

The Calling of the Disciples

Caravaggio: The Calling of St Matthew (1599-1600)
(in the Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome)

A Sermon preached in Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge

by Ben Quash

on Sunday 11th February 2007
Sexagesima

Image: Caravaggio: The Calling of St Matthew (1599-1600)
(in the Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome)

OT: 1 Samuel 3: 1-9

NT: Luke 5: 27-32

Caravaggio's painting the *Calling of St Matthew* (1599-1600) is a painting that tries to indicate the presence of the divine, and the manifestation of grace, in a particular moment of time. It provokes us to think with it about *how grace appears* in human situations – in the social, historical, and material circumstances of human life. The call of Levi (as St Matthew was then called) is, after all, a supremely gracious moment: one of the most dramatic instances of conversion in the Gospels, in which a tax collector recognises a new Lordship in the person of Jesus Christ, meets an irresistible summons to follow him, and leaves everything (including the failures and corruptions of his past life) to do so.

Against a monotonously plain, dark wall with a grubby, oilskin-covered window set high in it, the painting shows a table with various men seated around or stooping over it. The left hand end of the table is in shadow; the right hand end is nearer to the light, a light that comes from a source we can't see, but in slanting diagonally down from the top right hand corner of the picture becomes associated with the outstretched arm of Christ, whose pointing finger follows its line. Take especial note of that hand – I want to come back to it later. Christ stands at the extreme right of the picture, in the shadowy space beneath the shaft of light. He is very far from being centre stage, and is perhaps one of the last figures one's eye is drawn to. The light cuts across the picture making strong contrasts between the features, expressions and objects it highlights, and the dark ground of the painting as a whole. Levi's face in particular is highlighted by the light as he turns towards it (assuming Levi is the bearded figure

seated at the middle of the table, as seems most likely), while many of the other figures remain enveloped in shadow, especially the youth at the end of the table furthest from the light, with his head bowed and his fingers playing with coins – suggesting, perhaps, unredeemed humanity and the inability to respond to Christ. Other figures seem poised between light and darkness; they could go either way.

With its chiaroscuro effects and its concentration on an unidealised (however dramatic) depiction of its figures, this painting is very typical of Caravaggio's work – especially his later work. And here, as elsewhere, Caravaggio proves himself notably reluctant to depict grace or divine agency in *obvious* ways, unlike many of his artistic predecessors and a good number of his contemporaries. Divine agency in his paintings does not normally arrive in a well-signposted manner by being somehow 'extra' to what the world already contains; we do not usually encounter it in the form of a 'supernatural' agent like an angel, or a celestial window onto heaven, or the visible transfiguration or ascent of saints. The discernment of the divine is thus not made an easy business in Caravaggio's hands. God's self-disclosure – his saving power and action in human life – does not take a form that can clearly be differentiated from other objects and actions, and pointed to in straightforward distinction from them. It has to be discerned in the irreducible interactions of people with each other and with their material environment.

Other artists in both pre-modern and modern times have had their own way of dealing with the unrepresentability of God – which might mean also, as the early iconoclasts liked to point out, the unrepresentability of *Christ's divine nature* (however much his *human* nature lent itself to depiction). Now an uncharitable critic of Caravaggio might say that a shaft of light risks reducing divine realities to the humanly imaginable every bit as much as a choir of angels sitting literalistically on clouds: it makes the light a representation of the divine. But I think that Caravaggio's eschewal of 'supernatural' divine agents in favour of the shaft of light shows a caution and discretion that are impressive. What he honours in his approach is something of which Christian theologians down the ages have been acutely aware: God is not just one more thing in the universe. He cannot be described in relation to and distinction from other creaturely realities as if he were one such reality himself. So to avoid showing us anything 'extra' than the normal run of creaturely realities, as Caravaggio avoids it, is to ensure that God is not distinguished from creatures in the way that creatures are distinguished from one another. He leaves the light as itself – whilst opening a possibility that it may simultaneously mean more than itself.

