

**A Sermon Preached at the Community Eucharist
For the Stipendiary Ordinands of the Diocese of Newcastle
The Feast of St Matthew**

21 September 2010

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Matthew 9.9-13

Call and response is the heart of Christian life, and in particular the heart of the experience of vocation to ordained ministry.



In the church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome you can see a wonderful painting by Caravaggio entitled 'The Call of St Matthew'. What Caravaggio depicts is Matthew sitting in the shadows with four others dressed in Renaissance costume; all huddled around a table covered with money.

All the figures, with the exception of Matthew are looking up and to the right.

From the right side of the painting a shaft of light cuts across the top of the scene as though from a door opened at a higher level in the room. Jesus appears in shadow at the opposite side of the scene from Matthew who is not only hunched over the table, but is holding his arms defensively around the money. At the border of the line of shadow and light Jesus' hand appears, his fingers simultaneously indicating Matthew and summoning him: one of the tax-collectors at the table mirrors the same gesture.

Caravaggio's painting conveys the dilemma of Matthew – and speaks to us of the vocation to which we have responded. The shadowy cellar where they sit is a safe place: the challenge of releasing his grip on the money is hard. He bows his head and will not look. The figure who calls him is not clear: Jesus is not presented in a great shaft of light, decisively transcendent, so obviously God that to do anything but to follow him would be impossible. Instead he is a figure dimly discerned: he compels Matthew to follow into the unknown and towards a light that is somewhere behind him.

The story of Matthew's call in the gospel is told with none of the psychological elaboration that Caravaggio brings to bear. It is told simply so as to emphasise, as starkly as possible, that fundamentally discipleship is simply about divine call and human response. The call to discipleship entails dramatic changes of direction and radical transformations of commitment.

Disciples, as both Caravaggio and the writer of Matthew's gospel are aware in their different ways, are those who risk a break with security in order to follow Jesus.

Matthew might have imagined that this call he has responded to will represent a new start, a decisive break with his past-life. Instead he discovers that many tax-collectors and sinners now turn up. As Michael Corleone lamented in *Godfather III*: 'Just when I think I'm out, they drag me back in'.

From the perspective of the tax-collectors and sinners this invitation is good news. There is no threat, no intimidation and no menace in the house where Jesus gathers those he calls. This is the gospel hospitality that we are called to model in our

ministry. Accustomed to living on the fringes of society and of the religious community in particular, they are invited to dine at the table of one who, as Matthew reminded us earlier in chapter seven, is the ultimate judge of what is righteous;

On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name? Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you, go away from me, you evildoers.’

While Jesus’ behaviour is welcome to the tax collectors it troubles the Pharisees.

Their question ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ is an inevitable one for those whose world is tidily organised into the religious and the irreligious. Many Pharisees held that ritual purity was not to be practised by the Temple priests alone but was an imperative for all Jews. Such an arrangement neatly separates the good from the bad, and allows those who are able to maintain the purity laws to be secure in their own situation. The boundary lines are clear and there are no shadowy areas.

There is a certain comfort in knowing where you stand and who is inside and who is outside. Jesus’ behaviour disturbs and threatens such a world. His association with sinners uncovers a grace so powerful that religious people, otherwise comfortable in the security of their religious identities, are left unsettled.

The leader of the synagogue crosses a line when he comes to Jesus to plead for the healing of his daughter. In the face of the Pharisees who are his friends and colleagues and whose disapproval of Jesus is so apparent he comes and kneels before Jesus to plead for his daughter’s life from the one who he believes has the power to cross between the shadows that separate life from death.

The woman with the haemorrhage crosses the line. For twelve years her physical condition has meant that she could not enter the synagogue over which the leader presided.

As disciples of Christ we are drawn by Jesus, as Matthew, as the tax collectors, as the leader of the synagogue, and as the marginalised woman all were, to follow him, to cross the line that the world and our sinfulness draws and to step into the light.

You may recall from the opening of *Star Trek* that the starship *Enterprise*, equipped only with a split infinitive was ‘To boldly go where no man has gone

before'. Today's gospel calls us to boldness, but reminds us that in following Christ we follow those who have already heard his call, stood up in the dark, sat beside him, knelt before him, reached out their hands for him.