

The Merciful Jesus (Mark 2:13-17) – Vocation and Discipleship

Once upon a time, more than two thousand years ago, in a land far, far away, in the Middle East, there lived three young men. One of them was a tax-collector. He came from Capernaum, a town by the Sea of Galilee. Another was from a rich family; the third, the most important one, was a young carpenter from Nazareth. His name was Jesus. And thanks to him, the other two young men had the chance to change their lives forever.

Let me read out the following passage and you'll see what I mean. It's the first quotation on your sheet:

“So Jesus went out again to the lakeside, and the whole crowd came to him, and he went on teaching them. As he walked along, he saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting in the office where he collected the customs duties. He said to him, ‘Follow me!’ He rose and followed him.”

Levi, who was also known as Matthew, worked as a collector of taxes, or customs duties. This was one of the most hated professions of his day. Why? Well, because tax collectors were employed by the Romans, the foreign occupiers of first-century Palestine, who were despised by the Jews. Men like Matthew made their living by taxing their own people. No wonder they were unpopular! They also had the reputation for being dishonest, and many of them took bribes from wealthy people who wished to avoid taxes which they should have paid.

We're told that Jesus does three things: **he walks by** Matthew's place of work, at the customs office, **he looks at** Matthew, and **he speaks to him**: “Follow me”. Just two words. Yet these two words will completely transform Matthew's life.

You see, Matthew is in the very act of receiving a personal invitation by Jesus. The Church teaches us that this invitation is also extended to every one of us. One of the most famous documents of the Second Vatican Council, entitled *Lumen Gentium*, or the *Light of the Nations*, written just over 50 years ago, tells us that every human being receives a similar call. Every one of us has a calling, known as a vocation, to follow Jesus and to dedicate our lives to him. This call is specific to each of us – it is personal in nature – but it is divine, or supernatural, in origin. It’s clear from the Gospel passage I read out that Matthew has just received *his* call.

Matthew’s reaction is described so simply: “He rose and followed him”. However, this must have been far from simple. After all, Matthew is being asked to make a major life decision. He’s being asked to give up all of those indicators of success that are considered so important in our society – a good job, a comfortable lifestyle, money, status – and to place his faith and his trust in Jesus. This is how Jesus works. He enters into our world, into our daily lives, often when we least expect it, and he offers us an opportunity that has the power to transform our lives completely – if only we let it.

How must Matthew have felt at this invitation? He knew that he was hated by others because of his job. He knew that he was considered a sinner by many of his Jewish contemporaries. This resentment and rejection must have made life difficult for him. Was he defensive, was he insensitive because of this? Jesus, however, sees, beyond all of this, and he gazes at him with a look of mercy and love. Matthew must have noticed this look. Jesus was looking at him in a way that no one else had ever done – not with eyes of blame or of judgment, but with eyes filled with compassion. Jesus did not

look at him with hate, but with care. And those words of his: "Follow me". Those words must have made their way straight to Matthew's heart. Probably he had never felt such a sense of acceptance, of understanding before. For a moment, he must have thought: "Why me? I can't change.. I have my own plans for my life.. What will other people say?" But those same protests must have been replaced by something deep within him that said "yes", that welcomed the invitation to follow Jesus. And so Matthew, who has been sitting down, now stands up. He is ready and alert. He says yes to Jesus, and his life changes forever. In fact, this call was so important to him that when Matthew came to write his own Gospel, or Good News of Jesus, he included a short autobiographical note in which he briefly described this very moment when Jesus entered his life.

Now compare this scene with another passage – also in Mark's Gospel – where Jesus again meets a young man, this time from a wealthy and influential family. It's the second quotation on your sheet:

"As Jesus was going along the road, a man came running to him and threw himself at his feet and asked him, 'Good teacher, what am I to do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him ... You know the commandments. You must not kill, you must not commit adultery, you must not steal, you must not bear false witness, you must not defraud anyone, you must honour your father and mother.' He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these from my youth.' When Jesus looked at him he loved him, and he said to him, 'You still lack one thing. Go, sell all that you have, and give it to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. And come! Follow me!' But the young man was grieved at this saying, and he went away sad, because he had many possessions."

