

Trinity College Cambridge
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FOLLOWING CHRIST FROM EPIPHANY TO LENT

Circumcision and Naming

Caravaggio's *The Calling of St Matthew*

Exodus 3: 1–14 Matthew 9: 9–13

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If we wish this night to learn something about the light, then we need to examine first the darkness. Caravaggio's *chiaroscuro* style famously contrasts light and dark. In this painting, it is the latter which makes the first enduring claim. I can explain this quite simply. Even though you already likely know that the word 'disciple' in relation to Jesus means 'student', if I were to poll our Trinity Chapel this evening and ask those of us present if we have ever self-identified – verbally or in writing – as being disciples in this way, I suspect that the answer would be a universal 'no'. For many here it could even be stronger than no. I am not at all casting stones. Indeed, I do not go around describing myself as a disciple either. So, at the end of this term's brilliantly devised sermon series called 'Following Christ', we have to be honest about an uncomfortable truth. There's a word for those people; they're called disciples. And we don't style ourselves as those. So, there's the data. It is how we work. Caravaggio understood this well. And it is from that farthest point of discomfort with and objection to Christ – from perhaps not even believing him at all – that Caravaggio commences an argument. So, take notice, my friends, of the darkness. Between Jesus on the right and Matthew sitting at the centre of the table on the left there is a concentration of the darkest hues of the painting. The distance between Jesus and Matthew, though a few paces in life, is an infinite one. Sure, the light overcomes the darkness in this world view, but Caravaggio is making the point that there still exists a great deal of darkness in a very central location. Matthew does not describe himself as a disciple. He does not even think it is possible for him to be one.

If we consider briefly the call of Matthew in our second lesson tonight, we realize that Christ not only chose someone unqualified; he chose someone scandalous. When Jesus called his other apostles, it was along the rural seashores of lush Galilee in the north. They were simple fishermen. There's something nice enough about Peter, James and John immediately leaving their nets to follow Jesus. That's a story of the lowly being made great and the Gospels in some way narrate the education of those lowly oafs. But Matthew is an entirely different character, well-educated and wily. The setting of this scene is in town. Jesus approaches Matthew as he is tax collecting – which was at the time a post used frequently enough to extort unjustly for personal gain – and Jesus tells the sinner to follow him. It's not just that Matthew gets up and goes; we'll treat that in a minute.

The scandal is that Christ would bother with someone like Matthew at all. The sanctimonious Pharisees, who always come across too close to the rest of us for comfort, are completely scandalized that Jesus would even associate with one like Matthew. By eating and staying at the house of such a notorious sinner, even if he were repentant, Jesus was undoubtedly sending mixed messages. The Pharisees confirm Matthew's own objection: that one cannot be a disciple.



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Calling of St Matthew* (1599–1600), Contarelli Chapel of San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome

I suspect that Caravaggio himself understood this and it is one of the reasons that he makes this painting so personal. He does not paint this scene as that of first century Galilee, but locates it instead in his own seventeenth century Rome. Those seated at the table are in ordinary dress for the period and his characters have the features of fellow Italians. And we should at least note that Caravaggio himself was hardly a paragon of moral courage. He was brilliant at his art, he knew it, and some of his paintings flaunt it at the expense of others whose works he knew would be displayed in the same spaces. He killed a man and had a sex life interesting enough that art historians still enjoy speculating about it in print.

So, let's just say that Caravaggio gets Matthew and the darkened abyss between him and Christ. No trite pharisaical conversion will do here. Matthew is not a disciple and has no intention of being one. What will it take to get him there? Let's look at how Caravaggio builds his case. We've spent long enough dwelling on darkness and shadow; now we can look at the light. First, notice the place from which the light is *not* coming: that is, the window. The canvassed window and the gloomy darkened room suggest the indoors. But the light is coming from the same direction as Christ himself. That, of course, should surprise no one. The light illumines two contrasting sides of the painting, separated by the darkness we've identified. Mark the difference of how the two sides of the painting are dressed. Matthew and those around him are in the clothing of mid-level money – leggings, shoes, and caps. Christ and the disciple Peter at his left are barefoot. Their clothing indicates their poverty – no caps, no leggings, no shoes – no money. Matthew is the centre of his little world; Christ – who has a veritable claim to be the centre of the universe – is less visible than his disciple Peter. At Matthew's table are those with power – the young man sitting with him has a sheathed sword on his belt even as he sits. At Jesus' side is Peter carrying a wooden walking stick indicating that not only is he lacking a weapon, he is probably also lacking a horse. But Matthew and his companions are stuck – seated, rooted in their ways. Peter next to Jesus gives the sense of being someone on a journey; there's promise of movement in that man. And so the light of this scene illumines all the people in the room – this is not going to be the decision of a solitary soul in the darkness of his private chamber. The stakes are so much higher than that.

