



## Second Sunday before Lent– February 7th, 2021

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### REFLECTION on Mark 2:13-17

Good morning everyone all the way from Co Kildare in Ireland, where I am Bishop of Meath and Kildare. I am delighted to be able to join you for your worship today in Lanzarote, and believe me when I say, I wish I were there with you! It has been a spectacularly wet few days here in Ireland and a little bit of sunshine would be heaven at the moment.

I remember as a child that I had one friend that my Mum didn't like – and it was notable because in general, she liked all my friends. But she definitely felt that this friend was a bad influence. In as much as she could, in a quiet way, she tried to steer me away from fraternising with this friend, to spending time with my other friends, who seemed to pass the test! As a teenager, that wouldn't have worked so well, as teenagers are always suspicious of parents not liking their friends, and would want to spend more time with that individual as an act of personal rebellion! As it happened, I grew out of this friend quite naturally and it never became an issue. It was a shock a few years on to discover that actually, this friend had been told by their Mum to stay away from me, because... yes, you've guessed it – I was a bad influence! Nobody will ever know the truth then of who influenced whom most in that friendship!

In this gospel reading from Mark chapter 2, it seems like Jesus actually gravitated towards those who were perceived to be a bad influence. Unlike the average parent, Jesus isn't steering people away from the undesirable person, but chooses himself to fraternise with those whom the community rejects.





And worse than that, he makes a beeline for the least popular person in the region – the local tax collector! I apologise if you are listening to this and you worked in the tax office – somebody has to! But in New Testament times, tax collectors were particularly singled out for derision because they collected taxes on behalf of Rome, seen by some as an occupying force. So, someone in collusion with the Roman Empire, was not seen by the average Galilean as a person with whom you would publicly associate, nor someone to be included in social gatherings. And yet Jesus makes a beeline for Levi.

Why? What is it about Levi that caused Jesus to notice him? What was it about Levi's life and lifestyle that caught Jesus' eye? Why Levi, and not the thousands of other, less notorious people, who surrounded Jesus in his ministry? He even approaches Levi when Levi was 'at his tax booth' – imagine that – he takes notice of this man while he was actually picking up unjust taxes from the people. Most people would have deliberately ignored or even derided Levi for his public, despised role. But not Jesus. Jesus simply approaches Levi, and instructs him: 'follow me', and we are told that Levi did just that. He left his work and followed Jesus.

Astonishingly, a little later, we find Jesus at dinner – not with those at the top of the social hierarchy, or the religious elite, but at the home of Levi, along with many tax collectors and sinners. So, there is no chance of washing our hands of this as a once off, or an error of judgement. Hospitality was extremely important in Jewish culture, and to accept an invitation to the home of someone like Levi, was indeed a very blunt statement.

Does it mean that Jesus approved of everything Levi lived and worked for? Not at all! Does it mean that Jesus saw through the superficial Levi to the real Levi? Absolutely! And it would be the same for the rest of the tax collectors and sinners with whom he was breaking bread. He saw right into them. He saw need, and he saw value.





Indeed, the religious leaders are so flummoxed by this that they tackle his disciples head on, basically asking them what on earth their leader was doing being seen with such a crowd. Did they not know how this would be perceived and what people would think of him? Didn't they see the long term harm he was doing to his cause?

Jesus has the most astonishing answer, to which, in fact, there is no comeback. *'Those who are well have no need of a doctor, but those who are sick. I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners.'*

That must have been a real slap in the face! The religious leaders were expecting a Messiah, if indeed that was what he was, who would associate with them. I mean, they were at the top of the religious ladder! Everyone respected, admired and kowtowed to them wherever they went. If the Messiah did appear, surely it was to them that he would gravitate? It made no sense that he would instead throw his lot in with the dregs of society.

Jesus' response to them indicated that he was interested in particular in those who really needed him – the outcast, the socially isolated, the imperfect, the despised. If the religious leaders did not realise their need of mercy, the tax collectors and sinners were acutely aware of it. Jesus came to rescue all, but he started with those who, due to their rejection by others, really needed redemption.

The challenge with the contemporary believer is that we so often spend our time and our energy with those who are quite like us. We gravitate towards those who have a similar social standing, similar interests, even a similar church connection. We can narrow our focus to those who we think merit our engagement and forget that there is a whole world of needy people out there in desperate need of Jesus, our rescuer. We forget that we were once in need of rescue. We too were the outcast, the rejected, the sinner.

Who are our tax collectors and sinners in the circles in which we move? If you can answer that, do you gravitate towards, or away, from them?



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Having experienced the redemption and forgiveness of Jesus, who do we meet every single day perhaps, that could really use an anchor in their lives to help steady them? And in even dividing people up into sinners and non-sinners, we are missing the point. We are all in need of rescue – even after we make a commitment to Christ.

That doesn't automatically make us better people.

It makes us redeemed people.

As we consider this gospel story, which probably jarred much more in its original context than it does with us today, we must remember that we are forgiven sinners, and that once we are just that, our reason for being is to spread that good news. We all know friends and family who are lost and don't know how to be found. We all know people in pain. We know too that there are those whom society shuns, who more than most, understand that they need cleansing. That was Jesus' exact point. If you feel you are well, you don't need a doctor. If you feel you are righteous, you don't need a Redeemer. But the sick, and the rejected, and the person who has made stupid and wrong moral decisions – well, they usually don't need any persuasion that they need rescuing. Jesus went to them first.

So today let's firstly acknowledge that we are all in the 'tax collector and sinner' category. Let's consider carefully how we spend our time, and who we spend it with. Are there perhaps those very near to us, who need to know that there is good news – if you are spiritually sick, here's the doctor.

It has been lovely being with you and I pray that you will know that no matter what you have or haven't done, Jesus is making a beeline for you. He loves you. You're sick. But you've found the doctor.

AMEN.

