

St Matthew: Apostle, Evangelist, and Martyr



The first book in the New Testament is called the “Gospel according to St. Matthew.” It is often the first book that people try reading in the Bible, since it seems at first to be simple. Certainly, we are trained to begin reading at the beginning, so to start reading at the Gospel of St. Matthew seems logical. But it isn’t. It is a difficult book to understand and is written from a point of view that is not normally ours. So, for us in the 21st century, it causes difficulties.

For example, the Gospel starts with the story of the Birth of Jesus our Lord—and it is interesting, of course—but it is not the usual kind of Birth Story. It is the only story of the Birth of a Child that you will ever read that includes the (foster) father, the Inn Keeper, the Leader of the country, three Wise Men, and only mentions the mother (Mary) in passing. Which gives you an idea about St. Matthew—in our terms, he is a male chauvinist, and a typical Jewish male of his day.

We can go on into the Gospel and note that St. Matthew likes things in threes—so if there are stories about coins, he gives three stories; if there are stories of healing, he gives three stories. If there happens to be a fourth story, he leaves it out. Because he likes things in threes. Not that there is something spiritual about it—St. Matthew just likes to write that way.

He does give us a very detailed story of the Passion of Jesus and includes details that St. Mark leaves out. In fact, St. Matthew was writing his Gospel about the year 75AD, and presumably he had a copy of the Gospel of St. Mark beside him when he was writing. We can deduce that because he copies stories verbatim from St. Mark’s Gospel into his own Gospel, often summarizing them; and then he adds his own stories to those of St. Mark. It makes it very much more interesting.

St. Matthew was a Tax Collector before he became an Apostle and Evangelist. (He is called Levi in the Gospels of St. Mark and St. Luke, but he is the same person). There he sat at his Table, probably at a City Gate in Capernaum, collecting sales taxes from the sellers and the buyers. Because of his job, he was not particularly liked by others; let’s face it, St. Matthew was collecting taxes for the hated Roman government, not for the Jewish people. And no one likes paying taxes. So, Matthew was excluded from the synagogue, and from Jewish society.

And then one day, Jesus came by. He stopped in front of the Tax Table where St. Matthew was sitting, and said quietly: “Matthew, come and follow me.” It was a stunning invitation; Jesus had invited a person who was disliked by the people, usually shunned, and

avoided. It is doubtful if Matthew would ever be allowed to attend a synagogue—his job was regarded as sinful and obnoxious. But probably because of that, I'm sure that Matthew had gone along with others excluded from Jewish religious life, to listen to Jesus. And he had seen in Jesus a picture of the love of God. He was attracted at the deepest level, like never before. Jesus was truly holy. Matthew wanted Jesus.

So, when Jesus said: "Matthew, come and follow me," he knew that it was THE turning point in his life. Matthew stood up, closed his books, stepped out from behind the Table, and followed Jesus.

In doing that, St. Matthew left everything. He left his job, his home, his friends, his dreams, his security, his everything. He took only one thing—his pen. And thank God he did, because many years later, St. Matthew was to sit at another Table, a writing Table, to copy down everything that he had learned from Jesus—and later generations, millions, and millions of Christians, have read what he wrote—the stories, the teachings, the healings, and his love of the Saviour. Without St. Matthew's pen, we would be the poorer in our understand of Jesus.

Not that St. Matthew was good and righteous from the beginning. Jesus did not call a Saint, but a man who could become a saint over time. And Matthew knew he needed transformation—he wanted to be better, he wanted Jesus. That night, he invited Jesus to his home, along with his new disciples, to celebrate his new freedom with a dinner. Naturally, others were there—and the pharisees complained that Jesus would eat at the home of an obviously sinful man. That is what inspired Jesus to say: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." "I did not come to call the righteous, but the sinners..." And Matthew knew that he had been called—he wanted transformation—this was his chance to learn to walk with God.

Do you want Jesus that much? Do you want Jesus more than your job? more than your lifestyle? more than anyone else in the world? If you do, then Jesus is inviting you today—invite Jesus into your life and He will come and dine with you. At mass this morning, you can come to the Altar, kneel before Him, reach out your hands, and receive the Body and Blood of the Lord into your life. He is inviting you this morning, so come as He calls. Join us all as we are fed with the Blessed Sacrament for our salvation. Come and dine with Jesus as St. Matthew did so long ago.

And then, fed with His Body and Blood, cleansed by his forgiveness, and armed with His Love, head back into the world, to walk each day this week with Him. Let His Love embrace you. Let His Healing rebuild you. Do what St. Matthew did many years ago—Come and follow Jesus—into Eternal Life

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.