

Sermon: Our place is with the rabble
Mark 2:13-17,
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Last week we looked at the story of four men who came to Jesus with their lame friend. The house where Jesus was, in Capernaum, was so busy that they could only reach Him by damaging the roof of the house and lowering the man right in front of Jesus.

Imagine the many people in that house when mud and sticks began to rain down on them because some guys were opening the roof. 'Hey crazy guys, stop it!'

The next we read of Jesus is that he walked with his friends along the sea. Capernaum was a city on the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee. I guess the roof of the house was being repaired, so Jesus thought it wiser to go for a walk.

Then Jesus meets with a really bad man. A tax collector, called Levi. We also know him by his other name, Matthew.

No one likes tax collectors. They rip you off over the table and they extort money under the table.

If Jesus can be so friendly with evil people, what do we learn from this?

1. Comforting for us

Jesus saw Levi in his tax booth and called him. 'Follow me Levi, I want you to be with me from now on.' Levi got up, locked his tax booth, and followed Jesus.

This is amazing, because that tax job had made him very wealthy. In one single moment he left all that behind. It takes a big person to take such a big, life changing decision.

Levi had his office on the road along the Sea of Galilee, and this road was one of the major arteries in the Roman Empire. Imagine being able to tax all traffic on the October Bridge!

You open the trunk of every car and you see a suitcase - pay sir! You look in the car and you see five passengers - ah only one is free, for the other four, pay sir! You new tires on the wheels? That will cost you sir! Pay me an arm and a leg and you can continue your trip.

This is how Levi did his job. He gained a lot of money, and he lost a lot of respect. You wonder what sort of friends he had.

But in spite of his seeming success in life, his heart must have been aching, his shoulders drooping under the weight of self-hatred. So when Jesus offered him change, he knew this

was his day, or rather, this was the day the Lord had made!

Jesus invited such people to his community. For me this is so encouraging.

I qualify for Jesus. He invites me to his table to eat with him. He invites me to his table to feed me. He is the host. I am the guest. We are all invited to be at the table with our Lord.

I know there are many churches where at the time of Holy Communion, the faces become serious, the hearts heavy, and the walls of the law go up... 'Are you good enough? Do we qualify? Is there nothing bad in our life to stop us from Holy Communion with our Lord?'

Those questions are not so bad, but the answer can only be: 'No, I am not good enough. But praise God, Jesus invited all the not-so-good, all the not-so-perfect people. We are welcome!'

Surely we should not be proud of our sins and our bad behaviour. Levi came to Jesus as a very imperfect person, but he did change. He got clean hands. He became a follower of Jesus. He even blessed us with the Gospel of Matthew. An amazing change for this mean tax collector.

But the issue is - Jesus accepted him with open arms as he was. He first accepts, and then change will come. Often we turn it around. 'God can only accept you if you are a very good person first.' Well, this is not true. Jesus shows us all the time that God opens wide his arms - not for perfect people - but for people who desire to be with Jesus Christ.

By being with him, He will make sure you will become a better person. But He first welcomes you and honours you. 'Eat with me', He says.

And He paid the price for the meal. The grain of Jesus had to fall into the earth, so that He could be the bread of life for us.

2. Confronting for us

As Jesus opened his table for all, you have wide access... 'Too bad' does not exist in the dictionary of Jesus. 'Too proud', yes, that is possible. But then we ourselves block our access to Jesus Christ. He is not the one stopping us, we do that to ourselves if we are too proud to admit how badly we need Him.

The scribes of the Pharisees were too proud to admit their own need. They thought they were so much better than all others and therefore they could not imagine that Jesus could eat with those bad people. And so they stayed far away from Jesus and from those people.

The Pharisees were very decent people. They wanted to follow all the laws of God and a few more. And they looked down on all people who did not live as they did. With contempt they called those people 'the crowds' or 'the people of the land'.

Those were the people who did not follow all the rules of the law. And so the Pharisees could not have any contact with them. They were seen as dangerous because they might defile the good law-abiding citizens. As far as possible, the Pharisees tried to not travel with them, not to do business with them, and they would never marry their daughters to such people.

And most important, you never invited such people into your home, and you never accepted an invitation from such people... So by going into the house of Levi, Jesus was defying the orthodox conventions of his day.

Why did Jesus not care for all these issues? He told the theologians, in Mark 2:17, 'I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.'

