

November 16: St. Matthew the Evangelist

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Any reference to the Apostle St. Matthew, author of the first book of the New Testament, is made with such solemnity and reverence that speaking of him as a man seems almost sacrilegious, so close to the divine is he considered. But when Jesus came upon Matthew, he was a man who could scarcely be viewed with little but contempt by the human eye; the divine sight of Christ, however, saw in this man which He beckoned to His service that spark of greatness invisible to the rest of the world. It is doubtful that Matthew himself was aware of what lay dormant in him that was to place him in the forefront of Christianity.



Matthew was a native of Cana, the scene of the wedding feast at which Jesus performed his first miracle of changing the water to wine. He became a tax collector for the Roman government, a position that has endeared no one to the tax-payer at any time in history, but which in the time of Christ, when the populace was taxed to excess, was deemed second in unpopularity only to the executioner.

Jesus was travelling on the Mediterranean Damascus road when he came upon Matthew who was stationed there in his inglorious pursuit. Standing at a lake near the city of Capernaum, Matthew's gaze met the Lord's and Jesus spoke to him, uttering only two words: «Follow me.»

Thus, in most unceremonious fashion did the divinity of Christ assert itself and an overwhelmed Matthew took up the cause of Christ without any reply. He was no doubt so overcome with emotion at the majestic power of Jesus that he could not speak, but the communication between them was clear and Matthew felt a resurgence of the spirit within him and came to know the tranquillity that emanates from God.

The service of St. Matthew is familiar to all who call themselves Christian. His close association with Jesus tends to obscure the man who shed the ignominious role of tax collector to become the most intellectual of the twelve Apostles chosen by the Lord. The awesome task of carrying the word of Christ to a people oppressed for centuries and suspicious of any newcomer was assumed by St. Matthew with a determination that could not be denied. If the fifteenth century civilization could laugh at Columbus who said the world was round, what did they say to Matthew fifteen hundred years earlier when he declared that Jesus was the Son of God. In simple terms, it wasn't easy. Matthew says it in Chapter 10: 16 when he quotes Jesus as saying to his disciples: «Behold, I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves.»

After the crucifixion of Christ and His Resurrection, the inspiration of the Master was reaffirmed with renewed vigor at Pentecost when all the Apostles were enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Christianity owes its existence to the indomitable will and courage of the Apostles, who surmounted great obstacles of disbelief, superstition, distrust and open hostility in spreading the gospel. There was no mass media, only the word of mouth and the weary foot travel from village to village. Christianity is the greatest single achievement in the history of mankind and to St. Matthew and his ten comrades goes the credit for having successfully spread the worship of Jesus Christ.

Matthew preached the Gospel for many years after the death of Christ, travelling throughout the Holy Land and finally meeting a martyr's death at the hands of pagans in Ethiopia. His final verse is his epitaph. «Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.» The feast day of St. Matthew is observed on November 16.

From: George Poulos, *Orthodox saints*, Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, c 1976.

About the Gospel

Matthew was a Hebrew, whose calling in life was that of a tax gatherer under the Roman government. His writing evidences his acquaintance with the Hebrew Scriptures and especially with those which foretold the coming of the Messiah King. Thus, both in his religious thinking and in the prosecution of his daily calling he was familiar with the idea of government.

His story of the life and work of Jesus is naturally therefore a setting forth of the King and his Kingdom. The book falls into three parts. In the first Matthew introduces the Person (i.-iv. 16); in the second he tells the story of the Propaganda (iv. 17-xvi. 20); and in the last chronicles the events of the Passion (xvi. 21.-xxviii)._

From: G. Campbell Morgan, *The analysed Bible*, London._

Excerpts from the Gospel of Matthew

True happiness

“Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor;

the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!

“Happy are those who mourn;

God will comfort them!

“Happy are the meek;

They will receive what God has promised!

“Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires;

God will satisfy them fully!

“Happy are those who are merciful to others;

God will be merciful to them!

“Happy are the pure in heart;

They will see God!

“Happy are those who work for peace among men;

God will call them sons!

“Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires;

The Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!

Teaching about Anger

“You have heard that men were told in the past, *Do not murder; anyone who commits murder will be brought before the judge*. But now I tell you; whoever is angry with his brother will be brought before the judge; whoever calls his brother *You good-for-nothing!* Will be brought before the Council; and whoever calls his brother a worthless fool will be in danger of going to the fire of hell. So if you are about to offer you gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar and go at once to make peace with your brother; then come back and offer your gift to God.

If a man brings a lawsuit against you and takes you to court, be friendly with him while there is time, before you get to court; once you are there he will turn you over to the judge, who will hand you over to the police, and you will be put in jail. There you will stay I tell you, until you pay the last penny of your fine”.

Teaching about Divorce

“ It was also said *Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a written notice of divorce*. But now I tell you: if a man divorces his wife and she has not been unfaithful, then he is guilty of making her commit adultery if she marries again; and the man who marries her also commits adultery.”

Love for Enemies

“You have heard that it was said, *Love your friends, hate your enemies*. But now I tell you: love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you will become the sons of your Father in heaven. For he makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike and gives rain to those who do good and those who do evil. Why should God reward you if you love only the people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that! And if you speak only to your friends, have you done anything

out of the ordinary? Even the pagans do that! You must be perfect-just as your Father heaven is perfect.”

The light of the Body

“The eyes are like a lamp of the body. If your eyes are clear, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eyes are bad, your body will be in darkness. So if the light in you is darkness, how terribly dark it will be!”

Judging Others

“Do not judge others, so that God will not judge you-because God will judge you in the same way you judge others, and he will apply to you the same rules you apply to others. Why then, do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, and pay no attention to the log in your own eye? How dare you say to your brother, *Please, let me take that speck out of your eye*, when you have a log in your own eye? You hypocrite! Take the log out of your own eye first, and then you will be able to see and take the speck out of your brother’s eye.

Do not give what is holy to dogs-they will only turn and attack you; don’t throw your pearls in front of pigs-they will only trample them underfoot.”