

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

New Wine

Rev. Catherine Buchan

Sunday 5th February 2012

Mark 2:13-22

1 John 1:5-2:2

I wonder what is the worst job in the world? Working in an abattoir? Or in a sewage works? I suppose each of us would have our own ideas of what would make a job particularly unpleasant. For many people though being constantly on the receiving end of abuse would rank quite high. Think of a traffic-warden, who only sees people who are trying to prove that they don't owe the fine they have just been charged, who are always trying to prove that they could really park there, or they weren't really parked at all, who often round on the writer of the parking ticket with abuse. That is a little what life must have been like for Levi.

Levi was a tax-collector. No one likes the tax-man, even now, though usually now we don't meet them in the flesh, just in the abstract. Indeed the only tax-collector I know personally is a lovely man and a Session Clerk in Edinburgh! Still, there is something none of us relishes in having to pay our taxes. We are told that our pay will be such and such, and then it seems that it isn't, because there is this certain amount of it that we never see. We may agree that the money is needed for the various national purposes to which it goes, but still, actually paying it is something else again.

And what if you didn't agree that those who ruled your country should have any of it? What if you thought they shouldn't be there at all? And what if you were asked to pay tax for doing something which all your life had been free? None of us likes it when the tax laws change: remember the poll tax riots? How would you feel about the person who stopped you in your tracks and asked for your money?

That was Levi's position. Collecting tax in or near Capernaum he wasn't gathering directly for the Romans, but for Herod Antipas. This was one of the sons of Herod the great of whom we read in the Christmas story. When he died his large kingdom, which he ruled under Rome, was divided between his three sons. Herod Antipas got the Galilee and his brother Philip got the part we now call the Golan heights, just to the north, extending towards Syria. The taxes which Levi was probably gathering were a border toll for crossing from Herod's territory to Philip's. Until recently this had not been a border and travel on these roads had been free. You can imagine the excuses and abuse he got in the course of any given day. And, of course, it wasn't Levi's fault, just as it is not the fault of the traffic warden if you get a ticket. He may not have agreed with the new rules. It may have been the only job he could get - we are not told.

Then along comes Jesus, and instead of heaping abuse on unfortunate Levi's head, he gives him an invitation: "Follow me". He is invited to leave his isolation and become one of a group. He is invited into a fuller life. And off he goes, gladly. He goes to the feast of the Kingdom of God.

Some translations of our story give us the impression that the feast is held in Levi's house, but the Greek does not say so. It simply says "his house," and the last person mentioned was not Levi, but Jesus. It may well have been Jesus' house to which all Levi's colleagues flocked.

I read one translation which said that Levi got up and followed Jesus, and *"That's how Jesus came to be sitting at home with lots of tax-collectors and sinners. There they were, plenty of them, sitting*

with Jesus and his disciples; they had become his followers."

And that raises questions with the authorities. Jesus is with tax-collectors and other sinners. He is with people who didn't pretend to be perfect.

Jesus said that he did not come to call the righteous. That does not mean that there are lots of people who are excluded from his call by reason of their saintliness. From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture has always assured us that no one is righteous, no one is able of him or herself to keep to God's standards, even if sometimes we may satisfy ourselves by keeping our own, lower standards. We read in John's letter this morning about how if we say that we have not sinned, have done nothing wrong, then that in itself is a lie, and so we fall from grace.

Admitting our guilt can be a difficult thing, and it is particularly difficult for those who try to show their best side to the world. Which is most of us. There is nothing wrong with wanting people to see the best of us. Where the danger lies is when we start believing that this is all there is to see, when we are able to choose to forget that there is a less good side, or when we start to excuse our failings, rather than repent of them.

