

Matthew The Gift of God

Sermon on Sunday Septuagesimä Matthew 9, 9-13



⁹ And as Jesus was going away from there, he saw a man sitting at the tax office, whose name was Matthew; and he said to him: Follow me! And he got up and followed him. ¹⁰ And it came to pass as he sat at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat at table with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² When Jesus heard this, he said, It is not the strong who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go

and learn what that means (Hos 6:6): "I want mercy, and not sacrifice." I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

Matthew was a gift from God. At least that's the Hebrew meaning of his name. Perhaps some people around him thought that Matthew lived up to his name. Because he was rich. And he was an important link between the Roman state and the Jewish people. His chair was at the city's eye of the needle. No one entered or left the city without presenting themselves to Matthew. And of course that wasn't possible without money. Matthew, the gift of God, had answered the call of money. And he got his reward. He got rich...very rich. And very strong. But Matthew paid for all this at a very high price. As a tax collector, he was outside the Jewish community. It was clear to most people that one like him would face hellish torments for eternity. And because of that, most people found him repulsive, ugly, and unfair. That's what they thought, even if they smiled politely at him to negotiate a lower price. Gradually, therefore, Matthew felt himself to be an uninvolved spectator of his own life. He was playing a role in which he was no longer in control. His life went by without him and he was exposed to forces that defined his entire life. And he couldn't do anything about it. As a student, he had once learned from his teacher what justice was. At the time, the teacher explained, "Justice is like a relationship. In every relationship there is give and take." And so it is a duty of every human being to submit to the circumstances. As an individual you had no choice. You had to obey the laws of God, then God would bless you. You also had to obey the laws of the people, then the people would offer you protection and security. That made no sense to Matthew. He observed the life of his poor parents. They faithfully submitted to the laws of Moses. And yet they remained miserable and on the brink of starvation. They also had to give the last penny to the customs officers. Matthew thought that justice was out of joint. It didn't work anymore. At least not for him. So he had to create his own justice. He had to grab the world by the collar and get everything that could be gotten out of it, otherwise he would get crushed. And that is exactly what Matthew did. He excelled in maneuvering himself to the top floor in diplomatic negotiations and became strong and influential. A gift from God to the world. And yet he knew himself to be forever cast out from society. He wasn't part of it. Nor was he part of God's justice. And the longer the more he thought that this price was too high. What good would wealth and strength do for him if he were not human?

That all changed when Jesus came and met Matthew. In the first sentence it was already clear that Jesus was different from everyone else. It all started with the fact that Jesus did not see a tax collector sitting at the table, but a human being. For most Jews, a tax collector was not a person, but the dregs of society. But Jesus saw him differently. He only saw a person. The very look that Jesus gave these people revealed everything. Matthew had endured and endured many looks. He had scowls, dismissive looks, and hurtful looks. They say looks can kill. They are like knife stabs penetrating the soul. Matthew was one of those who was punctured and hurt by many such looks.

He was hurt and hurt in his soul. And yet he wanted to live. His soul wanted to live. As Jesus looked at him, something flashed within him. A look that revealed: I can be here! Here I am accepted! It doesn't matter here whether I'm rich, poor, strong or weak. Here I am only allowed to be the person "Matthew - God's gift ". What the look of Jesus showed can be summed up in one word. This is mercy. Mercy is derived from the Hebrew word "womb". The womb is the safe place where new and fragile life is given space to grow. Mercy comes from deep inside and tells the other: I want to give you this space so that you can grow. So that you can be home in spite of all your hurt and even in spite of your guilt. The righteousness Matthew learned in school was different. This justice is based on give and take. It's kind of a contract. And if one party to the contract fails to honor its commitment, the other side would punish the act. Just like Matthew experienced in his life. Mercy is different. It only sees people in their distress and in their hurt. It wants to help, even if there is no reward for it. Mercy is the feeling when the father just takes the son in his arms without merit. He rewards him even when there is no justification for it. Such compassion is not strong. It can be abused. Surely that was why the Pharisees relayed their doubts about Jesus. "He eats with tax collectors and sinners!" they said accusingly. According to the Pharisees, Jesus trampled on the basic principle of society, namely, "righteousness," simply by showing mercy to anyone in need. Where are we going if everyone gets mercy? Where are we going when society can no longer lure and warn people with rewards and punishments? In fact, socially and politically, the Pharisees are right. No state can function without just laws. But these Pharisees made the mistake that one also had to satisfy God with such laws. And there they made a huge mistake. When it comes to our relationship with God, our righteousness is non-negotiable. Our righteousness is always tainted and imperfect. And we can't offer God anything that we can then negotiate with. And that's why we all need only mercy! We live by this mercy. Without them there is no future! Without them we can grow as little as the egg without a womb.

And all this Jesus gives to Matthew. Not only that. It also gives him the strength to be a true follower of Jesus. One word is enough: "Follow me!" And Matthew got up immediately. He left the expensive chair at the city's eye of the needle. He left all the money boxes. He no longer wanted to follow money, but Jesus. As we proceed, we see what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Jesus comes to Matthew. He lives with him. Because faith in Jesus means exactly that. It means that Jesus dwells with us. It means that Jesus is never far away. And where Jesus is, there is justice. Yes, you heard right. The righteousness we heard about at the beginning is given through Jesus. It's a justice that doesn't have to be earned first. A justice that is not based on GIVE and TAKE, but based only on the gift that Jesus gives us. And where Jesus is, there are brothers and sisters. A whole church is founded, which comes together under Jesus. It is a church that receives mercy and gives mercy. A whole congregation that lives from the womb of Jesus and sings every Sunday.

Kyrie Eleison ! Lord, have mercy! Christ have mercy! Lord, have mercy!

Matthew heard that call. He became the first evangelist! He really became a gift from God.

Amen.