

Homily based on the readings from February 21, 2026 (Isaiah 58.9b-14; Luke 5.27-32)

It is difficult for us, in this day and age, to understand how *utterly* despised tax collectors used to be. Although nobody is particularly fond of the Internal Revenue Service, there is really no comparison with the level of animosity during Biblical times. Taxation did not simply constitute a confiscation of income – it represented the brutal oppression of a foreign occupier. Tax collectors were not just obnoxious bureaucrats, but willing collaborators in the degradation of their own homeland. It is not an exaggeration to refer to them as *parasites* on their own people.

From this perspective, we can see how shocking it was that Jesus embraced – and even *ordained* – such an individual. Levi, the tax collector from today's Gospel, is almost certainly the same person as the Apostle and Evangelist Matthew. He was, quite literally, one of the first twelve bishops of the Catholic Church. Although I rarely have much

patience for the scribes and the Pharisees, I can *almost* sympathize with this particular complaint. Surely Jesus could have chosen a less loathsome candidate to serve in such a vital position.

The point, of course, is that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. He had every opportunity to select his ambassadors from among the noblest members of the Jewish population. If he had done so, however, people might have attributed the success of Christianity to the *virtue* or *skill* of the *messengers*, rather than to the truth of the *message*. Remember the words of Saint Paul:

God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God.

The power of the Gospel is *never* the result of *human* strength – but rather the majesty of *God* manifesting itself through the frailty of his emissaries.

Most people, of course, are not called to serve as bishops – but Jesus still expects all of us to leave everything behind to follow him. Regardless of what responsibilities he entrusts to us – no matter how *miniscule* – we know with *absolute* certainty that we are *totally* unworthy of fulfilling them. That unworthiness, though, can never be an excuse for apathy – in fact, quite the opposite. The template for our lives must never be our own faults and failures, but the incorruptible ideal embodied by Jesus Christ. We are incapable of improving *ourselves*, but through the grace of God – by listening to his word, by participating in his sacraments, and by dedicating our lives to his service – we can *open* our hearts to his saving power. This process of *healing* and *renewal* is the primary focus of the Lenten season – but it is also the lifelong journey of every Christian, from the moment we *first* encounter the *unfathomable* mercy of our Risen Lord and Savior.