

Called and Made Welcome

Matthew 9.9-13,18-26

Our sentence of the day and prayer of the day point us to contrasts in life – sickness and wellness, death and life, sin and righteousness. We are called to what is life-affirming.

This is not to discount the righteous and those who are already living a life of meaning and purpose, following their faith and living in harmony with their neighbours. Rather, Jesus opens the way for those who have not known these things in their life, or who do not know them at the moment.

When we celebrate Jesus' coming into the world, we sing of "light and life to all he brings." (Hark the Herald Angels Sing). We sing and rejoice that this is for all. This is not just rhetoric. It is the promise that we find over and over again in scripture. Today we have heard just a few stories from Chapter 9 of Matthew's Gospel. It is not the whole of this chapter, which is a succession of stories of Jesus meeting, hearing and helping all sorts of people whom others thought were beyond help, beyond their notice, and beyond deserving attention, let alone help.

In my youth, I was backpacking in Europe with another young woman. One night, we could not find a place to stay and were settling in to sleep on the railway station. A woman and her adult son noticed us. He spoke English. She did not. She was concerned for us. He was not concerned for us, and not happy at her concern. Despite his disdain for us, she did not leave us until she saw us settled into clean sheets in a nearby homeless shelter. Have you ever had a similar situation, with yourself in either of these 3 roles, the one in need, the one who helps or the one who was appalled? (You don't have to admit to being the last one!) [...] If something occurs to you later, you might like to share it briefly in our prayer and share time.

Let's look at the sort of stories that Matthew shares. There was a paralytic whose real need was for forgiveness, but who also received healing. Then there was Matthew, the despised tax collector, who was invited to follow Jesus and whose hospitality Jesus accepted. Both of these things were likely to cause Jesus to also be despised. Then there was a question to Jesus about why his disciples did not keep strictly to the letter of the law. There was a girl whose father could not save her, even though he was a leader of the synagogue, but he believed that Jesus could do what he could not. There was a ritually unclean woman, forbidden to touch Jesus, but she reached out and was healed by faith. And on and on it goes – 2 blind men received sight, and a mute man found his voice.

The reaction of the religious establishment was suspicion and condemnation. This was not how things were expected to be. In their circles, the suffering must also have sinned to be so afflicted, and sinners were to be condemned. Are we also dismayed when good things happen for those we do not think deserving?

Jesus calls us all to compassion for all. This includes those we see suffering and those we see as sinners. All means all. I recognised my own limitations in Janine's recent sermon when she spoke of blessing those who do not treat us well. I am OK with tolerance and courtesy, but blessing takes a bit more effort. However, we are called to go the extra mile for all. Our neighbour includes those we might prefer to turn away from.

In a recent sermon from Ralph, he also pointed to God's generosity to all. In the scriptures, Peter quotes the prophet Joel, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people." Luke reports that at Pentecost, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit." Surely, in that crowd there must have been quite a few imperfect people, but all were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Our God is the God of all. All are invited to faith, to grace, to relationship with the God who loves them. Jesus invites all to the table. He does not turn away the righteous. They know they are invited. However, he also reaches out to those who are despised, vulnerable, suffering, neglected – the harassed and the helpless.

We hear that "many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples." They were many. Matthew was not an exception; he was the norm for Jesus and his followers. The Pharisees knew this. They asked, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" That's tax collectors and sinners, not just one sinful tax collector.

The last part of this chapter, which we did not hear today, is about the harvest being great but the labourers being few. We generally think of this as a call to sharing the good news, and that is true, but there's more. While these verses are for next week, we need to see the continuity and connection of this chapter of Matthew's Gospel.

What did Jesus do when he went out into the world? He went out to all sorts of places, teaching and sharing the good news of the kingdom. But he did more than that. He cured every kind of disease and sickness. He had compassion for them.

Why was that? We hear that they were harassed and helpless. Seeing suffering and helplessness is not enough. Helping is called for, either directly or indirectly. This might be a practical need or a needed change of attitude towards someone or a group of people. Bless those we don't much care for. Care for and care about those who are not much blessed. Help those who are not getting the help they need.

Jesus tells his disciples that there is plenty of this work to be done. This is not just an instruction for others. Jesus shows them the way. Let's go back to the story of Matthew in our Gospel reading. We generally think of Jesus as making an exception for Matthew, treating him differently from the way tax-collectors and perceived sinners were generally treated, and generally expected to be treated. However, Matthew was not the exception for Jesus.

We can ask those "hyper-vigilant for good" Pharisees. They observed Jesus closely. What did they see? What did they say? They did not just speak about Jesus' hospitality towards

Matthew. They said, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ It was not ‘Why did he do this?’ (a one-off action) but why does he do this (a continuing practice). And it wasn’t just tax collectors but also sinners, those condemned by society. Who does our society condemn? Those who transgress are not held up in the scriptures as examples to follow, but those who condemn them, harass them, reject them, see their need but turn away from them are condemned for their attitudes, and their subsequent actions and inactions. In our confession, we may recall what we have done in thought, word, and deed, and what we have failed to do.

Jesus had compassion for the sinful and the suffering. The rest follows on. Compassion is action-oriented. It is not “Oh dear, how sad”, and then turn away. It is having a genuine feeling for that person and a desire to find a way to help if possible. That help might be a word, a welcome, genuinely hearing them, helping them to act or helping them to find other help. The fruit of compassion will vary with the situation, but the first step is to genuinely see and hear that person as a real person, not as a sinner or some other condemnatory category.

Jesus urges action. I know that Hope Ginninderra is taking action for many and in many ways. Whom do we see? Whom might we not see? Will others say of us, “Why are those people not made welcome?” And, of course, it is very possible that sometimes we are “those people”, imperfect but, like Matthew, called and made welcome in the house of the Lord.

May we be ever ready to welcome others. Amen.

Helen Dean,
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