

## **The Calling of Matthew**

*The Feast of St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist (12th Sunday after Trinity)*

(From the Gospel: St. Matthew ix. 9 ff.)

**9** And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, *Follow me*. And he arose, and followed him. **10** And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples. **11** And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, *Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?* **12** But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, *They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.* **13** But go ye and learn what that meaneth, *I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.*

The poor Pharisees! They can never anticipate what Jesus will do next. They should have figured, long ago at the outset of His ministry, that He would probably in each instance do exactly the opposite of anything they expected. It was His inexplicable allegiance to an entirely different set of standards that angered and frustrated them so. They were thoroughly convinced that their opinions on all matters were impeccably correct, and until this point they had gone unchallenged in their position of moral authority. They believed themselves totally supported by the Mosaic Law, and, behind, it, by God Himself.

The Person of Jesus Christ, however, represented the profoundest threat to all of this. His miracles should have been telling enough. How could they not have been? His authoritative teaching, His popularity, and His bearing should have provided sufficient evidence of His divinity. If these learned men had only followed the leading of the poor and humble, and submitted themselves to Christ, in spite of the tremendous unfamiliarity of His message to all that they had previously held sacred, they too would have been set free from the prison of Law observance by the New Covenant Christ would soon inaugurate.

Today's Gospel provides us with yet another example of the immensely surprising ways of this Christ. Matthew is *sitting at the receipt of custom*, i.e., in a roadside booth as a tax or toll collector. Christ's enemies, observing this very strange act of recruitment, without thinking twice about it, would have looked upon it with contempt: "Look at the sort of people He draws into His inner circle: a dupe of King Herod, our hated overlord! Must be pretty desperate for converts. Or worse yet, He must hate and disrespect God, for God surely has no use for traitors to our nation!" They were aghast when the Teacher beckoned to Matthew: *Follow me, and he arose, and followed him.*

Think of it: *Follow me, and he arose, and followed him.* How much is implied in this short, abrupt, and simple interaction. For Christ to tell him *follow Me* is to say: "I have chosen you. I have handpicked you from the tens of thousands around you. Furthermore, your vocation

and past sins, your complicity with a foreign power, have not in any way caused Me to dismiss you as a candidate for discipleship!” *And he followed him*: no questions were asked. He doesn’t look back. He doesn’t doubt his meritoriousness for this appointment; he merely accepts it in faith. He is in...He is IN! What had provoked a mass of complexity for the Pharisees was as clear as glass to Matthew: a simple response to a simple call. And faith in the Caller was the key.

We find out in a parallel account of this Gospel in St. Mark that Matthew, also known as “Levi”, invites Jesus to dinner. The parallel account in Luke calls it *a great feast* (5:29). Now this is a simple act of hospitality, and it may be one of the few ways that Matthew can express his gratitude to Christ for noticing and calling him. Our text says *And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples*. Now there is that old saying, “A man is known by the company he keeps”, and the Pharisees lost no time in jumping to similar conclusions about Jesus, whose unpredictability continued to vex them.

The obvious conclusions are these: “Jesus is a bad person, and so bad people are attracted to Him.” Or, “Jesus has no discernment, or self-respect, or propriety, or He would never even dream of entering into intimate fellowship with such a crowd.” All they could see was the ragamuffin, criminal group who crowded around Him, very much at home with Him: thieves, crooks, prostitutes, swindlers, extorters, the irreligious, and the like. Now usually people seek company with others who are very much like them. That’s why they gather at bars, at clubs, in societies, etc. “Aha, it is clear that this wretched group perceives this Jesus to be one of their own,” must have been the slanderous, insulting thought his enemies relished against Him. “And where did the money come to fund this big shindig? Well, it probably came out of *our* pockets, via the toll booth!”

But why actually did they come to have dinner with Him? We can conclude that this act of devotion --joining Jesus at table-- is just as spontaneous, just as unplanned, just as simple as Matthew’s response had been.

