

Vespers Homily

The Fourth Sunday of Pentecost

June 8, 2008

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It's just a little synagogue, a small square building of mud and stacked stones. It's a warm afternoon, and the dust particles hang in the still air in the long, slanting, golden rays of the afternoon sun.

Men are seated on long benches around the walls, the best seats and the most important men seated by the Eastern wall. In the center of the Eastern wall are the niches, the tabernacle for the great scrolls of Torah wrapped in purple velvet with silver fringe and scrolls of the writings of the prophets. Not all the prophets: the synagogue is tiny and the scrolls are very expensive.

The western wall is a low wall topped by a lattice screen of wooden branches. It's the space for women and children, boys not yet having Bar Mitzvah, to stand and hear and see without entering the synagogue.

A young boy is squeezed up against the screen watching and listening with awe and fascination as the words and the sights of the synagogue unfold. He's Mattiyahu bar Alphaeus, and he is drawn, so very drawn to God. The world of the synagogue is his world. The Cantor and the Rabbi are his heroes.

So Mattiyahu goes home elated, filled with the sense of his destiny and says to his father, Alphaeus, "Abba – Daddy – I went to synagogue today, and I think I want to be a Rabbi."

Alphaeus drops his bowl and matzoh, looks up to the ceiling and cries, "A Rabbi! A Rabbi! O God, he says he's a Rabbi. After all I have done for him, this is the thanks I get. Never mind that his mother and I have slaved to keep him fed and with clothes and sent him to schul. A Rabbi! Who will care for us as we grow old – a poor Rabbi?" And he tears the edge of his robe and pulls at his beard and cries.

Mattiyahu says, "So maybe not a Rabbi?" Alphaeus, suddenly calm, says "I hoped, your mother and I hoped, we dreamed that you would go into the tax business with Uncle Moyshe, a man of qualities, a man of riches – a man who loves his family, but no, a Rabbi!"

Leaping forward a few years, Mattiyahu, now a young man, is seated one day at a table in Moyshe's Office of Taxation Collection, Inc., the dream of being a Rabbi long past, pressed down. He has accepted a life he did not choose – chosen by another – and with it he has accepted a world of power and influence, a world in which he is estranged from all but a tiny core of like people: the tax collectors, harlots and sinners of other persuasions who form a people apart. That is his world.

But, occasionally, when it's very quiet, a memory of the beauty of that day in the synagogue, of the sound of the Cantor, the pealing of the Holy Words, the rustling of Tallits, the slanting golden rays of sunlight, creeps back into his memory.

So it is on the day that a voice from the sunlit courtyard calls to Mattiyahu, "Follow me."

In His Holy Name.