

“NOW!”

Luke 5:27-32; 9:57-62, 2 Corinthians 5:16 – 6:2

We live in an instant society. With the facility of the Internet and mobile ‘phones, with electronic gizmos and hi-tech apparatus you can do pretty well what you want when you want. Via my computer I can log on to the school website and find out if my child is in the class she should be in (and if the system is working, I can track her marks as well). I can order something on the Internet from a firm the other side of the world and find that the whole transaction has been completed in the time it takes to click a computer mouse. If I see something in a shop that takes my fancy, I can go and get it immediately, using cards and PIN numbers and so on. It seems that there is nothing that cannot be done NOW!

But there still things we prefer to put off, aren’t there? In an economy built on debt, we can defer our payments until we feel the time is right – or until we have actually got the money or consolidated our debts. We can tap into the futures markets and look at what might possibly be happening weeks, months or even years from now. And there are tasks we have to do that we sometimes put off because we don’t actually want to do them, or because our inhumanly hectic schedules mean that we just cannot fit them in at the moment. There’s a Spanish proverb that says *“Tomorrow is often the busiest day of the week.”*

On occasions our procrastination (a word which has at its root the Latin for “tomorrow” – *cras*) or our hesitation can cost us dear. Limited offers run out (although there’s usually another one hot on its heels). Those goods you saw and couldn’t quite decide about are sold the next time you go. The product you saw on E-bay has attracted a higher bid. The ferry tickets you wanted have shot up in price over the past few days – as happened to me last week. There can often be a huge risk involved in waiting, in putting off the decision.

We’re looking this morning at an offer that is amazing, an offer Jesus made and continues to make, an offer that costs nothing but demands everything, an offer that has an expiry date on it – but we don’t know exactly when that expiry date is. You see the offer expires on death – or when Jesus returns, as he has promised to do: we can’t be sure when either of those things will take place, nor how much time there will be to prepare. And the risk we take – the biggest risk any of us could possibly take, I believe – is that we don’t respond to the offer Jesus makes. So let’s think about this offer – what it is, what Jesus has to say about it – and look at the example of someone who wasn’t prepared to take the risk.

The offer is set out in the first reading we heard this morning – *2 Corinthians 5*. The offer is a completely new start, the opportunity to make a break with the past and all the things we don’t like about it, and begin again with Jesus. Now, there are all kinds of things that we maybe don’t like about our lives – for some of us there will be more than for others – but they all boil down to one thing, which we may or may not be aware of. Our lives are not what they should be or could be because we are alienated from God.

You see, God created us as part of his perfect world, images of himself who had the task of managing a wonderful planet in collaboration with God. But very early on, human beings began making the wrong choices, fouling up the world and becoming estranged from God. As we blithely trod our own path, which was basically a thoroughly self-centred one, God’s sadness at the rift between us and him grew. If you read through the Old Testament part of the Bible, you’ll see just how deep that sadness became, as God gave humanity opportunity after opportunity to renew our relationship with him and, by and large, men and women rejected God’s plan to return creation and humanity to the state he originally intended – what he called his Kingdom.

In the end, he sent his own Son, Jesus Christ, into our world to show us in his own life glimpses of what that Kingdom could look like, little previews of a world in which diseases were no more, in which selfishness was conquered by co-operation and sharing, in which God was worshipped and loved as he wanted to be. To accomplish that, Jesus became, as it were, the lightning conductor for all the evil in the

world and, as he died on the cross at Golgotha, he demonstrated that evil was comprehensively defeated for all time. And as he was brought back to life on Easter morning, he blazed a trail for the rest of us, indicating that we too could overcome death and be reunited with God for eternity, resulting not just in a hope for the everlasting future, but also a satisfying and fulfilling life here and now.

That's what Paul's on about when he writes that "*God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ.*" And, having taken up Jesus on that offer of reconciliation, Paul is now so sold on the idea that he is desperate for everyone else to take it up as well. In the last sentence we read from that section of his letter he writes that "*Now is the day of salvation*". This offer is current now. This salvation, this offer of escaping from the limitations of a life alienated from God and the prospect of being reconciled with him for now and for ever, needs to be taken up now. Which is why Paul says, in v20, "*We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God*".

The thing is, though, that you've got to take up this offer before you leave this life: there will be no opportunity to do anything about it once you're dead. Nor will there be anything you can do about it once Jesus has been returned. And although we like to live our lives as if neither of those things is likely to happen in the near future, we can have absolutely no firm idea of when either of them will take place. So there is a real urgency in the invitation to accept the offer God makes through Jesus. Which is why Jesus speaks as he does in *Luke 9*, the third of the passages we heard earlier.