That is a very concentrated statement of Jesus. When He said, 'I did not come to call the righteous', he probably pointed at the Pharisees, and I think he did so with a very critical look in his eyes. 'You Pharisees consider yourself so righteous, but in the eyes of God, you are not at all. You who think you are so good, you who think you do not need any help.'

If we do not have a sense of our own need, we create a high barrier between God and ourselves. To have a sense of need is to possess the passport to his presence. To realise our unworthiness qualifies us to be with Jesus. Sick people are allowed into the hospital; healthy people are not welcome.

'I came to call sinners', Jesus says, looking at the crowds that followed him. Looking at the people that he was eating with. Looking at Levi, and all his crooked and bad and strange mates. Looking at us, when we participate today in Holy Communion with our Lord.

Jesus challenged the Pharisees. 'You think you are so healthy? You consider yourself the medical doctors who know what people need to do to be cured of their sins? Then behave as a doctor! Doctors go to the sick. Doctors meet with the patients. So care for the patients!'

But instead, the Pharisees were so afraid to be contaminated, that they did not come close to the people. Like a doctor who refuses to attend a case of infectious disease because he is afraid to contract the disease himself. What a lousy doctor that is!

I remember how here in Egypt, in the 1990s, when the first cases of HIV-AIDS were detected, some hospitals refused these people to enter, and how many doctors and nurses shamefully refused to treat them.

Jesus came to be the doctor of mankind, so He is as close as He can be to all people. Especially close to those with the greatest need.

Gregory Nazianzen, a church father with great impact on our theology of the Trinity, said: 'To blame Jesus for mingling with sinners would be like blaming a physician for stooping down over suffering and putting up with revolting smells in order to heal the sick.' [Oration 45, on Holy Easter 26]

3. Another lifestyle

And this is an important lesson for us as well. If we rejoice in the fact that Jesus Christ came for sinners like us, this should impact our own behaviour to other people.

To begin with, we eat together from the Holy Meal our Lord gives to us. We kneel together, shoulder to shoulder, and thereby we make a strong statement that we belong together and that we accept each other.

You think some others are stupid? You are right. Some of us are very silly. You think some are not as good as they should be? Excuse me, but look at yourself. Jesus embraced you, sick sinner, to be your doctor. Who are you to be critical of the other patients of our Lord?

For us here in church, this lesson of the Gospel is important. Jesus embraces us just as we are. Not only you, but also the others beside you, in front of you, behind you.

But the lesson is also related to how we deal with outsiders. With people who are not like us.

The Pharisees did not want to deal at all with 90% of the people in the land, because they were different.

Do you think those people cared much about this rejection by the Pharisees? I think not. Pharisees are not particularly nice people to be with, because they always focus on what is not good in the other person.

Pharisees start with the law, and only if we are good enough, God will love us. The Pharisee demands first; Jesus gives life first.

He starts with love, He ends with love, and it is love in the middle. And if you and I enjoy that love, of course change will come. Because that love melts our hearts to be softer for others as well. Of course we will begin to behave to other people as God treats us.

But this is a lesson we must learn. Do not consider people who are not as we are, as worse than us. We can be so quick to condemn and to have our opinion about others. As soon as we see a man with no moustache and a beard, ahhh.... We see people smoke, or drink, ahhh. We hear someone say *wallahi alaziim* and not *begad* and wow... that person must be bad...

Jesus had dinner with such people. He embraced them with so much love that they could not resist; many became his followers.

If we are serious that we want to follow Jesus, we need the same radical lifestyle where love for the other person comes first. If we want to follow the great Doctor of the soul, let us be such doctors as He was.

The medicine people need is not condemnation, but love. And acceptance. And respect. This This has such healing power, such power,

that people will want to change and be like Jesus. But for applying this medicine to people, we need to be very close to them. Words are not enough. It needs our personal proximity with a loving attitude, even to people we might naturally want to avoid.

One person who lived like this was the English missionary C.T. Studd. He worked in China, India, and eventually died in 1931 here in Africa. He expressed his devotion to all people in a beautiful simple piece of poetry:

Some want to live
within the sound of church or chapel bell.
I want to run a rescue shop,
within a yard of hell.

Conclusion

This radical attitude of love for people is what we need more of. Love for each other, and love for those outside the church. That is true discipleship, because this was the lifestyle of our Master, who always gave and gave and gave without demanding.

As we see today again, when we celebrate Holy Communion with Him and with each other – because in Holy Communion, he gives us, very imperfect people, of his own perfect self.