Let’s look at it on human terms. Suppose the very person from whom I had the most to fear and to expect grave consequences, was in my presence? Suppose it was a judge, or a policeman, one intimately acquainted with my case, and in a prime position to do something about it? Or suppose it was a dearly loved one, whom I had grievously wronged, through some harsh word of anger or hateful act? Their company would be the last I would seek, because of the burden of guilt and conscience. But my relief would know no bounds whatsoever if, instead of heaping upon me what I justly deserved, I was instead offered by them mercy, kindness, and forgiveness.

Now we have to conclude that all who came into the actual presence of Christ sensed something about Him. The miracles He had already performed at this early stage in His ministry would have testified to believing eyes in the most obvious manner that this Man was divine. But in the presence of divinity, we recoil! You remember Peter's response to Christ's miraculous provision of fish: "*Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!*" (Luke 5:8b). We must conclude that this group which sought His fellowship were on some level profoundly unhappy with themselves and their spiritual condition. Had they been hardened sinners, and not merely *sinners*, content with their sin, loving it, living in it, devoted to it, the last place they would have sought would have been the company of Christ! But Matthew and his friends bore the great burden of their sins upon their hearts. It was with them night and day. They also stood condemned by society, by the Law, and by the establishment that had presumed to take upon themselves its stewardship, the Pharisees and their ilk. Within the bounds of such a prison they perceived of no escape. Who would provide it? They surely concluded, with no reason to assume otherwise, that God Himself was also arrayed with all others against them.

Notice that the Pharisees did not have the courage to ask any questions of Christ Himself. Rather, they resorted to His disciples: *Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?* Perhaps they were hoping to undermine Jesus' credibility in their eyes. "Do you really think this Fellow is the kind of man you think Him to be? Maybe you'd better think twice!"

But Jesus' overheard this conversation, and intervened. We must look hard at His reply: *But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. 13 But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.*

Let's briefly study these phrases.

*They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.* The sinners who sought Jesus out were sick, sick unto death. But in their sin they had proven honest with themselves and with God, and ran to the only source wherein they might find help. But the self-righteous, law-abiding, proud Pharisees already had the cure in hand: themselves. They acknowledged no illness, the most dangerous thing that a sick man can possibly do.

*But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice,* is a quote taken directly from the prophet Hosea (6:6). The entire verse in Hosea reads: *For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.* Here Jesus' words must have pierced His foes to the heart, quoting as He did right out of the texts they would have considered themselves versed in, but turning the intent of the texts directly against them. "What good is your scrupulous exercise of the Law without love toward man and toward God? It would have been far better for you to have been just an ordinary, garden-variety sinner, like these that flock around Me, than to have embarked upon this path you've chosen."

And lastly: *I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.* Now this is a statement filled with irony. If the Pharisees had indeed been “righteous”, it would have been manifest in their attitude, which it never was. Their righteousness was on their own terms. Having missed the spirit of the Law, they stumbled over its letter. The majesty and holiness and stature of the Law should have provoked them to worship of the One who gave it, from whom constant mercy must be sought if obedience to it is even going to begin to be rendered. Only sinners whose hearts are turned upward can possibly be in such a favored place. The Pharisees, in presuming to comprehend the Law, vastly failed to understand its implications.

What does all of this mean? Matthew would soon go on to become St. Matthew, and provide a rendering of the Gospel, the story of Christ and His ministry, which is the source of today’s Gospel. It is a Gospel peculiarly tailored to the Jewish people, an effort to proclaim Christ in explicitly Jewish terms. As we consider his feast day, we should recall his humble beginnings. He was not merely poor, or a tradesman, like some of the apostles. He was, in his way, a seasoned thief, making money off the enforced taxes levied by a crooked secular government. But through Christ, he is converted. It is the small doorway through which all must pass, regardless of background, if they would be saved.

We have not one single reason to believe that the graces Christ visited upon this dear man are not fully available to us and to all others, should we but desire them!

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*