



14 February 2010  
Quinquagesima  
Choral Evensong  
Ezekiel 33 vv. 10–16  
Matthew 9 vv. 9–13

## Images of Christ



**Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610):**  
**The Calling of Matthew**  
By The Rev'd Grant Bayliss

I remember vividly the first time I saw tonight's image of Christ. It was two years ago on a Chapel pilgrimage I was leading to Rome. I'd taken a little time out by myself and was wandering around the churches of the city centre – from Bernini's to Michelangelo's, every corner held some great art-work and if truth be told, I'd more or less reached saturation point. Then I stumbled into a fairly unassuming church – well as unassuming as you get in the *centro storico*, where every building has a stunning façade. The French Church, dedicated to San Luigi dei Francesi, better known to us as Louis IX. It had a nice ceiling, an impressive altar-piece but what caught my attention was a sudden burst of light from a little chapel on the left as a tourist popped in a euro to turn on a lamp. Suddenly revealed was this amazing work of darkness and light and a hand, a hand that pointed, that called, that challenged.

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Confronted with this amazingly bold image, one of three by Caravaggio painted to decorate the Chapel of Cardinal Matteo Contarelli, I stood transfixed. It spoke right to the heart of me as only a few great masterpieces can.

As many of you know, I seem to spend my life dashing from place to place and that day had been no exception. But here in this little French Italian Church, I was brought to a halt, caught in a frozen moment of revelation and prayer, just like the scene Caravaggio so dramatically captured.

I'm afraid I can't pretend to any great artistic knowledge, so I won't speak of Caravaggio's control of *chiaroscuro* or the realistic style so far removed from the idealization of the High Renaissance. I'll say nothing of the scandal provoked among the clergy of the day, who found the piece heretically mundane. We'll pass over in silence his biography and the way this work made his reputation. Instead I want to invite you to come to this image of Christ as prayer and read it theologically. Caravaggio may not have had any formal philosophical training but in this and indeed so many of his paintings, he speaks of God, he does theology with his brushes, with his composition, with his vivid re-imagining of this brief Gospel passage.

Perhaps the first thing to notice is what held me back in Rome. The way Caravaggio seems to completely stop time. Of course a painted image is fixed, must necessarily be a frozen moment in a narrative or landscape, and yet there's something more here. A stillness. A pause. A moment of decision.

It is not that this is a tranquil scene, we can see the liveliness of the tax collectors' den, the money, the swords, the mixed reactions. It is not peaceful but rather busy-ness interrupted. Nor does it last, if you look at Jesus' feet in the bottom corner, you'll see he's already turning to leave. No sooner has he come than he's gone. The painting is of a moment, a choice, a fleeting instant where worlds collide and Levi must choose whether he is to remain Levi the Tax Collector or become Matthew the Apostle.

We see him seated at the table, an older man, his finger pointing at himself in surprise, "Who me?" The light of Christ has burst into this place and suddenly it is split in two, light and dark, written beautifully across the painting and in its centre Jesus' hand reaching out, dividing the two, offering a choice. Levi must decide and he must decide now, before Christ has gone.

Caravaggio captures brilliantly the urgency of the choice Christ offers and its weightiness. But his theological insights don't stop there.

What of the figure of Jesus himself? Well he's curiously out of frame, almost hidden in the darkness. His hand is a focal point but the rest of him almost slips away into obscurity. When Stephen our Chapel Clerk first printed it out in a somewhat darker version, I said "Oh that's a shame, you can't really see Jesus' feet" and he replied, "Well, where is Jesus?" This says something powerful about revelation and our ability to respond to God in Christ. The light and dark make the moment seem significant, powerful but the working of God in it all is subtle, tricky to discern, off-centre, brief. And most experience of God is like this, we are not overwhelmed with the dazzling pomp and ceremony of choirs of angels, it's the still small voice speaking through the everyday.

And of course, Caravaggio has made this his everyday. Jesus and St Peter may still be garbed in his best guess at first century Palestinian cloaks but the room, the tax collectors, these are the bad boys of sixteenth century Rome. They could be picked up and transplanted straight into one of his secular paintings like 'The Card Sharps'.

