

Why share faith? Because God loves people

Luke 5:27-32

1. Introduction

A familiar story, but perhaps you might be thinking that you thought it was Matthew the tax collector not Levi. In fact it is only in Matthew's gospel that the tax collector is called Matthew. The story appears in Mark as well as in Luke, but in these gospels the tax collector's name is Levi. Why should that be?

- Two different but similar stories?
- The tax collector had two names, or Jesus gave him a new name as he did for Simon who he called Peter. Levi means 'joined' and Matthew means 'gift of God'. And what a gift he received from God when Jesus entered his life!
- Or perhaps it had something to do with his genes?!

Be that as it may, take a look at this passage and compare it with the call of Jesus' first disciples, Simon and Andrew and James and John as recorded in Mark 1:16-18. Take a look at the similarities - Jesus **SAW** Levi in his booth, just as he had **SEEN** Simon and Andrew casting their nets. Jesus says to Levi, **'FOLLOW ME'** just as he had Simon and Andrew. Levi **LEFT EVERYTHING AND FOLLOWED HIM** just as Andrew and Simon had done. It all looks so similar. Yet whilst we may find the calling of the fisherman wonderful, we have to say that the call of Levi is shocking. It isn't to do with Jesus, he has treated Levi no differently from the way he treated the fishermen. It has to do with the character of Levi.

We know that Levi was a tax collector. I guess most of us don't like paying taxes. But in our day, tax collectors operate within the law. In Jesus' day, tax collectors like Levi had no laws to work by. The Roman authorities told them how much they were expected to hand over, but they did not care much how it was done. What is more, they received no salary, they were expected to take their own pay from whatever they were able to collect from the people.

There are stories of how tax collectors would set up a booth at a roadside and charge a toll on any travellers who happened to pass by. They might charge so much per person, plus so much per cart, plus so much for the number of wheels on the cart, plus so much for each donkey. Or whatever else they thought they could set a tax for. So not only were these men working for the hated Romans, they were also making their living by exploiting their fellow countrymen. In fact, one Roman writer of the day recorded how he had seen a monument that had been erected in honour of an honest tax collector. Honest tax collectors were that rare.

In fact, the suggestion has been made that Levi had set up his booth to take advantage of the crowds that he knew would be coming along the road to see Jesus. Whereas the fishermen seem to have been ordinary men, Levi's whole life has depended on exploitation and greed. So what is Jesus doing calling a man such as this?

## **2. Jesus calls sinners**

The uncomfortable truth of this story is, that Jesus calls sinners. At least, it is uncomfortable if you regard yourself as a decent, upright, law-abiding person. But if you regard yourself as a sinner, then this is the best news of all.

We are told that Jesus saw Levi in his booth. The word translated as 'saw' is not used often in the Bible. It means to view attentively, to view with understanding. Jesus is looking at Levi but looking into his heart, what he is really about. What is so shocking is that Jesus simply says to Levi, 'Follow me.' He does not mention anything about the kind of life he has been leading. There is no mention here of having to get his life in order before he can follow Jesus. What about repentance first? We'll come to that a bit later on. But in the mean time we can see that Jesus does not seek to pass judgement on Levi. Rather, he calls Levi to follow him.

The thing is, people tend to have this idea that the church is for good people, or at least for people who think they are good. It may even be that because we give this impression, people outside the church think that this excludes them. And as individuals it may be that we have a stumbling-block when it comes to following Jesus. We think that before we can follow him, we have to sort our lives out first. We think that is what repentance is all about.

The only problem with the idea that Christianity is for good people is that the founder of Christianity taught precisely the opposite. *'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.'* Jn 3:16-17 And do you know what Jesus says to you now, if you are thinking like that? He says just two words to you. 'Follow me'. There is a song which starts, 'I have decided to follow Jesus.' The trouble is with this, it is the wrong way round. Before we decide to follow Jesus, first of all he calls us to follow him. Our following him is merely a response to his call. His first concern for you that you should follow him, get to know him. Otherwise, how can you ever

put your trust in him? The truth is, God loves people, Jesus loves people. But the challenge for us is, are we prepared to respond by dropping everything and follow Jesus as he calls us to do?

