

**“LEVI LEAVES HIS LEDGER (Mark 7)”**

***Mark 2:13-17***

It's a couple of weeks now since we last looked at this story of the life of Jesus as Mark tells it in his gospel. We've seen the ministry of Jesus starting to take off and we've noticed how the radically new message that he has come to bring - the message that the Kingdom of God is about to break into this world, as predicted in the good tidings of the Old Testament prophets - is starting to have an effect on the people of the area in the region of Galilee, in the north of Palestine. Jesus has preached about it in the synagogue, the main meeting place of the Jewish community, and has demonstrated it in the exorcising of demons and the healing of disease and disability.

We also saw, in the first part of this second chapter, that Jesus was starting to attract opposition as he proclaimed a message that seemed very different from that which the people - and particularly their leaders - were used to. In that first story - that of the paralysed man who was healed after being lowered through a hole in the roof - the focus of the controversy was to do with the right of Jesus to forgive sins. In the part of the story we have read this morning, it's all about the company Jesus keeps. Some people - especially those who are to some extent in the public eye - can never do anything right, and Jesus is starting to learn that lesson himself.

But let's begin at the beginning. It all starts off with Jesus' calling Levi. Jesus is in Capernaum again. Capernaum is, at this time, a busy lakeside fishing village on the shore of Galilee. Not only is there a good deal of trade and industry created by the fishing itself, but it is on an important route that runs from the area to the north of Palestine down through Galilee and Judea to Egypt in the south. And there's a fair bit of east-west traffic, too. Jesus is walking along the shore in Capernaum, as the rabbis, the teachers, often did, teaching as he goes.

Suddenly, he stops at one of the many little customs booths that were set up around the town to gather taxes from the fishermen and tolls from the traders who passed through. Sitting in this particular booth is a man called Levi - a tax collector. Now Levi was not a popular man - officials who take money off other people never are particularly popular, but at this time and in this place they are especially reviled. Levi and his colleagues are social and religious outcasts. It's not simply a question of no-one liking them. They are actually officially declared *persona non grata*. There were several reasons for this - as I say, quite apart from most people's unwillingness to part with their hard-earned cash.

Firstly, Levi and his like are agents of a foreign power, and an occupying power at that. They are working directly or indirectly for the Romans. In Levi's case, it's pretty likely that he was working for Herod Antipas, who was actually Jewish, but he was a puppet ruler kept in power by the Romans and the money he collected would be passed directly to them anyway.

Secondly, the tax collectors were not generally considered to be honest men. They were not directly employed by the authorities, but bought the right to collect taxes - a kind of primitive "Private Finance Initiative". (I'm not sure that there's any kind of PFI other than primitive, actually.) So, in order to recoup what he had paid for the privilege of collecting the taxes and to make a good profit on top, he had to cream off quite a margin for himself and the poor tax payers had no alternative but to cough up.

Thirdly, because Levi was working on an international trade route, he would be in regular contact with people who were considered by the religious authorities to be ritually unclean. They might well be dealing in unclean foodstuffs - non-kosher meat and so on, textiles and other materials that were not within the fairly strict bounds set down by the interpreters of the law of Moses, or they were just plain foreign. And contact with an unclean person or commodity rendered you unclean yourself. So Levi and

his colleagues would not have been able to attend the synagogue or enter the Temple. They could not have had any social contact with Jewish people who had taken the trouble to keep themselves “clean”. And they would have had a pretty lonely time down at the pub of an evening because no-one wanted to talk to them or get anywhere near them.

But working where he did, Levi would almost certainly have heard about Jesus, and maybe even seen or listened to him before. So when Jesus comes along and very directly calls him to follow him, Levi seems to have no hesitation in getting up from his ledger, leaving behind a booth full of money and following Jesus out on to the shore and into a completely new life. Notice that Jesus doesn't lay down any pre-conditions. He simply calls him. There is no test of orthodoxy. There's no catechism, no introductory course, no call to repentance even. It's simply, “Come on, then. Join my new group.”

