

Call of St Matthew

After visiting Rome last summer I wrote briefly in our Parish Notes about the remarkable depiction of the call of St Matthew offered by the painter Caravaggio, in one of three frescoes which adorn the chapel of St Matthew in the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi, close to the Piazza Navona. Far better than listening to me talking about the painting is to be able to look at a reproduction, and I have placed a couple of books at the back of church which will enable you to do so after mass.

For the purposes of this sermon I simply wish to observe one thing about that painting, one thing which is literally crucial. The picture combines two sets of figures. On one side, Matthew and his companions sitting at the tax table, where money is the focus. They are a seated group of five, and they make something like a horizontal rectangle. On the other side of the painting two figures, Jesus and Peter, are standing tall: they present a strong vertical image. The horizontal group are concerned with the things of earth – eyes down, money being counted. The vertical figures are the representatives of heaven. What links the two sides is the outstretched arm of Jesus, who is pointing towards Matthew in a

gesture of serene authority. Here, Caravaggio has in mind the famous picture of the creation of Adam from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, by Michelangelo. The action and initiative are his, which fact recalls for us the Creator, but his arm is shaped in imitation of that of Adam. Jesus is the divine second Adam, the one who links heaven and earth in the incarnation.

So far so good. But of course a horizontal set against a vertical makes a familiar shape, a shape we call a cross. And sure enough, in the high window at the back of the scene, we see the perfect form of a cross, a cross which is thrown into relief by the light which streams through and catches the face of Matthew, as he points at himself and asks “who, me?” as well as glancing tangentially off the halo of Christ.

There is a clear point being made here, and it's a point which reminds us that much great Western art, laden with layers of symbolic communication, is less likely to be concealing some bizarre and exclusive secret, à la the da Vinci Code, than it is to be witnessing to the central truths of Christian teaching. On the wall opposite this fresco Caravaggio has depicted St Matthew's martyrdom, his own type of the crucifixion. The call which

Matthew receives, the life in which he is invited to walk and to learn as a true disciple, is not a magical solution to all of life's problems, or an instant entrance ticket into some sort of heavenly nightclub. The call to live out the love of Christ is nothing if it is not demanding.

On Friday, the church celebrated the feast of the Sacred Heart, a devotion which reminds us above all that the love of God is something earthy, something tangible. God is far from being aloof. The love of God in Christ is the costly, the painful and messy love which touches the leper and raises the cripple, which takes the towel and the bowl and the scorn and the betrayal, which invites the scourges and the thorns and the nail and the cross and the spear, which gasps out its very last breath. The heart of Jesus, pierced by a lance, has already been pouring its blood and its life into the arid wastes of the world which God embraces in the incarnation, bringing life where there was none. The love of God is what is ultimately creative, and it is this love which flows from God's outstretched hand, the hand which, as the artists recognised, fires the spark of life into the lifeless soul of Matthew the tax collector just as into the lifeless body of the newly created person of Adam.

Devotion to the love of Christ in all its physical reality should remind us of something else equally important. Place yourself at the foot of the cross, and at the end of Jesus's life. The fourth gospel's detail which tells us of the water and the blood which flow from the pierced side of Christ, is not simply a symbol of the sacramental life, though it is that symbol. It is also a sign that the very life of the church, the daily reality of discipleship, has its origin in that same physical, that same messy love, the tangible reality of suffering which God invites us to embrace in our Christian calling. The church is the dirty hands of Christ at work among us; it is itself a messy reality which lives with and in suffering in order to try to bring Christ to the world. To see the church as some sort of perfect communion and community of love is to grasp at, rather than to anticipate the life of heaven, a life which is, as theologians sometimes say, now but not yet, present among us but yet to be manifest. The love of God is perfect, unchanging, immovable, but it is also - in the incarnation - fleshed out in emotion, in compassion, in the living and walking and suffering alongside us by which Jesus showed us what it is that love can achieve, and to what our own loves ought to aspire. The love which breathes life into the church is no more abstract

than the people, you and me, who are enfolded into the body of Christ by the physically spiritual grace of the sacraments.

Matthew's call, then, is not a call away from the grubby world of money and greed, of self-serving and of self-concern. It is a call to enter again into that same world in a completely different way, to reverse its priorities and display something of what it means to be Christ like. It is a call to show that creation and physicality are not doomed to failure and to the triumph of self, but that the love which pours out of the wounded heart of Christ is never finally spent, though it is always and eternally being spent. That, after all, is the life of God himself: the eternal and complete giving of love which, because in the Trinity it is also received, can never be exhausted. In Caravaggio's painting, heaven and earth meet, they are shown to be brought together in the incarnation of the word. But their coming together shows nothing other than the form of the cross, the consequence of incarnate love, of daring to swim against the worldly tide, the fate of love at the hands of fear.