

onto an old cloak will shrink when it becomes wet, and possibly tear a worse hole in the old garment than was there in the first place!

The message appears clear enough, when it comes to delivering the 'new' things of God, the 'old' will not do. At one level, this is exactly what Jesus said and meant because the new message of the Kingdom of God could not, by the evidence of the previous two incidents (2:14-20), live with the old system of Jewish faith. Certainly not now it was radicalised by the party of the Pharisees. The whole of Jesus' ministry develops around this point, and we will discover that many of the stories of Jesus which come between here and His crucifixion describe the confrontations He had with the Pharisees. In the end, the Pharisees and scribes engineered the accusations against Jesus which resulted in His crucifixion (14:43f.).

But this is not all that these verses say. Read them carefully, for you will see that whilst Jesus talks about new and old not being able to live together, and He is clearly identified with the new, the mini-parables (which is what they are!) do make it clear that it is not right to rip old garments or burst old wineskins! The moral of these texts could well be that there is a place for what is new, and there is a place for what is old, and the old does not have to be torn or burst for the new, even if the two cannot be integrated! It is helpful to read the passage in this way because unless we do, we cannot make sense of Jesus' heartache for His own people (Matt 23:37f. and Luke 13:34f.). This also helps us keep a perspective on the relationship between the Covenant of the Old Testament and that of the New. The Old is our heritage and must be respected as such, but it is not the same as the Gospel found in the New Testament.

Application

There are many discussions about the various points raised in this text; firstly, the issue of fasting. Jesus' comments about only fasting when the bridegroom is absent (2:20) seems a throw-away remark, but it is the basis for the main long-standing regular Christian practice of fasting, which is to do so on Friday's. This is because Friday is the day Jesus died and as the 'bridegroom', was 'taken from us' for a time, until the resurrection. It may not be a common practice to fast until sundown on Friday's today, but various forms of Friday fasting have been practiced within the church for centuries, and this is worth considering as a memorial of Christ's death, as indicated in this passage.

The use of the last few verses of our text to justify new things in the life of the church is frequent, but we should be careful. We must not make the mistake of believing automatically that the principle found here applies to anything new we might wish to do. For in this scripture, the issue at stake is not the latest church idea, but the essential difference between the Old Covenant and the New. It is true that the Holy Spirit will frequently work amongst us by sweeping away what has been precious for previous generations so that the Gospel may be preached afresh to others, but Scripture bids us remember that the church of God's people is always the 'new wine'. We should not be too quick to condemn what God has used in His church in the past as if it were comparable to the Old Covenant which has been superseded.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Look up the references to Levi son of Alphaeus in your Bible and check out what is said in each Gospel about him. What do you think about this confusion?
2. How do we follow Jesus' example to eat with 'tax collectors and sinners'?
3. Discuss how we can apply the last two verses of this passage to the life of the church today.

Discipleship

There is much that is 'evangelical' in this passage of scripture. The venture of Jesus to preach to sinners with the disciples, Jesus' call to recognise Him as the 'Bridegroom', that is, the Messiah, and the urgency of working with the 'new wine' of the Gospel. Consider taking one evangelical feature of this passage and using it to ask your church (its leaders and meetings) how it is engaging in the mission of the church today. Be prepared to discuss this issue and use Scripture to back up what you say!

Final Prayer

Lead me, Lord Jesus, through the days ahead. When I do not know what to do, guide me by a word; when I do not know where to go, guide me by your hand; when I do not know what to say, speak tenderly to me I pray. Lead me, Lord Jesus, for You are my guide. AMEN

Prayer

Dear Lord and Father; may all Your people so work together to proclaim Your Name, that the whole world will come to know that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Saviour of the World, and that this is the centre of all Christian faith. May we be consistent in our witness and unyielding in our faith, and may we serve Your Kingdom for ever; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: World Politics

Pray today for the political situation in Pakistan. Since the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the tensions in the country have created great instability, and it remains uncertain how elections can be free and fair. Pray for a breakthrough of God's Spirit in this Muslim country, so that the Kingdom of God may find a foothold there and a give all people a hope for the future.

Meditation

Serve the Lord; serve Him without ceasing.

Serve Him by living the life of a servant:

By loving others with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Serve the Lord by honouring Him in worship:

Come, sing and dance, and join all the praises of His people!

Serve Him by fulfilling His Great Commission:

To preach the Good News to all the peoples of the earth.

Serve the Lord by living in integrity and honesty:

Depending each and every day on His inspiring presence.

Serve Him by being His priests in the world:

Work for other people, bless them, remember them in prayer.

Serve the Lord by actively fighting against evil:

Whether you find it in yourself, or in others, or the world.

Serve Him; serve the Lord without ceasing:

There is no reward, save being at peace with your God.