For many of us today, I would suggest, that is the real scandal. That's what we find most offensive. We may have no qualms about the kind of people who join the church (at least, we say we don't!). We may be quite happy that all-comers are welcomed into the life of the church. But we cannot cope with the fact that Jesus makes absolutely no demands on this man other than to ask him to follow him. How can we possibly know that this man believes the right things? He may not understand the atonement correctly and may have a faulty view of the Trinity. How can we tell what his family life is like? He may be living with someone he's not married to. How can we be sure that he knows how to behave in church? He may sit in the wrong seat or bring other undesirable people in with him.

But Jesus makes no such demands. He simply calls him and welcomes him. But the seriousness of Levi's commitment is not in doubt. The people Jesus has already called to join him are all fishermen and we know that they can always return to their nets if needs be: in fact, on more than one occasion in the accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John we read that they do. Levi can never go back to his profession. Before the seat in his booth is cold, there would have been another person in it and his job would have been taken. Levi, in leaving his booth has left everything to follow Jesus. It's an irrevocable break and Levi knows it.

The call of Jesus is so winsome. He is calling out to a person who has probably not had anyone show him kindness for quite some time. Other than his colleagues in the tax business, there is no-one to whom Levi can go for company and companionship. But Jesus calls out to the unloved and the unlovely. As T W Manson puts it, this is “*the gospel of the underdog, the poor, the despised, the outcast, the sinner.*” Jesus has not come to shore up the status quo or to affirm the already comfortable and complacent. He has come to call the people who would normally get accidentally overlooked or purposely excluded.

But, of course, Levi has a lot of friends who are also underdogs. And he wants them to know about this man who has just given him the opportunity of a new start, the chance to adopt a new agenda, a radically different approach to life. So he arranges for them to have an opportunity of meeting the man himself. The translators of the NIV make some assumptions here about what happens and reflect those assumptions in their wording of v15. In the Greek it's not at all clear whose house they are in, and therefore who has set up the meal. But the point is that Levi gets some folk around for the first recorded instance of an Alpha supper!

And just like the Alpha suppers today, there are a number of people hanging around to point out the flaws in it all. We've already met the “*teachers of the law*” in Mark's story of Jesus. They were the upholders of tradition and the unofficial police of the religious establishment. Now we meet the Pharisees, who were a faction within the broader group. Let's just sort out who they were before we go any further, because they crop up an awful lot as the story of Jesus unfolds.

Although we tend to draw a lot of conclusions about them from the way in which they are portrayed in the four gospels, we don't actually know a great deal about their history and origins. They first appear a

couple of centuries before Jesus came on the scene and the famous Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote that they were “*a body of Jews with the reputation of excelling the rest of the nation in the observances of religion, and as exact exponents of the laws.*” We do know that they were a lay group (not rabbis) from all walks of life and they focused on doing and teaching the law of Moses. They were very keen to ensure that the law which God had given Moses many centuries earlier was upheld and that it could be interpreted properly in every new situation that arose. There’s no doubt that they started off with the right intentions and even during the time of Jesus there were many good and pious people amongst them. But for many of them, the fervent obsession with getting the law right in every particular had led them into a way of life that was over rigid, uncaring and, often, actually rather hypocritical - as Jesus himself pointed out on more than one occasion. So for them to turn up at a meal where Jesus was mixing with “*sinners and tax collectors*” - people who were on and beyond the very margins of respectable society - meant that there was going to be a bit of an argument.

When they hear of this new preacher man - who has already upset them in the synagogue - now consorting with the dregs of society, they are deeply shocked and express their dismay. What on earth is this man doing eating - *eating*, the sign of real friendship - with these people, the very presence of whom is a sure sign of uncleanness and questionable goings-on?

