

THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

15th February 2009

Mark 2:13-22 New Wine

Immortal, invisible

Prayer:

Notices: Betty's Birthday

Children's talk:

Collection

Over all the earth [Lord reign in me]

One shall tell another

Rejoice, Rejoice Christ is in you

Prayers: Becka

Reading: Mark 2:13-22

Jesus calls us o'er the tumult

Address

Above the voices of the world around me

Prayer

Mark 2:13-22 : New Wine

Gathering taxes has always been a difficult and unpopular job. Right through history, governments have struggled to come up with effective ways of extracting money from their people, in return for some form of services – at one extreme, the service of “protection” from other warring neighbours, and at the other provision of virtually all services society could ever require – healthcare, education, roads, transport, police, social services, bail-outs of failed banks, whatever.

For most of us today, the Government have an almost fool-proof system to ensure that we all pay our tax dues, by building tax collection into the systems for paying and spending. We have our tax deducted “at source” – our employer deducts the income tax we owe and pays that directly to the government, so we never see that money. The things we buy are already priced including tax, so unless the chancellor changes the VAT rate we are not really aware how much of our money is going to him. Only companies like Ryan Air make the amount of tax we are paying obvious to us, as part of their cynical plan to hook us in on the promise of low fares with everything conceivable added on later as an extra.

In centuries gone by, things were not so simple. A lot of effort could be spent in gathering in taxes, particularly when the people were unwilling to pay. This was the situation that Rome found itself in, as its empire expanded across the known world.

In the second century BC, they adopted a method which offered the empire a secure stream of tax revenues for very little administrative effort – a system which became known as “tax farming”.

The idea was quite simple. The empire was divided and subdivided into many provinces, and in each province they would appoint someone to be responsible for paying all the tax. The cunning part was that they would put this position up for auction every few years, so that the winner actually paid the state up front all the taxes that would be due for the period. The state got their money pretty easily, and it was up to the tax-collector or “Publicani” to raise taxes from within his province to pay back his outlay.

Of course, if he was able to raise more than he had paid out, he would make a profit; and if he raised much more, he would really “coin it in”. However, at the next auction other slightly less greedy would-be Publicani could out-bid him knowing that they could easily recoup their investment, so from the state’s point of view it was a self-regulating system.

The Publicani would have to be quite rich already in order to afford to bid at the auction; they were not the sort of people who would get their hands dirty actually collecting the money themselves. Rather, they would divide their province into districts and use a similar system to appoint people to gather taxes in each district, and they in turn would appoint the actual “tax collectors” who would rub shoulders with the great unwashed to rake the taxes in.

From what I can gather, Zacchaeus was one of these middle-managers (Luke 19:2), and Matthew was one of the front-line tax collectors. Matthew’s job was to ensure that people paid their dues for using the harbour, landing fish, and so on. It is thought that his booth would actually be a watch-tower like a modern life-guard would use, so that he could survey the area and see who was liable to pay tax.

Whatever the details, it was an unpopular position, with tax collectors being despised by most Jews for many reasons – they were in cahoots with the Roman overlords, they would typically charge excessive taxes to line their own pockets, they worked on the Sabbath and they constantly rubbed shoulders with Gentiles. All in all, not the first people to get invited to parties.

Despite all this, Jesus calls Matthew (also known as Levi) to follow him.

Now I have always been fascinated by these accounts of how Jesus walks up to someone, instructs them to simply follow him, and they abandon whatever they are doing to come after him.

What is going on? Was Jesus command so forceful, or his personality so attractive, that complete strangers should take a spur-of-the-moment decision to give up their livelihood and reputation to throw in their lot with this man?

Of course Jesus' command carries such authority that even the wind and waves obeyed; and his personality is so attractive, dynamic, loving and persuasive that many do find following him is more important than anything else in life.

