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2 Corinthians 1:3-5

Christ is the source of our encouragement in the midst of our sufferings. “For as Christ’s sufferings overflow to us, so through Christ does our encouragement also overflow.” Discouragement is never from God. St. Paul reminds the Corinthian community and us this morning that our obligation is to encourage each other out of authentic compassion. True encouragement comes to us in the fullness of the Gospel that sin and death do not have the last word. True encouragement is that the last Word has been spoken by God the Father. He has spoken the last Word as the first Word, one and the same. The Word that is first and the Word that is last is the Word made flesh—His Son, Jesus Christ—Who fully reveals the compassion of the Father to us through His loving obedience on the Cross—a compassion that we can receive only through the action of the Holy Spirit, freely offered to us as Grace. This is truly encouragement in the face of sufferings especially when those sufferings have in no small measure been inflicted upon ourselves through sin—the cause of all discouragement.

Our feast that we celebrate today offers us an example of an Apostle who suffered such discouragement and received true encouragement through Christ. Before he became the Apostle Matthew, he was first the tax collector Matthew. Christ directly called Matthew to follow Him. It was an invitation made to Matthew while Matthew was in the midst of sin, sitting at the tax collector’s table. It was an invitation that then was further extended by Christ at the dinner table of Matthew. It is an invitation that then culminates with Matthew’s presence at Christ’s table—the banquet of the Last Supper—the Banquet of the Mass—the Banquet of the Cross—Meal and Sacrifice.

The Gospel of Matthew begins and ends with encouragement. The Gospel of Matthew begins and ends with God’s promise that God is with us—I am with you: expressed first in the announcement of the angel of the Lord to Joseph in a dream that the unborn Jesus is Emmanuel—God with us (Matt 1:23). Then at the very end of the gospel when the resurrected Jesus promises his disciples that he “will be with [them] always until the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). There is no other encouragement.

The stewardship of that encouragement is our shared responsibility as the Church centered upon Christ. Matthew’s gospel is also the only gospel of the four Gospels that uses the word *church* (*ekklesia*). The term *ekklesia* (church) occurs in two pivotal sections of the gospel. In Matthew 16:18, as Jesus gives the keys of authority to Simon Peter at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus says that he “will build my church” upon the rock of Peter’s often crumbling and stumbling faith, and that the forces of chaos will not overcome it. Secondly in chapter 18, in the midst of the discourse on community life and the church—Jesus brings the image of the church to bear in how discipline in the community is to be fostered (cf. Matt 18:17). The entire church centered upon Christ is to offer accountability on these matters that affect our life of communion. It is an accountability that is just and merciful, it is an accountability

that is demanding and compassionate, it is an accountability that is true—measured only by the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Christ comes to Matthew and calls him in the midst of his sin. This is the place he calls us as well. Like St. Paul writes to the Romans, "Where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more." The tax collectors' table was the table of selfish collusion with an evil system which dehumanized the people and fostered cynicism and discouragement about human life. It was a place of great scandal for the Jewish people. Matthew was capable of being part of that system, because of selfish gain, out of greed and arrogance. Matthew would count the taxes collected for the Empire, in that way Caesar would get what he wanted, and Matthew would take what he wanted - the seductive tyranny of selfishness, of sin. It is the initiative of Christ which calls Matthew from this tyranny. Since it is Christ's compassionate initiative that frees us from the same tyranny. During these days, Jesus comes again to us, and he will call all of us and each one of us in the tables where we gather. Jesus Christ offers us an encounter with Him, which will offer us a lasting encouragement, while he calls us from our tables of our own interest to his table, the table of the altar, the table of the cross. This is the place where we encounter Christ, the source of our encouragement our consolation, amidst our sufferings.