

SAINT MATTHEW/XIV TRINITY 2014
SERMON – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH
FATHER CRAIG LOONEY
ST. MATTHEW 9.9



Now hiring...read the sign outside the Capernaum Tax Office...must be fluent In Greek and Aramaic...local residents only...training will be provided...inquire within.

The sign was enticing to Matthew. He had the necessary qualifications and he was good with numbers. He lived in town...commuting would not be a problem. More than anything he needed the job.

Matthew's employment application was processed and he passed the required background check. And so he began his career as an agent for the Capernaum Tax Office. There was just one problem...and it was a major one...his job ran against all of his religious convictions.

While the scene described is plausible...we actually know very little about Matthew's background. Father Altberg calls him a real mystery man! He was a Galilean Jew who lived and worked in Capernaum and he had a better than average education. We don't know why Matthew became a tax collector for the Romans. It matters only because it created a burden for him.

His father was named Alpheus. Mark and Luke mention a Levi as the son of Alpheus and the tax collector Jesus called from the Capernaum Tax Office to follow him. Like Simon Peter and Nathanael Bartholomew, Levi Matthew may have been known by both names.

The New Testament word *publican* can be translated *tax collector*. But Matthew's role in the Capernaum Tax Office would have included more than collecting taxes. He would also have been a general contractor and responsible for issuing business licenses and building permits.

Matthew's job as a tax collector put him at odds with his own people. His fellow Jews considered him a traitor. Any tax or building permit would have been paid using Roman money engraved with Caesar's image. Romans worshipped Caesar as a god...blasphemy to Jews. They also resented Matthew and other tax collectors getting rich at their expense.

Matthew's legacy is his Gospel...his Good News. In the Introduction to his book Lifting the Burden, Father Brendan Byrne tells us Matthew wants us to see humanity as Jesus sees it...weighed down with all kinds of burdens...and Jesus comes to help lift those burdens.

When Jesus called Matthew away from the Capernaum Tax Office, he replaced the burden of his tax job with the work of an Apostle and Evangelist. Jesus saw potential in Matthew to do God's work, just as he saw in the other Apostles, just as he saw in people who suffered from illnesses and were cut off from friends and family who simply didn't want to be bothered with their burdens...just as he sees in us.

Jesus embraced tax collectors and sinners...he actively sought them out. When he was criticized for the company he kept, he told his critics to go read what Hosea wrote: God wants our constant love and for his people to know him. He then told his critics to think about what Hosea meant. Jesus is here to relieve our burdens, not weigh us down with more.

We would like to know more about Matthew's early life and what he did after Pentecost and his time in Jerusalem. He was an Apostle...he was sent out...he was an Evangelist...he had a message to deliver...and it was Good News.

One tradition tells us Matthew originally wrote his Good News in Aramaic or Hebrew and travelled with it to India. Bartholomew travelled to India some years later and found a thriving Church and the Good News Matthew left behind.

We need to listen to Matthew's Good News! Jesus has made certain our sins are forgiven ...and as Father Byrne reminds us...he lifts the burdens that weigh us down. He promises a place in God's Kingdom in Heaven for those who believe and trust in him.

Matthew's Good News...is a message of hope for us and for everyone who listens and responds 'yes' to the invitation to follow Jesus. It is Good News...even for tax collectors!