But did Matthew leave his tax-collecting lifestyle for a stranger? I don't think so. At the very least, he must have known Jesus by reputation. We know that Jesus was based in the town that Matthew collected taxes in, so it is quite possible that they had met before, just as it was possible that Jesus knew the rest of his disciples before he called them. Maybe he had even discussed with them the proposition of becoming his disciples – we simply don't know.

We do know that Jesus approached Matthew, and the others, while they were at their day jobs. He did not ask them the previous evening to follow him the next day, but walked right up to them in the middle of what they were doing, and asked them to follow him now. There and then. No turning back.

And they did.

They may have had the opportunity to think through what they were going to do beforehand, but when it came to the moment, there was no doubting their commitment. That, I suspect, is what Jesus was after. We know of other would-be disciples who wanted to follow, but also wanted to tidy up their affairs first. Jesus would not have them – “let the dead bury their dead” he said (Luke 9:57-62).

Jesus choice of companions was, by the standards of religious leaders of his day, radical. Tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes. The very people that other leaders warned their followers not to associate with lest they become contaminated. Yet rather than gathering round a group of like-minded “nice” people, Jesus gathers a group of people on the edge – or even beyond the edge – of the bounds of decency. When challenged on this, he highlights the great gulf between his understanding of religion, and theirs.

They were obsessed with observing all the rules and regulations not just of the Old Testament law, but of the traditions of their predecessors too. Their approach was to make sure beyond any doubt that they themselves were pure and upright – on the face of it, a laudable aim. But in putting their own outward purity first, they had totally messed up on the inside. Their religion was one of works – to satisfy God, they had to work to keep his laws, to keep from sin and hence to keep from sinners.

All they did was for the selfish end of ensuring they were all right – with no thought given to the plight of those sinners they sought to avoid. They were proud not to be tax collectors or “sinners” – sinners in their definition being anyone who did not agree with the Pharisaic interpretation of the Law, and not necessarily drunkards and prostitutes.

Jesus saw things in totally the opposite way. Crucially, he knew that no amount of following rules and regulations could actually succeed in making someone right with God. That was something which only his own sacrifice could achieve.

Matthew helpfully adds the following comment to this episode (9:13):

¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'

Quoting from Hosea 6:6, Jesus shows them from their very own hand-book that the mission of God's representatives on earth is not to gather in a holy huddle and observe religious ceremonies and practices, but rather to show the same loving care for others, for the poor and needy, for the “untouchables”, as God shows them.

Their mission was to be doctors, which means they will actively seek out those who need help – which of course means the sick, not the healthy.

We can be swift to judge the Pharisees on this point, but theirs is a common mistake. In fact, one of my biggest frustrations with the way Christianity is perceived even today boils down to this same issue. People think that to become a Christian you need to be perfect already. To go to church you need to be good already. It is fine that they recognise the higher standard that God has for our lives; but utterly tragic that they think they have to meet that standard in themselves before they can be acceptable to God.

The flip side of this is that, when people see so-called Christians and church-goers who are actually less than perfect, they brand us as hypocrites and write off Christianity as a sham! We have to hold firm to the absolute purity of God's standards, and to the fact that there are consequences to falling short of them; and of course we recognise that there are false-Christians who will bring the church into disrepute. But we must also show that to live consistently as a Christian does not mean we will be perfect – but that we will be repentant and forgiven.

It is not just the type of people who Jesus socialised with which annoyed the Pharisees, but they way he behaved too. Frequently they take him to task for failing to live up to the high standards the Pharisees expected; though each time Jesus turns the tables on them, and shows that it is they who are out-of-step with God's wishes and standards, not he.

The first behaviour which Mark records as annoying them was to eat. Or rather, not to fast like the Pharisees did. Fasting – going without food (and maybe water) for a period of time – had become a major tradition with them, even though the Old Testament requirement for this was minimal. Even John the Baptist and his disciples fasted.

There was only one “required” fast, on the day of atonement (Lev 16:29ff) where they were to “deny themselves”. But over time it became traditional to fast at other times for various durations. The pharisaic practice of fasting twice a week – and with lots of show to boot – was the ultimate expression, and the ultimate corruption, of the principle.