### **3. Jesus shares with sinners**

But the shock does not stop there. Not only does Jesus call sinners, he shares with them too. In verses 29-30 we see Jesus sharing in the banquet that Levi has arranged for him. It gets him and his disciples into hot water with the authorities. Surely he knows what kind of people he is eating with? So the Pharisees ask the disciples - they are there at the banquet with Jesus - 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?'

The Pharisees have compartmentalised people into particular groups. These are tax collectors and sinners. The thing is, if you knew that the people were like that you surely would not want to mix with them. In their filing cabinet such people would be in the untouchable drawer. You would make yourself unclean and then you would have to undergo all kinds of rituals and red tape before you would be allowed back into the synagogue to worship God. You would be cutting yourself off from God. It was as if the sin you saw in others was contagious.

We too can like filing cabinets. We can seek to file different people into certain compartments. It is very convenient because it makes it easier for us to exclude some from the love we should be showing.

So, when the Pharisees saw this, they had a fit. This is always how the self-righteous react when Godly people reach out in loving ways toward those whom society considers sinful. Levi's banquet reminds us that because of Jesus a group of sinners that

deserve rejection are invited to the table that testifies God's grace. It is a table that we are invited to join, in spite of our sinfulness. We who were apart from God and were not a part of the family of God, are made children of God, because of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus.

I like Levi. He gets it. He knows that he does not deserve a relationship with Jesus, but Jesus comes and gets him. I know my faults and failures. I know that the only way I have a relationship with Jesus is that he came for me. I know that I did not do anything to earn it or could live a life worthy of God. I could have been - I should have been - left out. But Jesus invited me in. Lord, please help me to remember that I belong at the sinners table with Jesus - not among the self-righteous religious people who try to second guess God's grace.

#### **4. Jesus calls sinners to repentance**

As the Pharisees criticise the disciples, Jesus butts in. What he says is the crux of the whole episode. Perhaps it is the main reason for the story being in the Bible in the first place. He says, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.' (v31-32) He shows up the gaping flaw in the Pharisees' attitude. They think sinners are condemned by God and should be avoided by all decent people. But the whole story of the Bible centres on how God continually seeks the return of his people who have turned away from him. Far from condemning the sinner, God's love is so great that he seeks out the sinner and longs for him to return to him.

But up until now we have avoided the issue of repentance. It all starts with his call. However, Jesus does not call us as sinners

and expect nothing more from us. His reason for calling us is that we may have our lives changed around.

I wonder what kind of picture we have in our minds of what repentance is about? Perhaps we have a picture of needing to fall on our knees to confess what is wrong in our lives (a slight exaggeration, perhaps). The word in Greek was used as a military command - not to fall on your knees but as the equivalent of 'About turn.' That is exactly how Levi responded to Jesus when he told him, 'Follow me'. He left everything behind him and followed Jesus. This was a complete change of life for Levi. He was no longer dependant on exploitation and greed. Rather, he was now prepared to depend on Jesus. When we respond to Jesus' call to follow him we are in fact repenting. We are no longer going our own way but are following Jesus. We have about-turned.

We need to be clear that the call to follow is not a once and for all, but a once and always leaving everything behind to follow Jesus. Remember Levi. When you find yourself sitting comfortably in judgment of others, you are in the wrong place. It is your call to go out of your way to reach out to those on the edges of religious life and invite them to join you at Jesus' side and then trust God to move in their lives.

How about you? What is your testimony about your relationship with Jesus? Is Jesus welcoming you to begin a relationship with him through faith? Is Jesus inviting you to follow Him? Have you said "yes" to following Jesus but have never made that commitment public so others might see and hear your witness of faith? Or is he calling you once again to 'Follow him'? Are you ready to respond again to his call?