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There is a grim and gritty realism of the day. A contemporary re-imagining. It's a key feature of Ignatian prayer, the Jesuit Catholic theology which grew up in the first half of the sixteenth century and called on people to imagine themselves in the Bible stories; that the Word of God does not speak to us purely as letters from across the mists of time but in these prayerful moments of encounter that bring us and the Scriptures, our world and that of Jesus, together as one. Much to the horror of many Vatican clergy, Caravaggio brought this spiritual discipline to life in the grittiest fashion. Today Caravaggio might have picked a seedy back-room at a fight club or a Las Vegas casino – the sort of place that respectable priests and Johnians alike I'm sure would have no experience of. The tax collectors of the Gospels were not like today's Inland Revenue but rather collaborators, thugs and thieves. Rich businessmen who could pay huge sums up-front and buy the tax farming contracts from the imperial government and then had no qualms about squeezing many times what they were owed out of the local villagers and townspeople. And here Caravaggio paints the sixteenth-century equivalent, all in their finery, swords casually displayed, money flamboyantly spilling across the table. This was not a safe place, not a good place, this was the immoral margin of his own day, even more so than the tax collector's office mentioned so briefly in our Gospel.

Our image of Christ does not just tell us of Matthew's calling but of all calling. Christ is the one fixed point, the brute historical fact which is not reinterpreted but rather comes again and again into renewed relationship with his people.

So what's the impact of this moment of encounter, this subtle slipping in of the divine presence made incarnate in a particular first-century Galilean Jew? Well, as we move round the table, Caravaggio fills out the Gospel account with a whole range of responses, there are the indifferent, those whose heads never even lift up to notice Christ was there. Eyes fixed on money. There is the younger man who shies away, who is disturbed and made uncomfortable. Then there is the aggressive response, reaching for his sword, whether through fear or confusion or hatred of what he sees, that first instinct to lash out, to destroy and St Peter seems to be there calming him, steadying him back. Maybe Caravaggio's Apostle has already learned the lesson of Gethsemane when *he* was the hot-blooded young man with a sword, lashing out at the ear of a slave, before being shown by his Master that this was not the way, could never be the way, hatred even of evil could never bring about the good.

Only Levi, soon to become Matthew, responds positively and even his first response is one of incredulity. "Who me?" It is a phrase I hear often from those exploring vocation to ordained ministry. They cannot quite understand why God seems to be so persistently calling them, with all their faults and weaknesses, surely he should call someone wiser, more popular, more loving. But no, God calls us from where we are. Jesus goes to tax collectors and prostitutes, he chooses fishermen to be his right hand men.

There seems little question that the older man is in fact Matthew (the namesake of Caravaggio's patron) but when you see this painting in real life, he is the less interesting figure. Our eye is pulled rather to the young man at the end of the table. The one lost in his ill-gotten gains. And I felt then, as I feel now, that this is the one Caravaggio himself identified with – not the one who did respond, not the one who became the Apostle, the cardinal, the man of the Church but rather the handsome young wastrel whose fate remains unknown, unimagined. Will he too arise and follow Christ or is he doomed to remain a sinner, to look up too late and find Christ already gone?

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And this brings me back to where we started, to that remarkable hand, which held me transfixed when it first appeared out of the darkness. A gesture hauntingly familiar to art-lovers the world over. A composition surely stolen from the roof of the Cistine Chapel, Michelangelo's famous painting of creation. God reaching out to Adam. Here now in this moment of calling, this instant of decision, when the world stands still and the choice between light and darkness hangs in the balance, what Jesus offers is not just a summons to a more moral life but an invitation to new creation, new identity. This is the theology of the eighth day, of resurrection and calling as mirroring and fulfilling the new first day of the week. Levi is Adam to be made anew, given a fresh identity.

Caravaggio of course didn't know of the modern exegetical interpretations which suggest Levi and Matthew were two different tax collectors altogether. His theology is that which tied them together, that saw a man renamed in his calling, as he was made anew for a new purpose, Simon become Peter, Abram become Abraham, Jacob become Israel and now Levi become Matthew.

As yet the picture is incomplete. Levi's hand does not yet reach back to his God as Adam's does closing the gap between the transcendent and the immanent. It still points at himself, still hesitates. But we know how it will end. He will get up and follow him, as our Gospel said so briefly. He will arise, respond, reach out and then he will be made a new creation – precisely because he attended to the elusive, subtle call of God in the midst of the everyday. But my prayers that day in Rome went out to the downcast young man at the end of the table, would he too look up, reach out, arise and be made anew? Or would it be too late?

I can't say much about Caravaggio the painter, he seems pretty good to me but Caravaggio the Theologian well he's an impressive individual. And in his theology of revelation, of response, of choice, of new creation, he has much to teach us and much to ask us. Where do we sit at the table? How will we respond? What will we choose? Matthew "arose and followed Christ" but will we?