As in so many other things, they had seized upon the outward activity, but ignored the inward. The Day of Atonement, and its associated fast, was all about remembering that their sin had to be atoned for not by good works, but by sacrifice. In denying themselves food, they were to remember the depths of their sin and their need for forgiveness, to use the time and the whole day to meditate on this.

But instead the fasting became a mark not of shame, but of pride. And their attitude to others showed that they had not appreciated anything about the mercy of God. Isaiah criticises this severely in 58:3b-7:

*“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please
and exploit all your workers.*

*⁴ Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife,
and in striking each other with wicked fists.*

*You cannot fast as you do today
and expect your voice to be heard on high.*

*⁵ Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed
and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?*

*Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?*

*⁶ “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?*

*⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

Religion is nothing if it does not result in a continual care for others. We miss the point of our faith completely if we are not committed to helping those less fortunate than ourselves – not just through supporting groups like Tear Fund who work with the poorest of the world and in the most needy places, like in Kenya as we prayed earlier. But also closer to home where there are people who could do with our help, in practical or caring ways.

Jesus does not condemn the practice of fasting as such – indeed, he predicts that his followers will fast when the time is right. But, using an analogy even the most strict Pharisee would understand, he says now is not the time for such mournful practices – now is the time for wedding celebrations. Jewish wedding celebrations were very important occasions, apparently even the most devout Rabbis would take a break from preaching and studying in order to join the celebrations. They would no sooner fast at a wedding than they would cut off their own noses.

The illustration goes a little deeper though. Jesus is claiming to be the Bridegroom, which links in exactly to what we were studying recently in Revelation. Israel is often described as a bride, and her groom is none other than God himself.

On the question of fasting in the church, opinion is divided. There are those who think that, because Christ is with us through the Holy Spirit, now is a time for celebration and not fasting; while others take the view that, as we are living in this sinful world without the physical presence of the Lord, we ought to fast. The early church (even after Pentecost) was known to fast, especially when they had an important decision to take such as the appointment of missionaries and elders. Certainly, Jesus himself does not condemn the practice, but rather its abuse. We are not obliged to fast on particular days or occasions; but assuming there are no unusual health considerations like diabetes to consider, fasting is one way in which we can set aside more time and attention to pray over a big decision or plan, either individually or as a church. (And it makes the catering easier!)

Although their initial question was specifically regarding fasting, the question really raised the more significant issue of how Jesus' teaching related to the historic teaching of the Pharisees. It was clear to everyone that this was something different, not just for the followers Jesus attracted, or the miracles which he performed, but in the things that he taught. What was Jesus' intention? Did he plan to supplant the precious teachings of the Jewish leaders with his own? Was there scope to amalgamate some of his more palatable teachings with traditional Judaism and keep everyone happy? Or was he out to destroy Judaism and establish a new religion in its place?

Jesus begins to answer this unspoken question by using two parables showing the relationship between old and new. Like many of his parables, they have a humorous irony which show how common sense is on his side, and thus how ridiculous their opposing position is.

The first parable is the easiest, especially in Luke's account (5:36):

³⁶ He told them this parable: "No-one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old one. If he does, he will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old."

The suggestion that anyone would cut up a new coat to patch an old one is ludicrous. Even if the old one had some sentimental value, or was comfortable and familiar, no-one would be so stupid – everyone recognises that clothes wear out and need to be replaced. If you didn't have a new coat, maybe you would continue patching up the old one to keep it serviceable for a while longer; but if you had a new coat, you would surely wear it instead.

Secondly, there is the famous old and new wine parable, which inspired one of our songs earlier:

22 And no-one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."

In those days, they didn't use oak casks or glass bottles to ferment and mature wine in, instead they used goat skin. New wine needs to ferment, as the sugar turns into alcohol. As it does so, it gives off carbon dioxide gas which, if you are not careful, will burst the vessel – as many home-brew novices have found when one of their bottles has exploded! Using a new wineskin got round this problem, because the leather was still supple and could expand with the wine. Any winemaker would know not to put new wine into an old wineskin, because the old skin would split, and the new wine would be wasted.

