to birth'?

He said it felt like it might feel to be in the presence of Jesus. God loves me and I am precious to him - and asks me 'how, then, will you lead your life'?

When Christ calls himself the "Light of the World" he is not telling us just to look at him, but to look out at life with his all-merciful eyes. Light is not something you necessarily see; it is something that allows you to see other things. We see Jesus so we can see like him, and with the same infinite compassion.

So. When we celebrate God's love for us, we also pledge to give others reason to celebrate our love shown to them.

When that happens, love enlivens the heart of our life.