In some ways **what Jesus has to say** to the people who have the opportunity of joining him seems rather harsh, but it's clearly Jesus' way of stressing the urgency of his call. We know from his stories and from the parts of his teaching and the teaching of the Bible as a whole that we are to take our responsibilities to our families seriously. But here Jesus is emphasising the urgent and single-minded response to his call that is needed. The refusal of him to allow someone to go and bury his father seems particularly callous, until you realise that he is not actually forbidding him from seeing to his father's funeral there and then. If the man's father had died, he would be occupied with the funeral there and then: what he is asking is that he might stay with his father until he finally dies, which is quite a different kettle of fish, because that could be months or years away.

Those who are not prepared to answer the call, respond to the offer and focus their attention and energies on the life of the Kingdom of God are taking a huge risk, as Jesus makes clear in his answer to the third man. We know that following Jesus did not mean a total break with the past – after all, Peter and his friends still had their boats and went fishing from time to time. What he was asking for was a re-ordering of priorities, a clear consideration of values and emphases in one's life. And there was no time to spend shilly-shallying about. A decision had to be made. After all, Jesus might not be passing that way again as far as they were aware.

And so we have **an example** in the story of Levi, about whom we heard just now. Levi (or Matthew, as he is also known according to the story in *Matthew 9:9*) was a tax collector, or customs officer in Capernaum. Capernaum was, at this time, a busy lakeside fishing village on the shore of Galilee. Not only was there a good deal of trade and industry created by the fishing itself, but it was on an important route that ran from the area to the north of Palestine down through Galilee and Judea to Egypt in the south. And there was a fair bit of east-west traffic, too. Jesus was 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 this man called Levi. 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, away from a life that meant he was alienated from most of his fellow citizens, let alone from God, 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 Levi, this unhesitating response to Jesus' call was a huge risk. He simply stood up and walked away from his job, from his colleagues, from his income. But the risk of his not responding in this way was even greater. Had he stayed where he was and Jesus had not come back through Capernaum again, the opportunity for a new start could have disappeared for ever. So he responded immediately and enthusiastically (it wasn't long before he was celebrating his new life with a banquet) and the rest, as they say, is history. Levi became one of Jesus' core group of followers, he wrote one of the gospels and he is remembered to this day as one of the first apostles.

Through the pages of the Bible, through the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit, through the words of those whose task it is today to proclaim the gospel, Jesus is still inviting people to join him. He is still calling men and women to leave behind those things which add to their alienation from God and inviting them to discover what being reconciled with God can really mean, both for today and for eternity. He calls you to find new purpose in his service, as Levi did. He calls you to be a disciple, a Christian.

St Augustine of Hippo was one of the great saints of the early church, still revered today and his theological ideas are still at the heart of much that we now believe in the Church. He wrote about his call from Jesus in these words: *“I could give no reply except a lazy and drowsy, ‘Yes, Lord, yes. I'll get to it right away; just don't bother me for a little while.’ But ‘right away’ didn't happen right away; and ‘a little while’ turned out to be a very long while.”* How many of us could echo those words?

Most, if not all of you have heard it all before. For some of you the call is to follow Jesus more closely. For some it is to give up something that is getting in the way of Jesus' using you as he wants. For some the call is to move into some new sphere of service for him. For some it is the call to commit your life to him for the first time. For some it is to open yourself up fully to the power of the Holy Spirit. But you have nonetheless decided to wait – to wait until this particular job is finished; to wait until the children are

all through university; to wait until this happens or that happens – there are things to be done, other priorities at the moment. Are you prepared to risk the certainty of reconciliation with God and an eternity spent in his presence for the possibility of some kind of temporary fulfilment in these other ways? How long have you got? How well do you know what the future holds for you?

Now is the time. Now is the time to respond to that call of Jesus, whatever it may be, whatever it may entail. Well, there's no time like the present. Don't put it off until tomorrow, because that may well be too late. If Jesus has been calling you and you have yet to respond – maybe after years of his trying, or maybe just from this morning – take a few moments now to say "Yes". We're going to listen to a song by the gospel group *The Winans*. It's called *Tomorrow*. As the music plays, respond to Jesus now.

Discussion notes on next page

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The offer is set out in *2 Corinthians 5*: a completely new start, the opportunity to make a break with the past and all the things we don't like about it, and begin again with Jesus. That's what Paul's on about when he writes that "*God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ.*" And he says, "*Now is the day of salvation.*" There is a real urgency in the invitation to accept the offer God makes through Jesus. Which is why Jesus speaks as he does in *Luke 9*, the third of the passages we heard earlier.

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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. 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"?
3. Reflect on Levi's enthusiasm to share his new-found friend with others (*v29*). In what ways could you attempt to emulate that?
4. Why are we often so hesitant in responding to Jesus' call? How can we be sure it is his call?
5. What is the main thing you have learned from these passages?