Bible Study - Mark 2:13-22

¹³ Jesus went out again by the sea, and the whole crowd came out to Him and He taught them.

¹⁴ As He walked on by, He saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the revenue post. He said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed Him. ¹⁵ It so happened that as He reclined at table in Levi's house, there were many tax-collectors and sinners eating together with Jesus and His disciples (for there were many who followed Him). ¹⁶ When the scribes and the Pharisees saw that He ate with the sinners and tax-collectors, they asked His disciples, 'Why does He eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' ¹⁷ When Jesus heard about this He said to them; 'Those who are well have no need of a doctor, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'

¹⁸ Now the disciples of John and the Pharisees were fasting, and people came and asked Jesus, 'Why do John's disciples and the followers of the Pharisees fast, but yours do not?' ¹⁹ Jesus replied to them, 'Are you suggesting that the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? No! they cannot fast while they have the bridegroom with them. ²⁰ But the time will come when the bridegroom is taken from them, and that is the day on which they will fast. ²¹ No-one will sew a piece of un-shrunk cloth onto an old garment, otherwise when it shrinks, the new will come away from the old and make an ever worse tear! ²² No-one pours new wine into old wineskins because the wine will burst the skins and the wine will be lost as well as the skins. Rather, new wine is poured into new wineskins.'

Review

This reading combines a number of well-known stories about Jesus, and every one of them is well known because they are used to illustrate some important points about the Gospel. After the brief

but telling verse 13 in which Jesus appears to have an easier relationship with the crowds who had pursued Him in the first few days of His ministry, Mark tells us about the call of Levi, son of Alpheus. The story is famous because of the party thrown by Levi after his decision to follow Jesus, which brought from the Lord this famous 'sound-bite', 'I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners' (2:17). Secondly, two incidents are fused together; a discussion between Jesus and the crowds about fasting (2:18-20), and lastly, Jesus' famous comments about the incompatibility of old and new cloths, and new wine and old wineskins (2:21,22).

Most of us have heard these incidents preached upon separately, as if they had no particular relationship with each other. Jesus' being seen in public with sinners (2:14-17) is often used to illustrate His mission to bring salvation to needy people beyond the confines of the church, and the idea that Jesus has come 'not for those who are well', but 'for the sick' (2:17) has long been a centre piece in the evangelistic message. Then, the famous two sayings at the end of the passage (2:21-22) have been used by preachers for centuries to comment upon the incompatibility of 'the old' with 'the new'. This is an uncomfortable message, but one that is rooted in the break between Christianity and Judaism, and we must not forget that the passage speaks specifically to this situation. The meaning of each story appears simple, but when we come to study the text more closely, neither is as straightforward as it seems.

The one incident that is used little for preaching is at the centre of our passage, and this is about fasting. It contains a rather confusing saying by Jesus about the inappropriateness of fasting whilst 'the bridegroom' is present (2:18-20). The general point is clear enough however, which is that Jesus has announced the Kingdom of God and performed feats which identified Him as the Messiah, God's Son. Since the Jewish people had long believed that the coming of God's Messiah would be like a great banquet, Jesus therefore promoted the idea that since He had come as Messiah, it was 'party time' rather than time for fasting! There is more to this matter, of course, but this serves to help us identify the key theme which runs through these incidents and sayings, and may well be the reason why Mark placed these all together (and also Matthew and Luke, see Matt 9:9-17 and Luke 5:27-39).

The theme that runs throughout this passage is that of the authority of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. Jesus, of course, did not stand up and say 'I am the Messiah' because this was what He wanted people to discover about Him. He had no personal need to inflate His own ego as the 'Son of God' (as God announced at His baptism) by merely saying 'I am the Messiah'; that would have been a cheap way to claim His place in God's plan. Instead, Jesus chose to show in His actions that He was doing the works of God that were appropriate for the Kingdom of God and for the Messiah. The consequence of this was that the Pharisees and the scribes were shocked because if Jesus was the Messiah, then they could not understand why He did not keep the principle of the Law that forbade a good Jew to eat with unclean people such as Tax collectors (as in 2:14-17 – see Leviticus 5f.). However, the prophets of the Old Testament are full of Messianic prophecies which speak of the Lord's servant acting in the interests of the spiritually poor (see Isaiah 61:1f.), and of the need for renewal amongst God's people (Isaiah 40:31, 41:1).

In our reading today, Jesus spoke and acted with authority of the Messiah, the Son of God who was the promised 'bridegroom' at God's wedding-banquet. He ate with sinners, refused to fast and had an uncompromisingly new message for all God's people!

Going Deeper

Each part of the passage holds its special interests and intrigues. Who was Levi son of Alpheus? He is not listed as a disciple of Christ! Why were John's disciples fasting together with those of the Pharisees? This sounds quite strange because John and the Pharisees were not normally found too close to each other. Lastly, if the old and the new are as incompatible as this passage suggests, what connection can the Old Covenant have with the New?

