



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for Saint Matthew (21st September) 2025

As the hymn we sung at the outset of the Mass stated with an insistence, which it would be difficult for even the moderately disengaged to ignore, Matthew holds three of the most senior titles in the Communion of Saints: Evangelist, Apostle and Martyr - indeed, he is the only person to be so feted with celestial honours.

These three categories of sanctity might be seen to fall into two groups: the first, Evangelist and Apostle, being so to speak, institutional roles and closed to new admissions; and the other - martyrdom - which is more of a personal accomplishment for want of a better word.

There are four Evangelists - the authors of the four canonical Gospels. Ultimately, this honour is determined by the choice of the Church, because there were other texts, which might have been included, but were not, for one reason or another. Of course, others have been deemed Evangelists - when I was in Middlesbrough, we had a diocesan Evangelist; but the status of Evangelist in the sense that Matthew is an Evangelist is constrained to the four.

Similarly, the role of Apostle was one that was appointed - this time by the incarnate Christ Himself. As I have reflected several times previously, the number twelve was as important as the identity of the individuals appointed. Saint Paul, of course, claimed to be an Apostle, others have tentatively been so designated; and in more recent times cognates of the title, if not the title itself, have been claimed for the work of Christian discipleship. The most we can say of all of this is that these people are "apostles" by analogy rather than Apostles in the sense that Matthew was an Apostle.

Martyrdom, on the other hand, represents a personal choice on the part of the martyr - doubtless, none-the-less, underpinned by the Grace of God. Unlike the status of Evangelist and Apostle, the designation has remained open to new admissions over the Christian centuries: we commemorate the martyrdom of Saint Maximilian Kolbe - murdered by the Nazis, or Saint Oscar Romero killed by political thugs in San Salvador. Had he been a Roman Catholic, we would probably have added to the list Archbishop Janani Luwum, done to death by the agents of Idi Amin in Uganda. Perhaps Father Jacques Hamel, slain at his altar in France a few years ago, will join the noble army of martyrs in due course.

We can surmise that for Saint Matthew, what I have turned his institutional roles within the life of the Church, led him to embrace his martyrdom: they required him to put himself in a place of mortal danger if we was to be faithful to the offices to which God had appointed Him: Kolbe, Romero, Luwum and Hamel would say much the same of their priesthood and episcopate.

The status of a baptized member of the Eucharistic community represents something of a blend of these two types of status - institutional and personal. In one way or another, like martyrdom, undergoing initiation into the Eucharistic community is a personal choice. However, once the step has been taken we hold a status within the life of the Church; and each of us will encounter implications of that status as we seek to respond to the particular circumstances which surround our lives.

The prospect of martyrdom might seem remote from our situation - though we should remember that it is rather more immediate to many of our fellow Christians around the world. However, for many there is an implied call to self-sacrifice of one type or another: it is an imperative, of course, embodied in the Eucharistic Liturgy; but also in the teaching of Christ preserved in the Gospels.

The question, which confronts us, is whether, when the moment comes, we shall embrace this corollary of our discipleship. Saint Matthew, our patron, stands as an instance of one who did.