When I was a teenager, someone gave me a little booklet entitled "The 4 Spiritual Laws." I don't remember all four of them, and I think that the way they distilled the gospel into law was reprehensible. But the first of them remains with me. It was "Admit that you are a sinner." It stays with me, because no one ever had to tell me to do that. Maybe it was my upbringing, with God's standard always held before me. Maybe it was my gender: they say that on the whole women naturally see their own faults better than men do: certainly if you contrast what girls and boys do when confronted with a mirror, you will see that the girls tend to frown and peer, while the boys strut!

Jesus came to call the sinners. This is a synonym for saying that Jesus came to call us all.

But Jesus did not come to give us a bad self-image, to make us beat ourselves up and live wallowing and mired in guilt. His interactions with Levi and his friends proves this. Their society and religion had told them that they were no good sinners. Their society and religion had told them that unless and until they got their act together pulled up their socks and made big improvements, they would not be fit to be a part of society. They could not belong. But Jesus came and called Levi while he was doing the very job that made him outcast. He dined with the recognised despised tax-men and other sinners. He let them belong before they reformed, because we are saved, not by our good behaviour, but by the faith of Christ.

The saving faith of Christ is Jesus' faith in God - for himself, that he was doing God's will. The saving faith of Christ is Jesus' faith in God - for us, that God loves us at all times and no matter what. The saving faith of Christ is Jesus' faith in us too - that if called and given the right to belong, we will be transformed by God's love for us.

Here is something new. The old way was that you had to become righteous, follow the laws, live an ascetic life, before you could come to God and be accepted. But Jesus' way is different and cannot be contained within the old ways. It will, inevitably and without setting out to do so, destroy the old ways. The old garment will tear, because the new cloth is stronger, The old skins will break, and then all will be lost.

Jesus' call, God's kingdom has an inevitable pressure. Did you ever brew ginger beer? There was a craze for it in the '70s. I remember my father getting a starter from somewhere and how we used to feed it sugar every so often. And then came the great day when you would bottle the stuff. Almost inevitably in the next day or two the force of the carbon in the bottle would mean that one or two of

the bottles would shatter or pop their tops off and the ginger beer would leave a puddle in the cupboard at the back door where they were stored. This happened so regularly that in the end my mother put her foot down and no more ginger beer was brewed in our house! The welcoming, loving style of God's kingdom has a force like that. It will inevitably destroy the rigid structures you try to keep it in. And when it does, look out for chaos.

When I was a probationer, we lived in Mid Calder in an old house half of which was above a little convenience store. Just occasionally the shop's burglar alarm would go off in the night. After one of these nights I went in to the store to ask the owners if everything was all right, and they told me, that actually no one had tried to break in. It had been a warm summer day and at night the heat left in the shop had worked on the bottles of Irn Bru, so that the drink had expanded and exploded its way out of the bottles. It was the flying glass and liquid which had triggered the motion sensors of the burglar alarm. There are some things that you simply cannot keep under rigid control. The good news of God's love, of Jesus' invitation to sinners, is one of them.

New wine needs new wine skins, and new cloth should be used to make a new garment, which is what the early Christians, for whom Mark wrote, were finding out, as they discovered that the spread of the gospel into the Roman world inevitably meant that the links to the old Jewish ways became strained and then severed.

And what happens when the new wine-skins become old in their turn, or when the new cloth becomes worn? Jesus did not come to replace one set of rigid rules and restrictions with another, even though the tendency of the church has always been to encode and enshrine and make things "normal". Jesus came to be always inviting those who no one else does, to be always helping us to face our disreputable side and have it forgiven and made new, not just patched up. He came to be always making us and making what we do new and surprising. Does what we have in Christ always surprise us? Does it surprise us with delight, or does it make us purse our lips, as the Pharisees did? The challenge to us to open up our minds is always current. If we fail to hear the gospel as a challenge, if it becomes comfortable and familiar then we are doing something wrong, and once again we will find that there are people, as in Levi's day, who thought that God's acceptance could not be for them.

God grant that this never be a church like that, but one which always has the flexibility of soft new wine-skins, to bend with the love of God which, knowing our reality, reaches out to all.

Amen