

Three Caravaggio paintings of Saint Matthew

Christ, our light in the darkness; we thank you for the inspiration that comes to ordinary men and women through the work of painters and other artists. We especially give thanks for the work of Caravaggio; and for his three paintings of Matthew in the church of St Luigi dei Francesi in Rome. May they speak into the lives of all pilgrims whatever our circumstances; and may their remembered image strengthen our faith; and renew our commitment to follow you every day of our lives. In your name we pray, Amen.

Getting to St Luigi dei Francesi: A visit to this church, small by Roman standards, is the perfect experience to save for an afternoon when pilgrims are ready for contemplation, space, tranquillity. The church itself is situated in a lovely part of old Rome, close to the Piazza Navona and directly opposite the Domus Internationale – made famous by Pope Francis when he returned there to pay his hotel bill after his election as Pope! The building is open from 10-12.30 each morning, and from 3-7pm every afternoon except Thursday.



Although St Luigi dei Francesi is home to many other wonderful artworks, for this pilgrim the paintings of Matthew outshone every other aspect of the church. These are the focus of this guide. As you enter the church, the Contarelli Chapel which houses the Caravaggio paintings is the last chapel on the left hand side as you face the main altar. Admission to the church is free but you need 1Euro coins to illuminate the

Caravaggio paintings. People visiting tend to take it in turns to feed the slot but it's definitely worth having a few spare coins in case it's only you!

What are these Caravaggio paintings saying to the pilgrim?

The Calling of Matthew

In Matthew's own gospel (Matt 9:9) we read an unembellished account of his call to follow Christ, and there are similar accounts in both Mark and Luke of the calling of 'Levi, son of Alphaeus'. The three gospels are unclear about whether Jesus' encounter with Matthew was a chance one. We are not told what Matthew already knew about this wandering Prophet and healer, or why he responded so immediately



to Jesus' call on his life. Two thousand years after that actual event, and 500 years after the work was completed, this painting provides a wonderful focus for each of us to remember our own call to be followers of Christ. Who or what do I have to thank for the start of my faith journey? Can I trace its origins to a single transformative event, or to the unfolding

circumstances of a life in which Jesus has always had a place? What new understanding of Christ's call on my life can I gain by placing myself in Caravaggio's painting, as Matthew, or as one of the onlookers in the drama? What is Christ calling me to do? Who is he calling me to be?

The Inspiration of St Matthew

In this work, Caravaggio depicts the angel inspiring and encouraging Matthew to write the story of Christ's life. This is Caravaggio's second painting of this subject matter – the first was rejected, partly on the grounds that it portrayed Matthew as a rough peasant. Sadly, the first painting was destroyed in World War 2 and only black and white and colour-enhanced images of it remain.



In the painting we view today, the two figures of Matthew and the angel dominate the otherwise darkened canvas, with the distinctive character of each figure emphasising the separation between heavenly and earthly realms and understanding. There is a sense of restlessness in Matthew as he sets about writing: his stool is tipping, and he looks back over his shoulder at the angel. Is he confused, uncertain, impatient? Can we relate to these feelings as we grapple with the expectations God seems to be placing on our lives, and wonder about our ability to be and do all that's required of us as followers of Christ?

Perhaps this painting is an encouragement for the pilgrim to sit quietly in the church and re-read Matthew's Gospel in the light of Matthew's own history – a Jew from the priestly house of Levi, a collaborator with the occupying Romans, and one who benefitted from their exploitation. What gifts might this painting and the Gospel of Matthew bring to us today, and how might we share them beyond this particular time and place?

The Martyrdom of Matthew



In this dramatic work the angel at the top right and the executioner in the central position represent the moment in which Matthew's vision shifts from his earthly surroundings to the joy of heaven. While the horrified bystanders ready themselves for the strike of the sword, Matthew alone can see and respond to the 'palm of martyrdom' offered by the angel: "the death of a saint as the personal handshake of the divine" (Wikipedia). In Psalm 116: 15 we read "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints."

Throughout history men, women and children have died for their beliefs. Here in Rome there are multiple reminders of the martyrdom of saints, towering figures in the history of the church and ordinary Christians like you and me. Most of us will at some time question the strength of our faith, and whether we would have the courage to sacrifice all, including life itself, for Christ. When confronted with the persecution and execution of our Christian brothers and sisters, we may find ourselves caught between glib assurances of God's protections and feelings of despair and fear. The Martyrdom of Matthew reminds us that these experiences are not new and neither are our very human responses. The Gospel of Matthew speaks into this very situation: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt 5: 10-12).

How should we respond? Once again, Matthew recounts Jesus' own words: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute, that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matt 5: 44-45). Is now the right time to pray, as Christ leads us, for enemies and friends, for the persecuted and their persecutors?

Other 'must-see' Caravaggio paintings on public display in Rome.

Sant'Agostina – Madonna del Loretta (Madonna of the Pilgrims)

Santa Maria del Popolo – The Conversion of St Paul; the Crucifixion of St Peter

Galleria Doria Pamphilj – Rest on the Flight into Egypt