



Retreat Homily at Mass 20th February 2026 in Honiton by Fr Robbie Low

Luke 5 v 27-32 The Call of Matthew

In the Baroque extravaganza that is the church of St Louis of the French in Rome, there is always a large huddle of tourists at the far end of the north aisle. They are not queueing for a glimpse of the relics of Louis, whose death from dysentery in the marshlands of North Africa on another failed crusade could not be more at odds with the theatrical glamour of his chapel. Nor are they particularly interested in the Maid of Orleans' brave cry in betrayal and terminal adversity, 'I am not afraid. I was born for this.'

No, they are jostling for a glimpse of the Tryptich of the life of St Matthew by the great Caravaggio. Caravaggio illustrates Matthew as, one ear cocked to Heaven, he is writing at his desk the Gospel that will bear his name.

In the final one we are treated to a scene of his martyrdom, the cruelty of his enthusiastic torturers pulsating with demonic energy and Satanic fury.

All this is a long way from the counting house where we encounter Matthew just at the moment of Jesus' call.

There is, in his young face, both confusion and incredulity. With one hand on the money and his eyes fixed on Jesus, he seems to be asking the question, 'Is it me you are calling Lord?' If you knew who I was, what I am, you would not be calling me. There is both dilemma and imminent resolution.

That the Christ of God should be standing in the house of a sinner, a traitor to his people, a collaborator with an occupying power, an extortioner of his own people, is remarkable and deeply shocking.

There is little doubt that Matthew will have heard of Jesus. Has the Messiah truly come? Where does that leave me? Can I possibly leave this life behind, this existence of corruption and betrayal? All these things will be going round and round in his Head.

And then, suddenly, He is there. And, shockingly, calling me of all people, Matthew, the least deserving, the farthest away, the alienated, the pariah, to join Him.

(We may recognize the internal debate here).

Then, like the other Apostles before Him, Matthew is up and after Jesus. His celebration is a party at his house and he invites all the worst of the block, his fellow tax collectors and other reprobates. Matthew's first job was to evangelise his fellow workers and sinners and indeed his fellow

Of course, had Jesus been a serious holy man He would have recognised what He was dealing with here and not gone anywhere near this crowd of moral hooligans? How come He didn't recognise this bunch of collaborators for what they were?

The Pharisees and the Scribes are quick to point all this out. Which brings the beautiful and stinging rebuke from Jesus.

'Those who are well don't need a doctor. The sick need a doctor. I have not come to call the Virtuous to Repentance. I have come to call sinners to repentance.'

And here Our Lord delivers the ultimate 'slapdown' of the self-righteous.

As St John puts it later on,

'If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.'

As Jesus later puts it

The ninety nine righteous souls have no need of His forgiveness.

BUT

There is more joy over one sinner who repents than over the ninety nine people who do not need to repent -whoever they may be....

If I was a Pharisee I would want to cringe at that moment. Am I perfect?

Of course not.

Elsewhere Jesus tells us that there is more joy in Heaven over one sinner that repents than over the 99 who are self -assessed perfect.

The lies we tell about ourselves keep us from the mercy of God.

The honest truth is that we don't deserve to be called but He has called us anyway.

So we leave the fruits of our sin on the counting house table and set out to follow Jesus.

It is thenceforth our duty and our joy to celebrate this extraordinary mercy and divine generosity by holding a party at our place and inviting other unlikely candidates to dine with Jesus. We call this the Mass.