

Sunday, September 21, 2025
Saint Matthew

Solemn Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia
on
Matthew 9:9-13
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Empty-Handed

In what feels like many lifetimes ago, at the age of eighteen, I started my novitiate as a Benedictine Monk in the most enchanted of places: a red-bricked fifteenth century monastery, adorned with frescoes by Sodoma and Signorelli, surrounded by the “crete senesi”, a striking Tuscan landscape south of Siena, marked by rolling clay hills, cypress-lined ridges, and silvery-gray earth that looks almost lunar. A scenery at once startling and haunting that mirrored my spiritual and emotional state at the time: intense fervour constantly alternating with a sense of unworthiness and inadequacy.

Thankfully, I soon learnt where to find solace. I began talking to a ninety-year-old French monk revered by the whole community as a living saint. He had been a monk for over seventy years – a span that to my eighteen-year-old self felt like eternity. He had poor eyesight and spent his days in his cell (the way monks call their rooms) sitting on a chair angled towards the window and praying. Stepping into his room filled me with a sense of calm and awe. He listened patiently to the litany of my qualms and anxieties and his words carried the gift of filling me with indescribable joy and peace.

On one of these occasions, I remember asking him how he could be at peace knowing that he would die very soon (I could be quite forthright then and, as it happens, he lived on until almost 100!). As though it were the most obvious thing in the world, he replied: “Oh, I figured out how to get a pass when I am in the Lord’s presence. I will simply say: *I have come empty-handed*” – which, as he explained to me, meant: “I have nothing worth mentioning for what I have done with my life except this: I know how much I need your mercy O Lord!”.

The old monk’s words came back to me as I was meditating on one of Jesus’ sentences in today’s Gospel: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matthew 9.13). Jesus is telling the Pharisees that instead of dividing up the world in the neat categories of “sinners” (usually others) and righteous (of course themselves), posing as judges, banning those who do not measure up to their standards – they have to learn how to become more compassionate and forgiving.

Nothing new there – except that the sentence – “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” – hides a few significant subtexts.

It is a quotation from the book of Hosea, and ‘mercy’ translates one of the most important words of the Old Testament, *hesed*, which means ‘lovingkindness’, ‘compassion’, and also ‘mercy’. What makes *hesed* such a pivotal concept in Scripture is that before being something that God asks of us, it describes God’s core quality, that which defines him above everything else:

“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness (*hesed*) and faithfulness.” (Exodus 34:6–7)

“The lovingkindness (*hesed*) of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.” (Lamentations 3:22–23)

When Jesus says: “I desire *hesed* and not sacrifice” what he means is this:

“However mired you might be in greed, envy, pride, and selfishness, when I look at you I do not see a “sinner” but a daughter and a son I love and want to heal. You might not want my love, and this is fine: I am not going to force anything on you. But this loving kindness is what I am and always will be – and as soon as you feel ready, I will be there – however long this might take. All I desire is for you to let me come closer to you, eat with you, spend time with you, and let you see by yourself that there is no catch – when I say *I am* loving kindness, I mean it!”

Hence the shocking (to the Pharisees) spectacle of Jesus and his disciples eating, rather *reclining* with sinners. Hence also the powerful scene of Jesus greeting one of the most loathed characters in the Jewish society of that time, a **greedy traitor**, sold to the Roman invader, a predator of his own people. Who can begrudge the Pharisees for harbouring hard feelings against such people and those who seem to condone their behavior!

As it turns out, this greedy traitor is none other than the author of the gospel that relates this episode – Matthew is talking about himself.

How curious then that he should be so reticent in the description of such a turning point in his own life: no explanation, no emotion, no defense. Just one bare line: ‘He rose and followed him.’

Is it the reticence of humility, of him refusing to make himself the hero of the situation? Or of shame? He knows too well what he had been. Or astonishment: how could he possibly put into words the moment he was set free? Maybe this reticence is itself a confession: “I have nothing to boast of, except the mercy that found me.”

The clever narrator that he was, though, might have left some clues about how he felt elsewhere in his Gospel.

Matthew wove the tale of his call with the healing of a paralytic and Jesus’s declaration that he came for those who are in need of a physician.

So possessed was Matthew by his greed for money, so hardened against the hatred of those he exploited, so resigned to remain a pariah until the end of his life, that he resembled a paralytic condemned to his bed – he was glued to his tax booth. Matthew experienced a liberation and a renewal that felt just as miraculous as the fate of the paralytic healed by Jesus: suddenly he was unshackled from his greed, could

follow Jesus, be welcomed in a community, find a purpose in life, feel again something he had long forgotten: joy, peace, kindness – or better lovingkindness. *Hesed*.

The Pharisees considered him unredeemable, forever unworthy of acceptance. No hope of healing for him, no incentive to change. His moral paralysis for them was a life-long indictment.

Jesus instead – just as he did with the paralytic – approached him as a loving physician would do and offered to him the most potent healing balm there is: his *hesed*, his lovingkindness.

Matthew learnt this lesson and embedded it in one of the most luminous religious poems ever written – a text that many describe as the *Magna Charta* of Christianity: the ‘Beatitudes’.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 5.6)

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5.44)

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you use will be used to measure you.” (Matthew 7.1f)

And especially

“Blessed are the merciful, because they will receive mercy” (Matthew 5.7) – which properly understood means: *Blessed are those who (like me, Matthew) have been touched by the loving-kindness of God, for they become able to shine the same lovingkindness into the lives of others.*

If the reading the whole Gospel seems daunting to you, just meditate on these 3 chapters,– chapters 5, 6, and 7 of Matthew’s Gospel– mindful of who wrote them.

Matthew has a compelling message for us here today – not only about the way we might be tempted to judge and condemn others, but especially about how we judge ourselves.

It is incredibly hard to get over the representation of God as a judge – even as he keeps repeating to us: *I desire mercy, I am mercy, I am loving kindness.*

Our kindness often amounts to polite, surface-level courtesy – a mere lubricant for smooth and conflict-free everyday interactions.

God’s loving kindness is a remedy that brings healing where all human remedies have proved ineffective.

God’s loving kindness is the balm that my nonagenarian monk had experienced for himself and learnt to administer to others through his words of advice and his whole demeanor. Like Matthew, from being patient he had become a physician.

From him I learnt one of the greatest lessons of my life: we come to God *empty-handed*. Any hope we have to do something with our life hangs on embracing the beatitude that Matthew so memorably enshrined in his Gospel:

Blessed are those who let themselves to be touched by the lovingkindness of God, for they will be healed, they will be freed, they will know joy and peace again – and they will become able to heal others by shining the same loving-kindness with their words, their actions, their whole life.