The implication is clear: the old and the new won't mix. In the cloth analogy, it was pretty clear that the new coat was the one to keep, rather than the thread-bare and torn old one. But with wine, it is a bit different, as Luke again points out (5:39):

³⁹ And no-one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is better.'

Wine tends to improve with age, indeed the most expensive wines are many decades old. So is this contradicting the cloth parable, or maybe balancing it out? Well, not really. The point is that new wine must be stored somewhere, otherwise it will never mature into tasty old wine. To simply reject the new because it doesn't taste right is very short-sighted, as again they would all recognise. You might prefer the old wine now, but if you don't lay up any new wine, then you will run out soon enough.

I suspect, but haven't found any information to confirm or deny, that wine tended to be kept for a year or two at the most in those days – partly because storage conditions were not ideal. So while there may be a call here for patience, it does not indicate an extraordinary long wait such as might be the case for a good Bordeaux to mature! Perhaps more to the point, it does recognise that switching from the old to the new is not going to be easy.

We are all, to a greater or lesser extent, creatures of habit. I remember Ashlea commenting on some of my peculiar habits a few years ago, implying that she had none of her own; then five minutes later, she tapped her toothbrush on the edge of the sink four times, as she always does! Once we are used to something, it is difficult to change. I suspect that is one reason why there are a lot of mental health problems in our fast-moving society; and also, more to the point, why not just the Pharisees but many Jews found it difficult to accept the new message which Jesus brought them.

It is clear from history that Christianity could not be contained within the Jewish system. It wasn't long before the two were at loggerheads, and the church had to separate itself from the synagogue. By telling these parables, and recording them in the Gospels, Jesus was preparing his followers for the inevitable but painful split that would come.

This does not mean that Jesus rejected the Old Testament, the Law and the revelation of God to patriarchs and prophets. If the Old was going to disappear when the New came to fruition, it was not because the Old was destroyed by the new, but rather fulfilled by it. An excellent example of this is an acorn. If you hit it with a hammer, it has gone, and been destroyed. But if you plant it and wait a few years, it will have grown into an oak tree. The acorn itself has gone, but it has not been destroyed – it has reached its fulfilment in becoming a tree.

The Old at the time of the parable was clearly Judaism, and in particular the mass of man-made tradition which had grown up around the Law. But it also encompassed the God-ordained system of sacrifice and other observances, which would be fulfilled and thus rendered obsolete by Christ's death. Religious traditions and ceremonies, however good they might be when we know their real significance, are not the end in themselves. Today, the Old could be our own traditions which, though precious to us through familiarity and constant use, are just traditions, and can get in the way of the "new".

The New then was clearly the coming of Christ himself, and with him salvation and Christianity. Given that this was to (pretty much) predicted in the Old testament, its new-ness was not essentially in its novelty, but in its fulfilment. So today, New does not imply novelty; and in fact the novel is often suspect – such as barking, which was in vogue in some circles a while ago! The New today is the same as it was 2000 years ago, and the same as prophesied 1000 years before that.

But people being what we are, the New is sometimes different from what we are used to, because we have lost sight of the essence of the Gospel due to the clutter of our traditions. We have a habit of building things up around the core Gospel, just like the Pharisees had around the law. Challenging those traditions is uncomfortable, and many of us would much rather carry on with things as “they have always been”. But we need to keep challenging, to ensure that we are not putting up false barriers to people coming Christ.

What the new wine can bring us is a freshness and vitality to the relationship we have with God; a reminder, if you like, that Christ is our beloved groom beside whom all else is unimportant. We all need reminding of this from time to time, when our faith feels tired, our love has grown a bit thread-bare, and the familiar pattern of our lives has less time for God than we once had. The good news is that the new wine is not a once-only offer, but freely available to all who would drink. Our great Doctor is always ready and willing to see his patients; the only foolish thing is not to come to him.