

“In Christ all shall be made alive”

Week 2: Caravaggio, *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (1599-1600)

This week we encounter the work of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610), an Italian painter whose work was foundational in the transition from Mannerism to the Baroque movement of the late Protestant and Catholic Reformation period. Perhaps equally significant has been his sustained influence upon art in the modern era. Caravaggio used tenebrism, a heightened chiaroscuro, in which the combination of light and darkness in painting achieves great dramatic and emotional tension. Caravaggio also employed a level of realism unheard of at the time. Mannerist art of the late medieval period normally idealized the human form into a thing of divine beauty; however, Caravaggio chose to portray the human subject realistically, depicting dirty fingernails and feet, as well as the realism of human death. His paintings have an immediacy that draws the viewer into a sense of shared humanity that is both recognizable and visceral, even though the viewer is separated by centuries from Caravaggio’s own era.



Though Caravaggio quickly became the most sought after painter in Rome, his personal life was complicated with legal battles and imprisonment, the result of a violent temperament. Wealthy and powerful patrons were able to get him out of trouble, but in 1606 he fled Rome for the murder of a man in a duel named Ranuccio Tommasoni. He lived on the run from Rome to Naples, to Malta, to Sicily, dying of “fever” in Porto Ercole, awaiting a papal pardon for his sins. However, to this day the circumstances of his death remain unclear, and the role played by the Tommasoni family and the church continue to be argued

by scholars. Caravaggio’s life was as dramatic as the biblical scenes he painted, which gives insight into a man who lived with an intensity that seems to have given him a deep awareness of the human drama in the biblical salvation story.

The Calling of St. Matthew is part of three works commissioned by Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte (1549-1627) for the Contarelli Chapel in the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome. The commission for these works came from the estate of Cardinal Matthieu Cointerel (1519-1585) who had left instructions and a bequest in his will for the creation of works related to his namesake, St. Matthew. Along with *The Inspiration of St. Matthew*, placed directly over the altar, the *Calling* is placed to the left, with *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew* to the right of the altar. These three works, representing the call, work, and witness of Matthew the Apostle, have

decorated the Contarelli Chapel since 1600.

The *Calling* depicts a verse in the Gospel of Matthew (9:9), after Jesus had just spoken the words, “*Follow me.*” In Mark (2:13-14) and Luke (5:27-28), Matthew is referred to as Levi, though the narrative is essentially the same, and in all the synoptic gospels the scene of Jesus’ calling of Matthew-Levi is set in Capernaum after the healing of the paralytic.

Caravaggio’s use of tenebrism places Christ in the shadows with a shaft of natural sunlight streaming into the scene from the upper right corner of the painting. However, it is the light radiating from Christ that illuminates the darkness of the painting. With great effect, Caravaggio has indicated that it is Christ who is the light of the world.

A further iconographic aspect must be noted: the extended hand of Christ is an exact copy (in reverse) of the outstretched hand of Adam in Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel. Caravaggio gave visual statement to the Pauline typology of Christ as the “new Adam,” in which Paul writes, “*for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ*” (1 Cor. 15:21-22; see also Romans 5:12-21). Coming to us in the shadows of our lives, it is the call of Christ – the new Adam – that enlivens and enlightens human beings amidst the darkness, sin and death of our lives in the world.

The end of Matthew 9:9 reads “*And he got up and followed him.*” Caravaggio depicts the moment just before Matthew stands to follow Jesus, pointing to himself in disbelief, visually saying, “*Who me?*” – yet at the same time Matthew’s eyes indicate that he has already answered in his heart the call to follow Jesus.

The immediacy and humanity of Caravaggio’s paintings show an artist who believed that the experience of the divine was extremely personal and real – that Christ comes to human beings in the darkness and shadows of their daily lives. Jesus appeared in the workplace of Matthew, illuminating his sin and shadowy tax practices, profoundly changing Matthew with a power that still reverberates across time to us through his gospel.



The *Calling*, *The Inspiration of St. Matthew* (left), and *The Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (right) are part of an artistic narrative describing the human journey from a life-giving encounter with Christ, to inspired work for Christ, to becoming a witness (in Greek “martyr”) of Christ. The paintings are a visual expression of “*if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation*” (2 Cor. 5:17).



Christ came to Matthew in the sinful shadows of his life, inspiring him through word and deed to record the life-giving words of Christ’s “great commission” (Mt. 28:16-20) – whereby so many have been called and sent into the world with good news of new life in Christ.

Where do you see yourself in the biblical narrative about Matthew? If you were to paint three images describing your Christian journey – Christ’s call, work, witness – which scenes of your life would you share? The dates of our lives will eventually be written with a hyphen separating a birth and a death. The call, work and witness of our lives is what that hyphen will represent. Christ calls each of us daily out of the shadows of our broken sinfulness, into his light, recreating us so that with thanksgiving, we might truly live, work and witness to him. Amen.