

10<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF THE YEAR “A”—2008

JUNE 8, 2008

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HOSEA 6:3-6

ROMANS 4:18-25

MATTHEW 9:9-13



The calling of the Apostle Matthew exercised great fascination as a subject matter for seventeenth century painting throughout Europe. In the Netherlands artists like Hendricks ter Brugghen and Rembrandt, in Spain painters like Juan de Pareja, and in France George de la Tour, all painted scenes of Matthew’s call by Jesus. Yet the most famous of all such paintings and the one which probably influence all the others was that of the Italian painter Michelangelo Merisi, better known as Caravaggio. In the small Contarelli Chapel of the Church of St. Louis dei Francesi in Rome, the controversial Caravaggio painted three paintings from the life of St. Matthew, the most significant being his *Call of Matthew*, which hang on the chapel left-hand wall. Done in Caravaggio’s dramatic style, the large canvas is a contrast of deep shadows and harsh light. The light reveals the areas of the painting where the artist wishes to focus our attention. On the right side of the canvas a sharp angle of light reveals the face of Christ with His right arm and hand extended in a pointing gesture that seems to mimic the hand of God in Michelangelo’s scene of Creation from the Sistine Chapel. Christ’s finger points to a group of men dressed in gaudy silk as they sit at table counting the coins collected as taxes. More particularly Christ’s finger seems aimed at one man in the group, an older bearded man, who returns Christ’s gaze and points to himself questioningly. While the tax collectors are dressed in 17<sup>th</sup> century costumes, elegant to the point of being foppish, Christ and His companion Peter are in the “typical” dress of 1<sup>st</sup> Century fishermen. Dressed in home spun, their features are weathered by the sun and wind, their faces appear rugged, and their feet dirty. Part of what revolutionized Caravaggio’s painting was his intense “realism,” and his realism shocked and even scandalized many to find Christ and the saints painted in a manner which seemed demeaning while the sinners were given an affluence of style.

While the prophet Hosea’s mission, like many Old Testament prophets, was to condemn the evil practices of the Chosen People, in today’s brief reading Hosea tells the people that theirs is a fickle love that is superficial and vanishes like the dew when touched by the rays of the sun. But, what God desires from them is a “true love” which creates a bond of unity between God and His people, and without that love all worship and sacrifice are empty rituals and rites which gain nothing and are in fact blasphemous.

In *Romans* this morning, Paul points to Abraham as an example of a man whose faith in God's promise, that he would be the father of many nations, justifies him, or as Paul says, "it was credited to him in righteousness." In other words, although Abraham was a sinner, his faith in God's fidelity to His promises reconciled him to the Father. Paul points out further, that we, you and I, are also sinners, and our justification also come through faith. Through faith we believe in the One who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead. We believe that in His Death and Resurrection Christ has won for us life, a life that will overcome physical death.

Mathew's version of his own call by Jesus is concise, and shows again the necessity of faith. The tax collector immediately leaves his post when Christ says, "Follow me!" As a tax collector, a publican, Matthew was regarded by his fellow Jews as a public sinner not only in his cooperation with the Roman occupiers, but in his cheating of his fellow Jews from their hard earned money. The fact that Jesus would recruit such a "sinner" would also make Him and His mission suspect in the eyes of many especially the Jewish authorities, a suspicion which would only have been confirmed by the fact that He sat at table in Matthew's home with other tax collectors and sinners. What Jesus does here seems a challenge to the sensibilities of His fellow Jews, yet Jesus has a reason for what He does, and that reason is at the heart of His mission. "Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do." The sinner is the reason for Christ's mission, the reason He came into the world, the reason He is called "Messiah."

If Caravaggio's painting was uncompromising realistic, so too are the Scriptures as we listen to them today. They all deal with one of the less than pleasant realities that we must all deal with in our own lives. The simple fact is that you and I are sinners. The Chosen People of our Hosea reading are sinners in so far as their faith has no depth. It is superficial and they seem to believe that depth that they lack in faith, which is really their love for God, can be made up by sacrificing bulls and sheep, when it is simply the gift of their hearts, the gift of their love which Yahweh longs for .

Our reading from *Romans* presupposes that we are sinners, yet it points to Abraham and Sarah who, though they were also sinners found justification through their faith in Yahweh's promises. That faith gave them the strength to lead lives of dedication to God and His mission for them no matter what obstacles they had to overcome.

Matthew's Gospel today is very explicit about the ugly fact of sin. Matthew and his friends are examples of the kind of sinfulness that all can recognize. Their collaboration with the Romans turns them against their own people and their desire for material gain leads them to cheating and duplicity further convicting them of sin. But the reading also brings to light the kind of sin that is not always recognized as sin, the sin of righteousness, which blinds the sinner to the darkness of

his or her own heart, but gives them perfect 20/20 vision in detecting the sins and imperfections of others. The self-righteous attitude of moralistic judgment is an attitude of sinfulness that remains with us today. It is found in all levels of society. It is found among believers as well as unbelievers, among the liberal and the conservative, among the rich and the poor, among the successful and the failure. It is found everywhere among individuals and groups who believe that they have the monopoly on justice and truth, and who therefore pass judgment on the words, the actions, the lives of others and despise others they see as “less” than themselves. Such spiritual arrogance begins to blind any one of us to our own insufficiency, our own weakness, our own sinfulness.

Although we may not like to face the fact, all of us have some degree of this “pharisaism”, this blinding self-righteousness in us. How many times a day do we unconsciously judge the attitude of a person in the next office, or the motives of a neighbor, or even the sincerity of our spouse? How many times does that judgment lead us to do or to say something which is harmful and has sinful repercussions? Listen to Christ, “Go and learn the meaning of the words, ‘what I want is mercy, and not sacrifice.’” Like the dark shadows of Caravaggio’s canvas where little or nothing can be seen, our sinfulness likes to insert itself into the shadows where few can see it and we can successfully deny it, but if we let the light of truth shine in those shadows that the darkness can be transformed, and our sinfulness, our self-righteousness seen in that light might just lead us to be more compassionate, more understanding and more respectful of others. Who knows what influence such a change might have not only in the way we relate to others but also in our relationship with God.