



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"God's Ways - Our Ways."**
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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Hosea 5:15-6:6
Epistle Romans 4:13-18
Gospel Matthew 9:9-13

Of all the men that Jesus chose to be his followers, we can come to terms with all but two. First, there's Judas, of course: the one who betrayed him. 'What,' we might ask ourselves, 'was Jesus thinking?' But we see this tragic figure as a given: part of the great drama of the Passion story. Broadway would even have us feel sorry for Judas who is an almost sympathetic figure in hits like "Jesus Christ Superstar." But it's another story entirely with the man we hear about today: Matthew.

The choice of Matthew is another problem for us. He doesn't fit the profile of a disciple. Most of them are simple, patriotic and devout souls whose calling to serve in the Apostolic band reminds us that God chooses the simple and the faithful as His followers. But that doesn't work with Matthew. He is educated. He is cunning. He works as a collaborator with the Roman forces of occupation. He doesn't fit the job description. Could you imagine someone who works for BIR, Inland Revenue or the IRS being chosen bishop? The mind boggles. But Jesus seems to have a talent for boggling, and this is a good example of his challenging our assumptions about who "fits" into God's plan. And it reminds us today about jumping to conclusions about what profiles the church is supposed to have when considering new members.

Coming to terms with the enemy, or those who might be *perceived* as the enemy, is in fact coming to terms with God. If Jesus makes these questionable people not only his dinner companions but also his closest followers, if he makes them feel at home with him, it is because that is the nature of his crazy kind of love. That love came to show mercy to sinners, to heal the illness of their sins. It is in the end a question of civil rights or status, but of *love*- a love that is the only force able to achieve these things- when Jesus calls someone to repentance according to the Gospel. Matthew and his call remind us of this.

What kind of people are called to be members of Holy Trinity (to use a practical and close-to-home example)? Time was when people in Manila considered us one of the "ex pat" congregations- many still do- a whole bunch of white people who get together over here in ritzy Forbes Park every week and, some would say, "pretend" that they're not in the Philippines! That ignores the fact that over half of our members are Filipino, but it does recognize that there still is something culturally isolating about our little club here.

We are still unconsciously dominated by the colonial idea of 'us' and 'them', and it affects much of our common life on many levels. Some of this is self-defense: our relations with the Philippine church outside these gates are definitely affected by the fact that we are viewed predominantly as a source of money. That is a fact that is not going away. It is also a fact that even our good suggestions about how to run the church are suspect because they are from a source still "tainted" by colonialism and patronization. We'll have to live with that, at least for now.

But, we also have to live with the reality that many of us, both Filipino and expat, live lives that few of our countrymen could dream of. Many live in gated communities and are attended by servants (even at church!). The experience gives us an insight into the world of the bible in a way we probably never imagined we'd have: when we read about servants and masters we no longer have to imagine a storybook realm in the past- we are living it here and now in Makati, Quezon City and Alabang.

This experience naturally creates some discomfort. Or at least it ought to. We still see ya-ya's and drivers sitting *outside* on a Sunday morning instead of being in here and at least experiencing our service. It pains me to see the way some of our more fortunate members treat their staff as if they were entitled to do this because of birth or wealth. And yet we are officially an *inclusive* church, dedicated to bringing Jesus Christ to all the "peoples of our community". The word peoples was put in the plural on purpose.

The world is changing; even our world here in Manila, and our duty will be to adapt as Christians to what we encounter. Please note that this is *not* the same as trying to adapt our Christianity to the world, which is a recipe for disaster and apostasy. If we look at Holy Trinity church and see the real-live people who form this community- not just our old friends and our fellow countrymen from whatever background we are- then we have the opportunity to become a vital congregation that witnesses to Christ in the midst not of not *how things were*, but of how they are and how they are *meant to be*. Life in the Philippines is no longer what it was, nor is Holy Trinity Church. But that doesn't mean we are meant to roll over and play dead. It is rather a challenge to become a vital Christian community in new ways without betraying the tradition that makes us who we are.

Now how, you may ask, does this connect with the call of Matthew? The parallel is there for those with eyes to see it: the Christian experience is meant to be a leveler and a challenge. In this place, if nowhere else in our society, we are all equal. And that doesn't just dictate where we sit, it also decides how we do business, how we treat each other, and what our attitudes must be about race, nationality and our vocation as disciples.

It is significant that the episode we have just read about Matthew being chosen as a disciple was written in the Gospel version traditionally held to be by Matthew himself. He knew, better than most, about the power of God's grace to shake up our world and challenge our presumptions about God's way being our way.

Hosea writes in today's first lesson about God's judgment rising like the light and coming to us like spring rains watering the earth (or, as we might say, the monsoon season following the long, hot summer.) Isaiah uses a similar image in the 55th chapter of his prophetic book when he says, *"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as rain and snow fall from the heavens and return not again, but water the earth, bringing forth life and giving growth, seed for sowing and bread for eating, so is my word that goes forth from my mouth; it will not return to me empty; but it will accomplish that which I have purposes and prosper in that for which I sent it."* [Is. 55:8-11.]

God's ways, not our ways: may they continue to challenge us and make us grow both as individuals and as a church community...just like the rain!