

Jesus says to Levi: 'Follow me'

Just for a moment I want to focus on Chapter 2 of Mark's Gospel where we read about Levi and his encounter with Jesus. Levi was counting taxes as he always did, hated by everyone, including probably himself. Imagine, then, the shock when Jesus, looking Levi straight in the eyes, says to him: 'Follow me.' In Matthew's Gospel this story is part of a series many of which are healing miracles and in many senses this story is one too. As Jesus dines with tax collectors at Levi's house he responds to those who asked how he, full of integrity and goodness, who claimed a special relationship with God, could associate with people whose lives compromised with evil. Jesus answers them in medical metaphor: 'those who are well do not need a doctor, its those who are ill that need a doctor.' It was a healing miracle, yes, because Levi was never the same again, simply because somebody had treated him as a human being. He felt wanted by someone. It is clear that true healing begins in the heart and that is where Jesus' words touched and found outcast Levi. Paul Tillich once wrote: 'we need the courage to accept that we are accepted in spite of being unacceptable.'

In Mark's Gospel this story is seen as part of his build up to show that the work of Jesus is bringing God's whole new order into being. As the hymn puts it: 'Meekness and majesty, manhood and deity in perfect harmony, the man who is God.' It's the new wine that is going to burst the old bottles; now that a sun has risen its time to blow out the candles. Things are different, there is no room for prejudices and practices which do not conform to God's ideal, or for inflexible laws and traditions. In Jesus the centre shifted; people once on the edge now find themselves at the centre.

What of the little command Jesus gave to Levi on that strange day in Capernaum? One thing that people didn't want Levi, the tax collector, to do was to follow them. They wanted to leave him behind, forget about him and concentrate on nice, lovable people, not on those who embarrass or frighten them, make them angry or ashamed. Yet Jesus says: 'Follow me, Levi, follow me to the party where God's love will flow like new wine which every person can drink' No one pretends, no one has anything to prove, everyone can feel at one with each other and God. I remember a sermon by our curate, Revd Christine Haydon, in this church, almost 20 years ago now in which she likened Jesus to a rope bridge to God and urged us to take hold of the bridge, to ask for God's forgiveness and claim his promise of eternal life. That is exactly what Jesus was asking Levi to do in Capernaum – to grasp hold of the rope bridge, walk along as it swings around and accept Jesus' invitation to God's wonderful party.

The crunch came, of course, when Levi realised that the party wasn't just for him. Once the doctor cures him, then he must become the doctor. And that applies to us too. We have an opportunity, now, in our Stewardship campaign, to make a renewed, individual commitment to Jesus. In a few week's time, at the patronal service in June we can lay our new pastoral mission before God, one which increases our fellowship with Jesus, our willingness to do as He wants and loves as he loves. This includes a commitment to give of our time and gifts and support to God's church here. As Levi responded to the invitation he became Matthew, one of Jesus' most committed disciples. As he walked on that rope bridge he had accepted that Jesus WAS the Way, the truth and the Life. Those of us who, over the past four weeks, have tried to discover what we truly believe about God, in the Nurturing our Faith course, unanimously agreed that we believe in an inexhaustible God who is with us only in

this place and nowhere else, full of unconditional love and grace, grace that we see enacted out in the life of Jesus. Like Levi, God wants us to be present, now, and attend to God, who is always there in the present moment.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8:11: 'On with it, then and finish the job! Be as eager to finish it as you were to plan it and do it with what you now have (Good News).' The Message translation says: 'Your heart's been in the right place all along. You've got what it takes to finish it up so go to it.' And from the Easy-to Read Version: 'So now finish the work you have started! Then your 'doing' will be equal to your 'wanting to do.' Give from what you have!' It's all about the ways and means of walking along that rope bridge as we are and with what we have.

In this month's parish magazine I have written about the classic story of the Wind in the Willows. There are four main characters. If you are familiar with the story you will know that they all have a different temperament and outlook on life. BADGER is a calm, careful planner who thinks things through logically based upon a life of rich experience. He's the sensible one. RATTY is practical. He works at getting things right, just as he wants them. His house, his boat, his beloved riverbank, his way of life is comfortable and practical. TOAD, spontaneous, impatient, impetuous Toad, goes with the fashion, no plans, no cares, no forethought, just wanting to try everything – caravans, motorbikes, cars. Finally there is MOLE, simple in his tastes no desire to do great things, no logical thinker, no pretence. Yet it was MOLE who on the first page of the book, had the urge to do something different, a spirit of adventure and discovery which led him to leave his underground home and make a dash for freedom from his dreary and ordinary routine. He had the desire to explore. It was the start of a series of new adventures, friends, situations in which he did simple things, asked simple questions but new situations to which he gave a great deal. The commitment to his friends was total. Of all of them it was Mole who had the urge to explore, try out the new and, unlike Toad, commit himself to it.

Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit we have to keep moving forward to new situations. Standing still is not an option. Try standing still for long on a rope bridge! I have tried! If we do, our Stewardship campaign will not be successful. Listening to God, and guided by the Spirit, we can dream, explore and discover, not bogged down by practicalities and convention with Paul's words echoing in our ears: 'Be as eager to finish it as you were to plan it and do it with what you now have.' Paraphrasing the hymn: take our life and let it, Lord, be consecrated to thee, take our hands, our voices, our silver and gold, our wills and our love, take all our senses and our gifts, take all our moments and our days and let them ALL flow in CEASELESS praise to the Lord.

When Christopher Wren planned the new St Paul's Cathedral he prayed about a magnificent arched ceiling stretching towards heaven. Experienced architects claimed such a design was flawed. It needed pillars to hold the roof up. Wren genuinely believed that God was guiding him but after prayer and listening to the views of older and wiser colleagues, he relented and built the pillars. Fifty years after his death, during repainting, it was discovered that the extra pillars were several inches short of the ceiling; they were actually doing nothing. Wren believed in God's guidance so much that he had the courage and creativity to risk something new. He dared to believe in his own convictions. Isn't that what our commitment to follow Jesus is all about? Prayers, plans, active response! Put another way, READY, AIM, FIRE. Not

Ready, aim, ready, aim ready, aim, or as Toad would advocate – fire, fire, fire. How much of a positive contribution to the morale and ministry of our church can you or I make? ‘Come and follow me, Levi’ said Jesus. ‘Come and work with me and find out that I am the way, the truth and the life.’ Are we prepared to accept the same invitation?

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