

## HOMILY AT THE TOMB OF SAINT PETER

### Feast of Saint Matthew

21 September 2006

Eph 4:1-7, 11-13; Mt 9:9-13

I have always been struck by something I – and perhaps all of us – first noticed in the seminary: that so many of the lads who left were the ones that you would have put all your money on to stay the course and to make excellent priests. We remember the feeling, 'If he doesn't think he has what it takes, what am I doing here?'

Sadly, the same phenomenon continued after ordination. Men who left the priesthood often seemed to have great pastoral gifts that I certainly didn't have. It was a lesson in seeing that God's ways and God's choices are not ours.

That is an appropriate thought at the tomb of Peter. The man who is honoured by the building of this great basilica, and several other churches down the centuries over his grave, might not have been our choice. If there had been seminaries in those days, you can just imagine a Dean saying, "Mr Bar Jonah, you are full of enthusiasm and good intentions and extravagant promises, but, when it comes to the point, when the cock crows, you are a miserable failure; and as for the Bar Zebedee brothers, James and John, with their ambitions to sit on thrones, one at the Lord's right and one at his left, they would need to be taken down a peg or two!; and Philip, who was with him all those years and still did not know him; and Thomas, like any modern sceptical scientist, who would believe nothing that could not be demonstrated and observed; and Judas, the one who was trusted with the common purse – in the seminary, he would have been a prefect or monitor – he turned out to be the worst of all. None of them would have had an easy time getting through the seminary; they might have been the fellows whose departure would not have surprised us!

And there was Matthew, whose feast we celebrate today: he, I'm afraid, would not even have got into the seminary! He was involved in the despised and discredited profession of tax collector; he was regarded as being beyond the pale, an outcast. Respectable people would have nothing to do with him.

In fact, when the Pharisees wanted to destroy the reputation of Jesus, they accused him of eating with prostitutes and tax collectors.

But when Jesus challenges the Pharisees, he turned the tables completely. He tells the shocking story of the Pharisee, a good living, conscientious man, faithful to all his religious duties, who went to the Temple to pray. But he failed to return to his home justified, unlike – of all things! – a wretched tax collector!

What does all of this mean for us? It says that God's call does not necessarily, indeed not even usually, go to the person with the most outstanding gifts. The essential element in a vocation is a call from God – a call which, in the case of the priestly vocation, finds visible expression in the laying on of hands.

The Pharisee in the parable relied on his own gifts. He obviously imagined that God would be greatly impressed! He made the fatal mistake of trying to measure himself against what he imagined was the state of other people in the sight of God, like the tax collector. He lost sight of the truth expressed in the Fourth Weekday Preface, that our desire to thank God is itself God's gift. He lost sight of the fact that his gifts were just that – **gifts**. Our gifts are given to us not in recognition of what wonderful people we are and how much better we are than others, but simply 'according to the measure of Christ's gift'. Nor does he give us those gifts primarily for our own sake. The Spirit gives different gifts to different people 'for the building up of the Body of Christ'.

Being called to the priesthood is not an achievement of which we should be proud, it is a gift, for which we should be enormously grateful. This gift is not given in recognition of our talents, but for the sake of building up the body in its worship and its life and its closeness to Christ. The call to priesthood is given for the sake of all the gifts given to all God's People so that

they can be recognised and encouraged and so that they may flourish for the good of the whole Church and of the world.

We are at the tomb of Peter, who learned a hard lesson about his own weakness, on the feast of Matthew who was called from the despised fringes of society. We gather to give thanks for all God's gifts to us – the gift of life, the gift of new life in Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist and all the sacraments, and the gift of our Ordination. Our gifts and all the gifts that God's Spirit gives to God's people, and the whole life of God's people in their families and in the wider society, all are symbolised in the gifts of bread and wine, the fruit of God's creation and the work of human hands, which we are about to offer. And all of that is gathered up in the unconditional and unlimited gift of himself which Jesus offers on Calvary.

We who are ordained offer that gift in his name, presiding in his name over community which he gathers; we act in the person of Christ as we recall the Gift he gave to Peter and Matthew and the other apostles – and to us – on the night before he suffered. And as we make this offering we share in Christ's journey through death as we walk with him towards the fullness of the Risen Christ.