

With the Feast of St. Matthew, and the appointed Gospel reading from Matthew, chapter 9, we are given two particular points to consider. First is the unique call from the Lord to Matthew the tax collector to follow Him as a chosen apostle and later evangelist. Second, the beautiful distillation of our Lord's purpose and work in this world, given in His own words as He says, **"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick....I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."**

Matthew, called Levi in Mark and Luke, was a tax collector. He served in that detestable office that worked either directly on behalf of Rome or, more likely for being in Galilee, Rome's vassal, Herod Antipas. Jesus says to Matthew, "Follow Me." The Greek verb Jesus uses there, translated "follow," is the source of our word "acolyte." Acolytes in recent decades are simply those people, usually young, who light and extinguish the candles. Historically, serving as acolyte was much more significant. The acolytes were young men who, as our translation renders it, followed the pastors. Not just in the service, to assist in various ways, but in a more general way as those who would potentially go on to be trained as pastors. They would closely follow their pastor in order to observe and learn, to begin their training as one who, one day, could be called by God to serve as a pastor, thus, their service in various ways in the Divine Service, their being vested, and in many congregations, seated in the chancel with the pastors.

And so Matthew is called to be an acolyte, a follower and learner of the Lord, not simply as one of those in the many crowds who heard and learned, who were called to faith, but as a close student of Jesus. This is why we have these days set aside for the thankful remembrance of Matthew, his brother apostles and evangelists, and still others, such as St. Mary, John the Baptist, Barnabas, etc. These are those particular people who had a specific, unique role in our Lord's earthly ministry of salvation. The apostles lived with, studied under, and were taught in the closest ways by the Lord, and then were sent out by Him to bear witness to what they had seen, heard, and come to know. Their voice has gone out into all the world.

And most especially significant for the Church are those four men who, under the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit, wrote not simply their apostolic testimony, as did Peter, Paul, James, and John in his epistles and Revelation, but the four who recorded for us the very words and deeds of the Lord Jesus, how it is that we come to know Him in the most essential way, as the incarnate Son of God at work in this world to save sinners.

Like each of his fellow evangelists, Matthew gives us details unique to his Gospel. Without Matthew we'd have no magi in our nativity scenes, would not know the rejection suffered by the Lord already in His infancy as Herod sought His life, would not know of the flight into Egypt or the slaughter of the innocents. Many individual points of the Sermon on the Mount are recorded in Mark and Luke, but only Matthew gives us that Sermon as a comprehensive whole, a sermon in full, with many smaller points only found in Matthew. It is Matthew who ends his Gospel with the clear trinitarian name of God that is the power behind baptism, and the name placed upon us, and finally our Lord's comforting promise to remain with His people until the end of the age.

Among the parables, those of the good and bad fruit, the wheat and the weeds, the hidden treasure in the field, the great net, the unforgiving servant, the workers in the vineyard, the wise and foolish virgins and the sheep and goats, are known to us only from Matthew.

And yet for all this, Matthew gives us no record of his own words, the way we have the sayings of Peter, John, or Nathaniel. Though we know Peter to be bold and even brash, John to be the beloved disciple, and Nathaniel's guileless inquisitiveness, all we know of Matthew is that he had been a tax collector. But Matthew hands on to us the words of the One who does matter. Through his written witness we are given the words and works of our Lord Jesus.

And what Matthew makes especially clear, in direct connection with his call into discipleship as one who would then be sent out as an apostle and be used as an evangelist, is the teaching of the Lord Jesus that had particular significance for Matthew the sinner, and for us sinners. It is this: Immanuel, God-With-Us, came to be with, to call, and to save sinners. He came not for those who see themselves as already righteous in themselves, in no need of a savior or forgiveness, but for those who are sick.

Matthew identifies himself as one such person by what we see before and after his call to follow Jesus. Chapter 9 begins with the paralytic who is then forgiven of his sins by Jesus, and then Jesus having dinner with known notorious sinners. This is the kind of person Matthew, the blessed apostle and evangelist was and is without Jesus. He is what he is only because of Jesus' call to repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

This is not just one of many things that Jesus does, on equal par with His many teachings or the varied miracles. The call of the divine Physician to those who are sick with sin unto death, that they might repent and live from His forgiveness, that is the reason God has come to be with us. It is the defining thing about Jesus. He is, as the angel says to Joseph, the Lord who will save His people from their sins. He calls sinners because He, and only He, can do something about sin. He pays the price for them, shedding His blood as the merciful self-sacrifice.

The "Follow Me" spoken to Matthew was the particular call to the unique role the Lord had in mind for Matthew. But the Lord Jesus does also call everyone, every sinner, to live as every Christian must; following after the only One worth following, the only One who has shed His blood for the forgiveness of their sins, to follow the One who embodies divine mercy. This is what the world cannot understand, and thus it will delightfully draw attention to the failures of Christians. It will point out your sins and call you a hypocrite, a poor example for the Christian cause.

Jesus shows there is a place in His kingdom for Matthew the tax collector, or Simon a zealot. He calls such sinners to Himself, not that they continue on in their sin, but like Zacchaeus, bear fruits of repentance, like the 12, whose lives are forever changed by the One they are bid to follow. So then whatever your past sins, however many or severe they have been, when the Lord Jesus bids you to follow Him, to take up His yoke upon you and learn from Him, to cast all your weariness and heavy burdens upon Him, know that He is sincere in that invitation. Have the confidence that He, and He alone, is able to bear it. For far more than the heat of the workday, He has borne the heat of the Father's wrath for your sins, none excepted. He desires mercy for sinners, and that is what He has and gives.