That indistinguishability is, after all, what marked the calling of the boy Samuel all those ages before the calling of Matthew – the calling we had as our Old Testament lesson this evening. What Samuel hears is wholly explicable as a human voice. Twice he interprets it as just that and no more. There is nothing obviously strange or supernatural about it. Moreover, there is no difference between the second and third call in what is made available to Samuel's merely bodily senses, and yet there is *all* the difference in his response. The difference is that before the third incidence of the call 'Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him', whereas by the time of the third call it *had*. From the time of the third call onwards, there is a newly constituted servant of the Lord to hear the Lord speak. Samuel has been newly made.

Both Caravaggio and the author of the books of Samuel agree on this: the material facts of the world looked on by the believer are no different from those looked on by the unbeliever. It is not within the power of our ordinary perceptions to tell us, for example, that the material world we inhabit is a *creation*. So we may say that believer and atheist see the same things, but they see them differently. The believer does not have more information than the atheist – and this, incidentally, is one of the virtues of Caravaggio's general eschewal of supernatural agents and other non-worldly phenomena in the composition of his religious paintings: there is nothing *more* to be seen than what is there anyway. What matters is *how* it is seen. It might be argued that this is exactly what makes *painting* in some way instructive (by analogy) for a doctrine of revelation, for painters are generally quite aware that they need not concern themselves with what isn't there; their concern is to depict what *is* there in a *new way*, so that we see what we thought was familiar with *new eyes*.

In revelation, Christian theologians tend to argue, it is *God* who enables this depiction of what is there in a *new way*. It is not the product of human initiative. In revelation, 'God himself becomes our teacher'. Because he is transcendent, incomprehensible and hidden, God can only be known when he makes himself known; God ensures his own knowability where nothing else can ensure it. So revelation is, essentially, divinely given and not humanly found.

So let's return to Levi in his tax office, and ask what it was that God worked in him, and what God equipped him to discern.

The call narratives of the Gospels are, however you look at them, very hard to explain. It's very hard to make them sound reasonable. What are we to make of the mysterious way in which Levi (like Andrew, Simon and the others before him) simply 'fell in' behind Jesus, leaving everything else behind? It is surely an extraordinary thing that men busy making a living, in the middle of a working day, should

leave everything there and then and follow a stranger, without any clue about what adventures they are setting out on.

There have, it must be acknowledged, been plenty of biblical scholars in our reasonable Western universities – and in recent decades especially – who have tried to make sense of the weirdness of these calls. One very distinguished modern New Testament scholar, for example, has said this: ‘Clearly without some previous knowledge of Jesus, these men’s dramatic actions would have been inexplicable and irresponsible’. Inexplicable – indeed so. Irresponsible – yes, perhaps even that – certainly by the standards of a sensible Oxbridge academic. The writer drives his point home: ‘If the details are pressed as biographically accurate’, he says, ‘we are *bound* to suppose that [those, like Levi, who responded to these calls] had had previous contact with Jesus.’

I suppose the question we need to ask in the face of this is whether the criteria of reasonableness, good sense and responsibility set by intelligent and moderate people in universities should in every case be allowed to become the criteria for judging what is true and what is not true in the Gospels. I am not, I hope, arguing for a complete anti-intellectualism here, nor a complete evacuation of common sense. But just imagine what would happen if we *never* allowed our reason and common sense to be offended by the Gospels. What on earth would we do with the resurrection, for example, and its extraordinary impact on its first witnesses?

I am much more inclined to see in these call narratives the action of *God*, and accept that, yes, each of these calls is something very hard to explain, but that these are events which claimed the total person of those called, in an irresistible way. A bond between Jesus and his future followers was disclosed, confirmed and actualised in these encounters. In each case, we see much more unfolding than an intellectual decision that has been made after carefully weighing up the pros and cons. The call of Levi – like all the New Testament calls – is one of those moments in which everything clicks into place; in which the penny drops; in which to hesitate is to be lost.

