

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 22nd November 2020
Mark 2:13-17 - Jesus' Acceptance and Challenge

Children as ever, please feel free to complete your activities while I talk. We continue our series in Mark – actually the last one until the new year, as I will be doing something different for Advent and Christmas. A reminder, we're asking ourselves the question Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" And what difference does who he is make to your life? Today we're re-visiting 2:13-17.

[Read 2:13-17]

13Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. 14As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

15While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. 16When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?'

17On hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'

[Pray]

Some people run to the doctor with any and every ailment, while others struggle on for months with major issues without seeking medical help – sometimes meaning they seek that help too late. And there are different reasons why people stay away: fear of wasting the doctor's time; belief that they can cure themselves through diet, prayer, etc.; a refusal to acknowledge that they are ill or, in the case of mental illness especially, a refusal to acknowledge that the illness itself is real; or conversely the recognition that they are very ill and desire to live their last months to the maximum; or a mistrust of medicine in general – something that is manifesting itself again in the many fake news stories about the Covid vaccines (I, for one, will have a vaccine at the first opportunity). There are also those who believe that only certain people should be allowed access to NHS treatment, a belief most commonly expressed against immigrants, which conveniently ignores the fact that vast numbers of workers in the NHS are also immigrants!

Interestingly, we see similar reactions when it comes to Jesus, the doctor. Take a look at the Pharisees in this passage. Jesus had done two unthinkable things in their eyes. Firstly he had called into his discipleship school Levi, a tax collector! The tax collectors were regarded as among the worst of sinners at the time, partly because they made their money fraudulently by charging far more tax than was owed – to which the Roman authorities turned a blind eye – and partly because they were seen as unpatriotic, colluding with the occupying Roman authorities who imposed the taxes. Those of us who lived, or whose ancestors lived, under colonial rule may understand the depth of this feeling far better than those of us who have always held the position of privilege. But, for Jesus to call one of these hated tax collectors into his discipleship school was scandalous at the least!

And then he goes and eats with a whole load of tax collectors and notorious sinners! As with many cultures today, to eat with someone was to express acceptance, even approval, of them. As far as the Pharisees are

concerned, by eating with the tax collectors, Jesus is condoning their collusion and their cheating. Hence, their challenge, interestingly expressed not to Jesus himself, but to his disciples – perhaps they were seen as an easier target – “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Jesus’ simple response challenged their theology, their bigotry and their self-righteousness: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” It challenged their theology, because their theology said that God was interested in the righteous, not in sinners; that those who followed God’s Law would be blessed by God, usually demonstrated in their material wealth, while those who did not live according to the Law would be cursed. And the true interpretation of that Law in their sight was unquestionably their own – a highly restrictive and legalistic interpretation. But Jesus claimed to be their promised Messiah, and more than that to be God himself, and yet he declared that he had come *not* for the righteous, but for sinners! That turned their theology on its head.

It also challenged their bigotry – the ways in which they wanted to see themselves as better than these others. The only thing they offered to these sinners was condemnation. You get the impression that there was no path back to God in practice, even if there was in theory. For they would always be judged by their past, no matter how strong their repentance. Yet, Jesus offered them *healing* from their sin-sickness!

Perhaps the reason for the Pharisees’ bigotry was their own self-righteousness. You see, the Pharisees believed that they were righteous in God’s sight because of their adherence to the many rules they had created to interpret God’s word. Therefore, Jesus’ words “It is not the healthy who need a doctor ... I have not come to call the righteous ...” would have been seen as excluding them. In reality, that was not Jesus’ message. Rather, he challenged the Pharisees to look deeply into their own hearts and see their *own* need for a doctor to heal *their* sickness of sin too. Jesus’ gospel was and is an open invitation to all – Pharisee and tax collector alike – providing they could swallow their pride and admit that they were sinners. The only difference is that the tax collectors found it far easier to admit their sin than the Pharisees did to admit theirs.

And I suggest to you that this is still a message that the Church struggles to accept 2,000 years later. There are still many Christians whose first instinct is not grace, but law; who in practice seek a Church that is clean and comfortable and sticks to the rules, rather than one that is full of the life and mess that comes when sick people are in the process of being healed by Christ. In reality, what that breeds is duplicity, not righteousness, a space where people have to pretend to be good to fit in, and where they never feel comfortable to talk about their real struggles with sin because they fear being judged and ostracised. The moment we lose sight of Jesus’ priority to heal the sick and call sinners into his discipleship school, or the moment we start to believe that we somehow *deserve* God’s love, is the point when we stand in danger of placing ourselves outside of Jesus’ help. To be the Church of Jesus Christ we have to constantly remind ourselves of his words: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Yet, there is an equal and opposite danger, which is implied in the Pharisees’ objection to Jesus eating with the tax collectors and sinners, and is particularly prevalent in Britain today. It is the lie that says that to welcome someone with love one must support *everything they do* without question or challenge. This argument is most commonly seen in relation to discussions around gender and sexual identity, but it is becoming more prevalent in all sorts of situations, including most recently in the Black Lives Matter movement – the idea that it is impossible to fully support the principle if one does not fully support all the

aims of the Black Lives Matter Global Network. That is simply not true. Jesus did not, by going to this house, condone all the actions of these tax collectors and sinners. How do we know that? Because of his own explanation of what he was doing there: “It is not the healthy who need a *doctor*, but those who are ill.” Jesus was there because they needed *curing*.

If I’m doubled up with pain in my abdomen, I don’t want my doctor to say to me, “It’s probably gall stones, but it’s best not to do too much poking around to find out; best just to learn to live with them.” I want my doctor to book me a test at the hospital to determine if I do indeed have gall stones, and if I do, I want the stones or my gall bladder removed! Similarly, if I’m struggling with clinical depression, I don’t want my doctor to say to me, “Never mind, we all get a bit down sometimes; I’m sure it will pass.” I want a proper assessment of my mental health, the appropriate medication if needed, and the appropriate referral to suitable counselling or equivalent.

When we are ill, we need a doctor who behaves like a *doctor*. Sometimes that means inflicting more temporary pain for long-term gain. It certainly doesn’t mean telling a patient with a problem that they don’t have a problem. Likewise, the spiritually sick – which is all of us, in different ways – don’t need someone who tells us, “It doesn’t really matter.” What we need is someone who loves us enough to say, “It does matter. Take it to Jesus and he will heal you.”

The tax collectors were sick with greed and perhaps disloyalty. The Pharisees were sick with legalism and judgementalism. We might also be sick with those maladies, or with lust, or sowing discord, or gossip, or insubordination, or unforgiveness, or hatred, or rage, or idolatry, or envy, or selfish ambition, or pride, or fear, or unbelief, or any number of other maladies. The good news is that Jesus did not come to call the righteous, but *sinners* like you and me. He accepts us, knowing full well who we are and what we’re like! And if he accepted us when we were sinners and still his enemies, he’s not going to reject us now we are his friends if we slip up and sin! But he also challenges us to accept his help on his terms, not ours. We have to accept his expert assessment of us as sick and in need of a doctor. To deny our sin-sickness is to reject the healing that Jesus died to make ours, which is ultimately to hold him and his grace in contempt. So, I pray that, as individuals and as a collective church, we will create the honest atmosphere where Jesus is free to do his work of healing. Amen?

[Pray]