The calling of Levi son of Alpheus and the meal at his house.

The big problem with the story in Mark of the call of Levi, son of Alphaeus, is that it is the same as the call of Matthew in Matthew's Gospel (9:9f.) and the same as the call of Levi (with no mention of his father) in Luke (5:27f.). It would be easy for us to say that this is a simple case of someone having two names and that Matthew and Levi are the same person, but the problem with this is that the name of the father, Alphaeus, is not mentioned in the lists of the disciples except as the father of a different disciple named James (Matt 10:3, Luke 6:15)! In the end, this is a conundrum we cannot solve, except by saying either that 'Levi' was a different person than 'Matthew', or that

'Alphaeus' was a common name for a father in those days, or that someone recorded something wrong somewhere! Indeed, there is some evidence in the very earliest of copies of Mark's Gospel we now possess (from the fourth century AD) that the name 'Levi son of Alphaeus' was tampered with on the scroll, but by whom and why, we do not know! Perhaps they had the same problems with the text as we! I prefer to think that Matthew and Levi were the same person and that the name 'Alphaeus' is more likely to be the reason for the problem!

These matters are always important for people who want to be sure that every feature of God's Word is properly understood, but what is more important is the extraordinary story which followed Jesus' summary call of Levi. Levi responded to Jesus' call just as quickly as had Simon, Andrew, James and John (1:16-20), but his response was very different. He called all his friends who, like himself, were outcasts from the Jewish faith because of their financial association with the Roman authorities and the puppet king Herod. All these friends would be regarded as ritually unclean by rigorous Jews, and therefore 'sinners'. The phrase 'tax-collectors and sinners' does not describe two categories of people; both words described Levi and his friends. Moreover Jesus was content to 'recline at table' with these people (i.e. 'eat with them'). What is quietly remarkable in the middle of this passage is the brief comment in verse 15 that Jesus ate together with His disciples. The early disciples, Simon, Andrew, James and John must have felt able to trust their Master above all their fears and prejudices in order to do this!

The power and authority of Jesus' reply to the acrid question posed to Him by the Pharisees, 'why does He eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' is stunning. It is one of the first famous 'ripostes' given by Jesus to the Pharisees which put them in their place; 'Those who are well have no need of a doctor, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.' The scribes and Pharisees were looking for a Messiah who fulfilled all the Laws including those of cleanliness because in their day, they believed that this was necessary in order to maintain the purity of God's people at a time of political oppression. They were unable to see that Jesus the Messiah fulfilled God's prophecies by offering people the opportunity to repent and change their ways, as He had preached from the beginning of His ministry. Jesus' first sermon was hypocritical if He did not open the door for sinners to repent; moreover, the Pharisees were not able to see that if Jesus was truly the Messiah, then His purity was greater than the ritual impurity of the tax-collectors, and He was not compromised by contact with them. Only good could come from Jesus' time spent with 'tax-collectors and sinners'.

Fasting

According to the Laws of Moses, Jewish males were only required to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement, but rigorous Pharisees had introduced the practice of fasting twice a week, on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Fasting meant not eating food in the daylight hours of a day from morning until sundown; and a meal was had in the evening. It is not clear, but the implication in this passage is that John's disciples had taken up the rigorous weekly rules of fasting which the Pharisees advocated. The term 'the followers of the Pharisees' in verse 18 is sometimes translated 'disciples of the Pharisees' simply because the same Greek word means 'followers' and 'disciples'. However, there are no other references in Jewish writings of Pharisees having 'disciples', so it seems that the word used here simply refers to those people who followed the Pharisees' practice of fasting; in this case, the disciples of John and others.

Mark does not say who came to Jesus to ask the question about why Jesus' disciples did not fast, but knowing the background to all this, we can imagine that Jesus was not keen on the suggestion. His disciples had been together with Him 'feasting with sinners', and those who asked the question did not see the difference between Jesus' evangelistic work and the religious rituals of the Pharisees. Jesus' response describes a wedding feast purposefully and brings the subject back to feasting. In effect, He said to the Pharisees, 'we are now living at the time of God's banquet for the Messiah, and it is not a time for fasting!' In its day, this would have been well understood.

What is not so clear is that Jesus spoke about a time when the bridegroom was 'taken from them'. This would have puzzled those who heard Jesus, but it is likely that Mark intended his readers to see in Jesus' words a veiled reference to the time when He would go to the Cross and die (2:20). In Mark's view, this was the only reason for fasting.

The new and the old.

The logic of the two sayings with which this passage finishes is fairly straightforward. It is easy to see that new wine which is still fermenting might burst an old wineskin which has become hardened with age, and it takes a little more imagination to see how a patch of new cloth sewn