Belief in God and discipleship of his Son Jesus Christ will always have such dimensions to them. It is of their essence that they are much more than reasonable – and you cannot ever put yourself in a position where you weigh up all the pros and cons and make a safe and prudent decision. There are inevitably all sorts of reductionist ways of explaining every instance of divine calling and human answering in Christian history. God, after all, doesn’t appear with bells and whistles whenever a person becomes a disciple. It may seem that ‘calls’ are just examples of irrational behaviour that can be explained in human terms as pathologies or delusions – or, conversely (with my New Testament

scholar) as quite understandable responses to the information available. But to the eyes of faith, the Christian call is a divine work of transformation, by which people's lives are radically and permanently changed. People who have never been able to accept their own self-worth learn to do so; people who have clung to material security let it all go; people who cannot forgive a particular thing – and who we might all agree would be unreasonable to forgive that thing – find they are not only able but *want* to forgive. The transformation of life effected by the divine call is as powerfully represented as anywhere else in the Bible by our New Testament lesson, by Levi's simple act of leaving everything and following Jesus, and by the accompanying transformation of his name, to Matthew.

A reductionist looking at Caravaggio's painting might observe there is nothing in the shaft of light or the human figure *per se* to lead anyone to the firm conclusion that something miraculous is taking place, that Levi is receiving 'new sight'. To which I would answer: revelation cannot be depicted; divine reality cannot be reduced to the humanly imaginable. The painting as a painting can only show us a group of men, a dingy wall, a pointing finger, a shaft of light.

But then we might ask this: was the presence of an empirically real man (Jesus Christ) in a particular setting at a particular point in time merely incidental to the moment of revelation Levi underwent? Here, for Christians, the answer has to be 'no'. It is in the person of the incarnate one above all that the issue of God's 'appearance' becomes acute for Christian theology. To be sure, in apprehending the man Jesus, we do not as such and without further ado lay hold of God. But nor will the advent of revelation dispense with these facts, or obliterate their importance. We might say that the facts are made 'transparent' to something in excess of themselves. The christological form of this claim would be that the veil of Jesus's humanity can to the eyes of faith become a transparent veil, but that the 'veil' of material things is not somehow 'in the way'. Empirical history is the locus of the revelation of transcendence, and without it transcendence is merely a speculative projection.

The challenge to discern God's call in the world comes therefore in the form of a *question* about this *person*. The question is 'Who *is* this Jesus Christ?'. This question draws us along the way of the cross into dispossessive relationship with one who is the 'ultimacy' of our existence. We find him incognito, hidden in empirical history *as* empirical reality, "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Romans 8:3). He is the definitive revelation of God but only by allowing himself to be pushed out of the world onto the cross, in this way 'showing' us the God who is not an agent in competitive relation to other agents in the world – not just one who makes particular differences – but one who makes *all* the difference, *in* but not *in addition to* all the differences that there already are.

The shadowy figure of Christ in Caravaggio's painting can be read as this 'Who?'-provoking figure. His tangible presence is the condition for the 'Who?' being asked, but not the resolution of the question. The question will only be 'answered' by allowing, as Levi/Matthew did, some greater possibility to open up within the creaturely material in which he is humanly present. This greater possibility, if it is worthy of the description 'revelatory', will be a *converting* possibility, by which we are changed, and embark on the eternal 'process' of being opened from the midst of the penultimate to the fullness of the ultimate: to God's truth, and beauty, and goodness.

Levi the tax collector had the veil lifted – saw more than he had seen before – when he was asked to consider 'Who?'. The world of human transactions to which he was accustomed was opened up to a possibility in excess of itself. A world in which the only sort of embarrassment was embarrassment by debt suddenly became a world in which it was possible to be embarrassed by *love* – a love embodied in the person of Jesus. He saw what he thought was familiar with new eyes, as Jesus totally forgave his past, and asked him to come and work for a new world, and a new economy.

Now look again at that hand – the outstretched hand of Jesus Christ. For it echoes another famous hand – a hand Michelangelo painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, when he showed God's great act of creating the first man, Adam. What we are looking at in this painting by Caravaggio is a new Adam coming to life in the moment of Jesus's call – just as every call of every disciple is a birth into a new humanity, by the grace of God. Here, in this painting, a new creation springs to life at the hand of its creator. And having heard his call, Matthew the tax collector, for once, does not make any calculation; without a backward look he takes up Jesus's offer, leaves everything he has, and follows him.