

## **Archbishop Aspinall's Reflection: Morning Prayer, Feast of St Matthew**

In 1602, the artist Caravaggio was commissioned to paint a portrait of the evangelist Matthew and an angel, to be used as a reredos for the Contarelli Chapel in Rome. The painting was ultimately rejected by the patron, and a second, more ethereal version of the same subject matter was completed in its place. The first painting passed into private hands, and eventually it was destroyed in the bombing of Berlin in WWII. Today we have only black and white reproductions to tell us what it was like.

The painting shows a rustic, even slow-witted Matthew writing what would become his version of the gospel. He is assisted by a gossamer-draped angel figure with startling white wings, who has literally grasped Matthew's hand to direct his writing. Matthew lacks dignity – he is dressed in a very short coarse robe, his brow is furrowed, his features are rough. One can easily imagine that this writer could never have produced the Gospel of Matthew without the angel's help.

As usual with Caravaggio's works, this one draws the viewer in through its use of light. The light falls on the pages of the book and the large ill-formed letters Matthew is writing, and then on his sturdy, bare, peasant's legs and feet. There is a stark contrast between the solid, earthy man and the heavenly task he has been set. No wonder the angel has such an intent look on its face.

While we shouldn't mistake the painting for an historical record, it does remind us that God uses all kinds of people in God's work, and not just the wise and great. This truth comes through vividly in the passage we have heard from Matthew's gospel. A rich young man with a good knowledge of the law came to Jesus, but went away disappointed. He could not yet be who Jesus needed him to be. He was looking for an easy answer, a check list that he could tick off. He wasn't really prepared to risk all that he had for this mission. That was left to the fishermen, who were neither wise nor great, but who were ready to respond to the call.

This echoes what we heard of the story of Queen Esther last night. It seems a risky business for God to have relied on a young Jewish woman, who had shown little interest in either her Jewish heritage or in exercising power, to save God's people from genocide. And yet that is what God did. That is what God does. God repeatedly shows a willingness to leave creation in the hands of the least suitable candidates: fishermen, women, you, me.

Caravaggio went on to complete his second version of Matthew and the angel. This time Matthew looks much wiser and far more dignified in a flowing saffron robe. He even holds his own stylus and forms his own words, while the angel whispers in his ear. And yet there is something about Caravaggio's first attempt which invites us to see ourselves as companions of the first Matthew. We may not be among the great and the wise, we will often feel that the task is far beyond our meagre talents and abilities, and yet if we are willing, God will use each of us for the work of bringing about the reign of God.

21 September 2009