Again, in this passage, we have the young carpenter from Nazareth encountering another young man. And how is this youngster? Well, he's polite – he refers to Jesus as 'Rabbi', 'Teacher'. Clearly, he has been brought up well by his family, who have great expectations for him. He is a good,

honest, decent young man – he keeps the commandments. In fact, so far he seems to be a better person than Matthew, our young tax-collector. So what is the fundamental difference between them? Well, in this encounter, the wealthy young man is unable to accept the invitation that Jesus makes to him. He doesn't get up and follow him. Why? Because Jesus asks him to sell all he has and to give the money to the poor. In other words, Jesus is asking him to let go of all that he holds dear, of all that he thinks is so important, and to become a disciple. What is it that prevents this young man from doing so? He lacks the necessary courage, he lacks the generosity of spirit, the trust that is necessary to say 'yes' to Jesus. He is so obsessed with his own possessions that he cannot free himself from them. They have become the most important thing in his life. And then we're told something else, something very significant. We're told how it feels when we say 'no' to Jesus. The rich young man goes away sad – he's sad because he is unable to accept the call to discipleship, the invitation to be a follower of Christ. Ultimately, he knows that he has made the wrong choice. He has turned his back on the possibility of transforming his life in Jesus. And we never hear about him again. How many people do we know who are searching for the answers to the deepest questions in life, who are looking for something more, something greater? How many people do we know who are unable to accept Jesus' invitation? Is there anything that we can do about this?

Jesus is calling each one of us to fulfil our own lives, to fulfil the plan that he has for every one of us. To be his disciples, to share in the adventure of the Gospel Story, of sharing our lives with him. In order to do this we have to have courage and faith. It may seem scary, it may seem impossible to us, but to God, nothing is impossible. And if we accept the offer to follow him, the gifts, the graces, that Jesus will offer us are more than all the wealth, all

the power, all the success that we could possibly imagine. This morning, every single one of us is like Matthew, that tax collector. Like Matthew, we're not perfect – we all have our faults. Yet Jesus sees the good in us, he sees what we can become, he sees that underneath our hard, stony exteriors, we have the potential to be masterpieces, and he calls each one of us to follow him. How will we choose to respond?

This is something that Pope Francis understands very well, because he himself experienced this call in a very vivid way, thanks to an important event that took place in his early life. In 1953, on the feast of Saint Matthew, the young Jorge Bergoglio, not yet 17, felt, in a very special and intimate way, the loving presence of God in his life. He went to the Sacrament of Confession and felt his heart touched by the mercy of God. It changed his life. At that moment, he also felt God's call to the priesthood and religious life as a Jesuit.

The young Jorge Bergoglio felt the tender gaze of God's love, His mercy, and his vocation. In an interview, Pope Francis spoke of that event in these words: "In that confession, something very rare happened to me. I don't know what it was, but it changed my life. I would say that I was caught with my guard down... It was a surprise, the astonishment of an encounter. I realized that God was waiting for me. From that moment, for me, God has been the one who precedes (to guide me)... We want to meet Him, but He meets us first."

Just as Jesus had summoned Matthew to become His apostle, Jesus called the teenage Jorge Bergoglio to be His disciple. Pope Francis once said: "I believe in my history — which was pierced by God's look of love, on

September 21, the feast of Saint Matthew — He came to meet me and invited me to follow Him.” That vocational encounter and piercing look of God’s merciful love has influenced Pope Francis’ life and ministry. The gaze of Jesus completely overtook the tax collector and sinner Matthew. It changed his life. It changed Jorge Bergoglio’s life. It changes our life. Pope Francis says: “Jesus’ gaze always lifts us up. It is a look that always lifts us up... never lets us down... It invites us to get up... to move forward. The gaze makes you feel that He loves you. This gives the courage to follow Him. And “Matthew got up and followed Him’.”

When he visited Rome prior to becoming Pope, Jorge Bergoglio always stayed in the neighborhood of the French national Church of San Luigi dei Francesi. There, in a side chapel, are three paintings by the famous early 17th century artist Caravaggio. Bergoglio would often go to the church to look at and reflect on the famous painting of “The Calling of Saint Matthew” by Caravaggio. In the painting, Jesus is pointing at Matthew. Matthew is holding on to his money as if to say “No, not me! No, this money is mine.” Pope Francis says he sees himself in Matthew – a sinner on whom the Lord turned His gaze. He trusted in Christ’s infinite mercy and accepted His calling: to become a Jesuit, a priest, a bishop, and pope.

I’d like to conclude this short talk with the following words of Pope Francis. At the close of the 2013 World Youth Day in Brazil, more than 3.7 million young people attended the final Mass with Pope Francis on Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro. During that Mass, Pope Francis told everyone that the call to discipleship requires an openness to the will of God, and a desire to give oneself selflessly and heroically. I’ll leave you with the words of

Pope Francis, words that are addressed to each and every one of us here this morning:

“Dear young friends, Jesus is calling you to be a disciple with a mission! What is the Lord saying to us? Three simple ideas: Go, do not be afraid, and serve... Do not be afraid to say ‘yes’ to Jesus. Do not be afraid to be generous with Christ, to bear witness to his Gospel... Bringing the Gospel is bringing God’s power to pluck up and break down evil and violence, to destroy and overthrow barriers of selfishness, intolerance and hatred, so as to build a new world. Dear young friends, Jesus Christ is counting on you! The Church is counting on you! The Pope is counting on you! May Mary, Mother of Jesus and our Mother, always accompany you with her tenderness: ‘Go and make disciples of all nations’. Amen.”