

09/20/20

The Feast of St. Matthew

**St. Matthew: Apostle and Evangelist**

**Matthew 9: 09-13**

As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him.

Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples.

And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

When Jesus heard that, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

But go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Tomorrow, September 21, is for the Christian Church the Feast of St. Matthew, and today we observe that festival in the liturgical calendar. On the one hand, to designate a day of honor for one of the apostles is to honor all of them and to remind ourselves of the blessing which our Savior has bestowed upon His Church through those twelve disciples who first preached His Gospel to the world. It is thus also a reminder to us of the apostolic ministry of which they were the beginning and which continues in His Church also today. To Matthew and those other first apostles Christ Jesus entrusted the ministry of Word and Sacrament. With no other tools or equipment than the Gospel of Christ which they preached, the baptism in the name of the holy Trinity which they administered, and the holy Sacrament of Christ's body and blood which they distributed in their worship, they planted our Lord's Church and extended His kingdom to the ends of the earth. Today their work continues wherever that same Gospel is preached and those same sacraments are administered according to our Savior's command. To honor one of the apostles is to honor their ministry and thus to honor our Savior Christ Jesus who Himself is at work through His Gospel-Word and His sacred ordinances, building His Church and bestowing upon her His Holy Spirit.

And on the other hand, the individual apostle Matthew has by himself a special place in our hearts here at Old Zion. This beautiful sanctuary in which we are so blessed to gather for worship was, before the congregations

merged, the sanctuary of St. Matthew's Lutheran Church. Still to be seen above the central door in the back is Matthew's symbol—a shield on which are depicted three money bags, calling to mind his work as a tax-collector before his call to discipleship, calling to mind also our Savior's power to transform lives. And there is much that we can learn and much benefit for our faith in Christ to be gained in our consideration of Matthew and the gift he has been to the Church—this hated tax-collector who became a devoted servant of Christ, this social pariah whom our Lord made to be His disciple, His apostle, and His evangelist.

## I

Our text, first of all, shows to us Matthew's exemplary response to our Lord's call. Even as he sits in the tax office, performing the work that made other people hate and despise him, our Savior says to him, "Follow Me!" and Matthew presents to us his own answer to Christ with these simple words, "So he arose and followed Him." It tells us much about this disciple of our Lord that this is the only mention he makes of himself in his Gospel. Matthew's emphasis instead is entirely on the One whom he was called to follow and to serve.

It also tells us a great deal about this disciple of Christ that, when he invited Jesus to dine in his house that evening, Matthew also invited to his home other tax-collectors and other people whose sins were public knowledge. It was his intention that Jesus should share His word of salvation also with these—Matthew's acquaintances and friends and colleagues who were hated and despised by the people just as he was, who were ostracized from society just as he was, and who desperately needed a Savior just as Matthew himself did. On his first day of following Jesus, Matthew was already carrying out the work to which he was called by gathering dying sinners like himself to hear the saving Gospel of the Lord's Anointed.

Although in his book about Mary's Son Matthew tells us nothing about himself because his focus is so entirely on Christ Jesus, yet we can know some things about him from his own and the other Gospels. We can know, for example, that he showed the same weaknesses as the other disciples. Matthew, too, ran away when his Master was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. Also Matthew hid in fear as Jesus offered Himself up on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for our sin. Also Matthew could not believe the message of the women on that first Easter morning that our incarnate Lord had risen in triumph, breaking death's hold over us forever.

But we can also know, both from Scripture and from the Church's traditions, some of the laudable characteristics and noteworthy deeds of this self-effacing servant of Christ. With the other disciples, Matthew received

the Holy Spirit on the first Christian Pentecost. Along with the others, Matthew proclaimed the Gospel of Christ Jesus, our crucified and risen Savior whose forgiveness and life are for all people.

A strong and reliable tradition of the early Church tells us that, after our Lord's Ascension, Matthew spent some fifteen years preaching the Gospel in Judea, proclaiming the good news of salvation to his own countrymen—precisely the people who had hated and shunned him. He did so because Christ Jesus called to this tax-collector, "Follow Me!" And Matthew followed.

## II

It is especially through the Gospel which Matthew wrote that he continues to be a blessing to the Church of Christ even today, and the message in our brief text is typical of his entire account of our Savior's life. The pompous, self-righteous Pharisees could not understand why Jesus would be in the company of such as the tax-collectors and the public sinners whom Matthew had invited to his home. To them, Jesus preaches the Law of God in its utter, sin-condemning simplicity. "I desire mercy and not sacrifice"—with these words Jesus reveals the uselessness of the superficial religiosity of these Pharisees with their emphasis on their own outward actions. Mercy toward others and not just outwardly observing ceremonies; pure love and honor for God and not just showing off their external piety in how they dressed and talked and ate; active, self-giving love for their neighbors and not their prideful scorn for others—that is what the Law of God demands.

"I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance," Jesus says. How precious those words must have been for the tax-collector Matthew! He knew all-too-well the truth which those Pharisees still needed to learn, that the Psalmist tells us plainly, "There is none righteous, no, not one!" And again the prophet Isaiah says to us, "All our (best works) are nothing but filthy rags (in the sight of our holy God)." "I have come to call sinners to repentance," Jesus says. Only in such a Savior could Matthew find hope. Only in that same Savior can you and I find hope.

Matthew's entire Gospel proclaims that hope to us. The incarnation of the Son of God in the womb of the holy Virgin; the busy life of love and mercy which He lived as our Substitute under the Law; His death on the cross for our sin; His triumphant resurrection -victory over death for our sakes; His command that we preach to and baptize all nations because His saving work is meant for all the dying like us—from first to last, Matthew's Gospel sets forth the One who came to call sinners to repentance and to offer them the salvation He came to win. From first to last, Matthew presents to us our Lord's salvation which comes to us purely as gift of His grace.

### III

We honor Matthew today, and in so doing we honor Mary's divine Son whom he served. And of course, the best way in which we can honor this apostle of Christ is to read that Gospel record which he has left us. It has been called "the most powerful book ever written;" to read it in its entirety takes only a couple of hours of our time, and yet it always rewards its readers with new understanding and new insights.

And also Matthew's Gospel shows to us this apostle's love for and his determination to serve his own people—the very people who had despised him and ostracized him—for it is clear that, from beginning to end, Matthew intended his book for Jewish readers. That is why, even more than the other Evangelists, Matthew cites so many prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures which were fulfilled by our incarnate Lord—to demonstrate to his own people that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the promised One to whom all the prophets of Israel had pointed. And just for that reason, to read Matthew's Gospel is to receive profound instruction on how we are to understand Moses and the Psalms and the Prophets.

It is in St. Matthew's Gospel that we are given the fullest version of our Savior's famous "Sermon on the Mount," that great "Charter of the Christian Life" in which we both see as in a mirror our failures to live as Christ commands us and in which we also find the pattern for living which we want to follow out of thankful faith in Him who has redeemed us from sin. It is also in Matthew's Gospel that we find the most complete version of the "Lord's Prayer"—that model of Christian petition which we use in our homes and in our worship together. And above all, when we read the Gospel of St. Matthew, we encounter again and learn more about God's incarnate Son who came to call not the righteous but sinners like you and me to repentance, so that we might find forgiveness and life in Him.

We thank the Lord of the Church for His gift to us of St. Matthew, and we pray that, for Jesus sake, the Holy Spirit would grant to each of us a firm faith in that Gospel/Word which Matthew proclaims to us. Amen.