As is rapidly becoming apparent, Jesus always has an answer ready when it comes to responding to his critics. On this occasion, he offers them a proverb, and goes on to apply it to his own ministry (v17). You see, the Pharisees had no problem with God working to help people - but their view was that God would work on behalf of the righteous. And they had no problem with the idea that God would grant forgiveness to repentant sinners. As E P Sanders puts it, “*There is nothing distinctive about saying that God accepts repentant sinners.*” But he goes on, “*Jesus proclaimed God’s love to sinners **before** they repented.*”

This is where the message of the Kingdom which Jesus came to preach and practice parts company with the message of the Pharisees and the other guardians of the law of Moses. Jesus has not come simply to announce God’s forgiveness to anyone who would listen - the Old Testament prophets had been doing that for centuries. He had come to “*call*” sinners. Now, the words Jesus uses have a certain ambivalence about them which we usually take to indicate that he was speaking ironically and saying that he didn’t come to call those who **considered themselves righteous**, but that’s probably only just a way of making this fit in with our preconceptions. The Kingdom of God which Jesus is inaugurating will include the righteous (whoever they may be and however many of them there are), but his specific call is to those who are really sinners - those who would otherwise be excluded from the kingdom.

You see, when Jesus told the parable of the Lost Sheep, for example, the shepherd didn’t get rid of the ninety-nine who were safe in preference for the one who wandered off. The woman who lost a coin didn’t keep the one she found and dispose of the other nine. They were all there, but Jesus was especially concerned about those who would otherwise lose out on the grace of God. The Pharisees, of course, considered that if you were a sinner it was your own fault entirely and you didn’t deserve to enjoy the love of God. Jesus came along turning that on its head and saying that sinners were the special objects of God’s love. God’s grace was particularly appropriate for them and he wanted everyone to know it. That’s the radical message of the Kingdom: that’s the new agenda that Jesus is calling people to adopt as their own.

Now, is that good news or what? Whatever your situation today, however much you have sinned, however far you may feel you are from God, however much you may feel that you are not righteous (whatever that means for you), Jesus is saying, “I’ve come to call you. I’ve come to give you a new start.” There are no pre-conditions. There’s no tick list of things you’ve got to say or do or assent to before you can respond. God loves you and he wants you to enjoy the benefit of that love. It’s a simple call. And there’s a simple response - “*Follow me.*”

And when Jesus says “*Follow me - just as you are*”, he is confronting you with the greatest gift and the greatest challenge you’ll ever face. For Levi it meant a clean break with the past in terms of his employment, and a recognition that his prospects as a taxman were now at an end. He had to walk away, literally, from all that was familiar and comfortable and trust Jesus for the future. He didn’t have time to explore all the intellectual and philosophical questions there might have been in his mind - they would be answered as he travelled the road to which Jesus had called him. Are you prepared to do that? To step out in faith and walk the way of Jesus? As the poem that Terry Bath read out last Sunday evening said, it takes real courage to do it. But the results and the rewards are guaranteed.

Jesus is passing by again this morning. He’s spotted you - even while all these righteous people around you have been listening to his teaching and watching for the mistakes - and he says “*Follow me*”. Are you going to be drawn by the power of his love, by the reality of God’s grace, to respond - just as you are? I’ll let you into a secret - one that they probably don’t know themselves - but all those righteous people sitting around you haven’t really got it all sewn up either! But Jesus calls you all - that’s why he came.

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### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Levi’s call was very sudden. How did you hear and respond to the call of Jesus?
2. Tax collectors and customs officials don’t have the same social and religious stigma today. Who might be the 21st century equivalent?
3. Are there still “Pharisees” about today? How might you recognise them? Are you one?
4. All Jesus asked of Levi was that he followed him. How can we square that with the demands that we seem to make of potential “converts”?
5. To what extent is a right understanding of doctrine necessary for salvation?
6. Reflect on Levi’s enthusiasm to share his new-found friend with others (v15). In what ways could you attempt to emulate that?
7. Who are the “righteous”?
8. What is the main thing you have learned from this story?