The light brings forth these contrasts in order to capture a single moment, when the eyes of Matthew and Christ are locked in exchange. The secret, of course, is in the hands of Christ. As a university student in an art history course, I must confess I first thought Christ's gesture rather odd, the raising up of his right arm with finger pointing in such a limp and bony manner that it seemed to be quite the opposite of a robust and rousing call to being a disciple. What an uninspiring digit. It does not make sense until we consider the hands Caravaggio used as his inspiration. For at the heart of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling in Rome, which is an image reading of the book of Genesis, is the hand of God the Creator reaching out to touch the hand of Adam the created. The fingers point toward each other in anticipation of contact. Jesus' hand, in our painting, pointing at Matthew the tax collector, is the hand of Adam from the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Now what are we going to do with that?

Caravaggio is claiming something more subtle than that Michelangelo had managed a fresco of archetypal hands. No Caravaggio is making a theological point. For in that centre fresco of the Sistine Chapel ceiling showing God's and Adam's hands almost touching, Christians understand there to be a harmony of likeness and image. That creative moment – captured in a human being with mind and heart and total freedom – resembles the very image of God. This image is so fundamental that it can be tarnished but cannot be undone. So Adam and Eve, types for all men and women, share in their very existence something of God's. When the hand of God reaches toward the hand of Adam and the latter reaches back, it is creator and created as they are supposed to be. God is the source and sustainer of being, yet without compromising Adam's freedom.

That's all well and good, but Matthew's hand in our picture is not reaching out to touch Jesus' hand. He doesn't appear to be returning the gesture. And as I mentioned, Jesus' hand is that of Adam, not that of Michelangelo's God the Father. Here we have to know a second bit of theology: when Jesus comes along, as both fully God and fully human, he is the new Adam, the one who is to renew the image – not only in himself but in all – to meet humans in their freedom, and restore the creative genius of their nature. What's more, Jesus patterns this redemption in actions that are intelligible, in the ordinary ways of human interaction with people like tax collectors.

For, you see, the claim is that it is very hard to recognize discipleship in the abstract. One person managed it – but it was a terrifying experience that almost killed him. We heard it in our first lesson. Moses was effectively called and chosen by the source and sustainer of all being. In the call of Moses at the burning bush, we hear God self-identify as 'I AM WHO AM', which literally translates as the one who is with you and will be with you. Moses had quite a sophisticated understanding of God as source and sustainer of being which Judaism and Christianity have always kept, and for which we must hold him in highest respect.

But just as *being* so described is a verb that cannot be named with a proper noun, so it follows that it cannot be placed on a canvas. An incarnate, enfleshed saviour – Christ – makes it possible to have the theology and see it, too. Caravaggio takes that richness of God as source and sustainer, creator of heaven and earth, and embeds it in the flesh and bones of Christ's hand. And it is to make a point about discipleship. It happens at a level so fundamental that it is deeper than any other particular part of who we are. It is a call to the very ground of one's existence ... the creative renewal of an image of eternity in us. It is so 'foundational' that it can include all of the other disparate parts of us. Matthew's call doesn't happen in a snap moment of conversion wherein he pledges to start being good. It doesn't occur without doubt and uncertainty – notice Matthew's own two hands: one saying "really me?" and the other still fingering his money. Matthew does not even think that he himself can be a disciple he is so far from being morally upright.

But when we have considered this call at the core of his being, then we see that Matthew's very freedom to object is not up against divine oppression but rather that which meets the grounds of freedom itself. And you and I are thus prepared at long last for the final detail about Matthew's physical response. Matthew's response to Christ's hand is actually in Matthew's legs. For though he continues to doubt and waver and hedge and be stunned, the painter took great pains to show that right along with those objections and emotions the muscles in Matthew's legs are tensed. He has already begun to rise from his seat. It is almost an afterthought – probably more for our benefit than Matthew's – that Jesus should even have to say, "Follow me."

There Caravaggio is nearly ready to leave us. Matthew, not despite his doubts and his sins, but right along with them, is answering the call. In that sense, the call is a mercy. It allows him to walk on the way of the light toward completion, yet without being perfect in order to begin. Matthew will sin again. He'll run away when he sees Jesus crucified in just a couple years. Yet something deep in him has been named. He is a disciple. He is set free.

I claimed, however, that the key to the painting is the hands of Christ. So far we've only talked about one. I'll conclude with the second. At the far right side of the painting is Christ's other hand, opened and gesturing outward. Toward the world – from a saviour who is of the world – this call grows, enlivens, and dares to hope that in mercy it might draw forth the same. Christ met Matthew right where he was – in the midst of his friends and his sin – and the disciple who thought he could never or should never be one finds deep in the fundamentals of his body and will the most exciting and life-giving version of himself, in freedom lived outward and toward others. That prepares us for Caravaggio's opening the hand of Christ in a perpendicular angle to the scene. I hardly think it a coincidence that Christ's hand opens right toward the viewer, inviting an encounter from which, Caravaggio has just claimed, even you and I cannot hold ourselves excused. Through even our objections and our doubts, perhaps we, too, beckoned by our freedom, will have already begun to rise and to stand. Amen.