

SEPTEMBER 21 MSGR. NUSCA

Today we celebrate the Feast of St. Matthew one of the Twelve Apostles. Matthew, or Levi – as he is referred to by Mark and Luke - is described as a tax-collector. Little else is known of his life. Christian tradition has him preaching the Gospel in Persia and later, in Ethiopia where it is believed he was martyred.

Certainly, the Gospel that bears his name, offers a sophisticated and well-organized account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God: this “Emmanuel,” or *God who is with us*. In it, Matthew wants to show us how the writings of the Old Testament prophets have come *to be fulfilled in Christ*. Indeed, as Jesus states clearly, “*I have not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them.*” And I think that several things emerge for our reflection.

First of all, looking at today’s Gospel I was struck by the *unlikelihood* of Matthew’s call. In Our Lord’s time tax-collectors had a rather bad reputation, and not without reason. They were regarded as traitors by their own people for helping – rather than opposing – the oppressive Roman rule of the day. Typically, in the various Gospels, “tax-collectors” are grouped together with “sinners.” Hence, Jesus is criticized for dining with them, as well as for the merciful attitude that He demonstrates in His interactions with them. Moreover, the fact that Jesus would have called someone whom most would have considered a social outcast into His circle of closest followers – the Apostles – would, at the very least, have evoked perplexity on the part of many people. Certainly, Our Lord’s self-righteous religious critics and opponents, the Scribes and Pharisees, would have regarded

the invitation to Matthew to be a rather bold affront, as we can surmise from their reaction in today's Gospel.

We are led to ask then, what does Jesus see in Matthew and indeed, in the tax-collectors and sinners He is dining with? Clearly, Jesus looks beyond mere outward appearances. With eyes of mercy, Jesus looks at the person of Matthew, and sees far beyond the narrow-minded impressions of the people. Indeed, Jesus sees beyond whatever self-limiting attitudes that Matthew may have regarding himself, and his life's vocation.

Jesus simply doesn't see Matthew as the others do. That this is the case, is implicit in His statement that: "*I have not come to call the righteous but sinners,*" and that God desires "*mercy not sacrifice,*" quoting the Prophet Hosea 6:6. Ultimately, **Jesus doesn't see Matthew as Matthew sees himself.** Rather, with eyes of love and mercy, Our Lord's focus is upon everything that Matthew has the potential to become through the transforming power of God's grace: **if only** Matthew will say "yes" to the call to follow Jesus *on the way of the discipleship and the Cross.*

The call of Matthew inspires us, then, to look beyond the narrow conceptions that others may have of us and indeed of the self-limiting choices that we may have accepted regarding ourselves.

This leads to my second point, namely, that to follow Jesus ultimately involves entering willingly into a lifelong process of conformity to Christ. To "follow" Our Lord means to enter into a life-long spiritual process of being conformed, or **configured** to the mysteries of Christ's own life, death and resurrection.

As St. Bede comments: ‘Jesus saw the tax collector and, because He saw him through the eyes of mercy and chose him, He said to him: Follow me. But this following meant imitating the pattern of His life– not just walking after Him.’ To follow Jesus involves much more than simply following behind Him, much less following behind, even farther back at a safe distance.

St. Paul speaks about being ‘with Christ,’ or being “in Christ.” In his Letter to the Ephesians 4:24, Paul speaks of being “renewed in the Spirit,” and “casting off the old sinful self; of putting on the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” The First Letter of John 1:9 invites us to “walk always in the light.”

At the same time, Matthew’s immediate and total response serves as an inspiring model for us, in our own ongoing response to Our Lord’s call...a call to which we must respond not only once, but **every day** and **in every circumstance of our life**. Our Lord calls us to leave behind **everything** that separates us from a deeper and more lasting relationship with God, and to do so without delay.

The call of Matthew invites at the same time, to be open to the **infinite world of possibility** that opens up to us when we too say “yes” to God’s call, and to the lofty plans that He has in store for us.

For as we consider the calls of Peter, Matthew and the other Apostles, it helps to remember the responses of others **who were called, but refused**; or didn’t respond quickly enough to God’s call. When the unnamed man in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 8:21 respond says to the call of Jesus by saying: “Lord, let me first go and bury my father,” Jesus responds immediately: “*Leave the dead bury their own dead.*” In the Gospel of Luke Jesus says that 9:62 “*No one*

who puts their hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

So, it is that through both the loving and merciful gaze of Jesus, and the generous and immediate response of Matthew, the tax-collector and sinner is given the opportunity to become an Apostle, and Evangelist: called to bring the Good News of salvation to the ends of the Earth.

Finally, the call of Matthew is ultimately a call to martyrdom, from the Greek verb *‘martyreo’*: to bear witness, to give testimony. Like St. Matthew and the Apostles and Martyrs of the early Church, we too are called to give witness to the eternal truth of the Gospel in our own difficult times: beginning with the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death. We are called to witnesses to **Christian love and joy** in an era marked too often by violence or indifference;

to be witnesses to **Christian Hope** in an era marked by too much despair and nihilism; to give witness to the **power of the cross** against the narcissistic spirit of the world, and to witness to the **light of the Resurrection** against a powerful culture of death.

As we continue to celebrate this Mass, let us pray for the intercession of St. Matthew that we may obtain the grace to respond generously to the call to holiness that Jesus makes to us every day of our lives. And let us pray for the grace to leave behind the things that are keeping us from becoming **the new creation that God is calling us to be**: through the life of faith, and through **the transforming power of the Eucharist that we are celebrating**.