



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Paul VI Audience Hall  
Wednesday, 30 August 2006*

### **Matthew**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Continuing the series of portraits of the Twelve Apostles that we began a few weeks ago, let us reflect today on Matthew. To tell the truth, it is almost impossible to paint a complete picture of him because the information we have of him is scarce and fragmentary. What we can do, however, is to outline not so much his biography as, rather, the profile of him that the Gospel conveys.

In the meantime, he always appears in the lists of the Twelve chosen by Jesus (cf. Mt 10: 3; Mk 3: 18; Lk 6: 15; Acts 1: 13).

His name in Hebrew means "gift of God". The first canonical Gospel, which goes under his name, presents him to us in the list of the Twelve, labelled very precisely: "the tax collector" (Mt 10: 3).

Thus, Matthew is identified with the man sitting at the tax office whom Jesus calls to follow him: "As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office; and he said to him, "Follow me'. And he rose and followed him" (Mt 9: 9). Mark (cf. 2: 13-17) and Luke (cf. 5: 27-30), also tell of the calling of the man sitting at the tax office, but they call him "Levi".

To imagine the scene described in Mt 9: 9, it suffices to recall Caravaggio's magnificent canvas, kept here in Rome at the Church of St Louis of the French.

A further biographical detail emerges from the Gospels: in the passage that immediately precedes the account of the call, a miracle that Jesus worked at Capernaum is mentioned (cf. Mt 9: 1-8; Mk 2: 1-12) and the proximity to the Sea of Galilee, that is, the Lake of Tiberias (cf. Mk 2: 13-14).

It is possible to deduce from this that Matthew exercised the function of tax collector at Capernaum, which was exactly located "by the sea" (Mt 4: 13), where Jesus was a permanent guest at Peter's house.

On the basis of these simple observations that result from the Gospel, we can advance a pair of thoughts.

The first is that Jesus welcomes into the group of his close friends a man who, according to the concepts in vogue in Israel at that time, was regarded as a public sinner.

Matthew, in fact, not only handled money deemed impure because of its provenance from people foreign to the People of God, but he also collaborated with an alien and despicably greedy authority whose tributes moreover, could be arbitrarily determined.

This is why the Gospels several times link "tax collectors and sinners" (Mt 9: 10; Lk 15: 1), as well as "tax collectors and prostitutes" (Mt 21: 31).

Furthermore, they see publicans as an example of miserliness (cf. Mt 5: 46: they only like those who like them), and mention one of them, Zacchaeus, as "a chief tax collector, and rich" (Lk 19: 2), whereas popular opinion associated them with "extortioners, the unjust, adulterers" (Lk 18: 11).

A first fact strikes one based on these references: Jesus does not exclude anyone from his friendship. Indeed, precisely while he is at table in the home of Matthew-Levi, in response to those who expressed shock at the fact that he associated with people who had so little to recommend them, he made the important statement: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mk 2: 17).

The good news of the Gospel consists precisely in this: offering God's grace to the sinner!

Elsewhere, with the famous words of the Pharisee and the publican who went up to the Temple to pray, Jesus actually indicates an anonymous tax collector as an appreciated example of humble trust in divine mercy: while the Pharisee is boasting of his own moral perfection, the "tax collector... would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"".

And Jesus comments: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk

18: 13-14).

Thus, in the figure of Matthew, the Gospels present to us a true and proper paradox: those who seem to be the farthest from holiness can even become a model of the acceptance of God's mercy and offer a glimpse of its marvellous effects in their own lives.

St John Chrysostom makes an important point in this regard: he notes that only in the account of certain calls is the work of those concerned mentioned. Peter, Andrew, James and John are called while they are fishing, while Matthew, while he is collecting tithes.

These are unimportant jobs, Chrysostom comments, "because there is nothing more despicable than the tax collector, and nothing more common than fishing" (*In Matth. Hom.: PL 57, 363*). Jesus' call, therefore, also reaches people of a low social class while they go about their ordinary work.

Another reflection prompted by the Gospel narrative is that Matthew responds instantly to Jesus' call: "he rose and followed him". The brevity of the sentence clearly highlights Matthew's readiness in responding to the call. For him it meant leaving everything, especially what guaranteed him a reliable source of income, even if it was often unfair and dishonourable. Evidently, Matthew understood that familiarity with Jesus did not permit him to pursue activities of which God disapproved.

The application to the present day is easy to see: it is not permissible today either to be attached to things that are incompatible with the following of Jesus, as is the case with riches dishonestly achieved.

Jesus once said, mincing no words: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Mt 19: 21).

This is exactly what Matthew did: he rose and followed him! In this "he rose", it is legitimate to read detachment from a sinful situation and at the same time, a conscious attachment to a new, upright life in communion with Jesus.

Lastly, let us remember that the tradition of the ancient Church agrees in attributing to Matthew the paternity of the First Gospel. This had already begun with Bishop Papias of Hierapolis in Frisia, in about the year 130.

He writes: "Matthew set down the words (of the Lord) in the Hebrew tongue and everyone interpreted them as best he could" (in Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. Eccl.* III, 39, 16).

Eusebius, the historian, adds this piece of information: "When Matthew, who had first preached

among the Jews, decided also to reach out to other peoples, he wrote down the Gospel he preached in his mother tongue; thus, he sought to put in writing, for those whom he was leaving, what they would be losing with his departure" (*ibid.*, III, 24, 6).

The Gospel of Matthew written in Hebrew or Aramaic is no longer extant, but in the Greek Gospel that we possess we still continue to hear, in a certain way, the persuasive voice of the publican Matthew, who, having become an Apostle, continues to proclaim God's saving mercy to us. And let us listen to St Matthew's message, meditating upon it ever anew also to learn to stand up and follow Jesus with determination.

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### *To special groups*

I am pleased to greet all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, including the group of altar servers from Malta and the visitors from Denmark, Japan and Australia. May God give you the grace to deepen your love of Christ and his Church, inspired by St Matthew. I wish you all a blessed stay in Rome!

Lastly, my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. May the heroic example of St John the Baptist, whose martyrdom we celebrated yesterday, be for you, dear *young people*, an incentive to plan your lives in full fidelity to Christ; may it help you, dear *sick people*, to face suffering with courage, finding serenity and comfort in the Lord; may it lead you, dear *newly-weds*, to witness to sincere love for God, to one another and to your neighbour.

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