

April 21, 2002
Saint Mary of Egypt

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Since the call of Levi falls in exactly the same sequence in the gospels of Mark and Luke as Matthew's call in the gospel of Matthew, we are surely correct in regarding these two men as identical, notwithstanding the contrary opinions mentioned by Heracleon, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. Mark and Luke place this tax collector's calling fairly early, soon after the calling of the fishermen, where we might naturally expect it. Matthew puts it somewhat later in the narrative, after the Sermon on the Mount.

It is much more significant, however, that all three Synoptics treat the call of the tax collector as a center piece bracketed between two stories about sinners: the paralytic being forgiven his sins and Jesus having dinner with notorious sinners. Thus set between these two events, the call of Levi/Matthew represents above all the evangelical summons to repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

The dialogue connected with the meal at his house illustrates this meaning of the tax collector's call. Jesus, criticized for his association with sinners on this occasion, explains that "those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Mark 2:17). In thus addressing sin through the metaphor of sickness, the Lord strikes again the note recently sounded by His healing the paralytic as proof of His authority to forgive the man's sins (2:5-12).

Furthermore, summoning sinners to repentance and salvation is not just one of the things Jesus does. There is a sense in which this is the defining thing that Jesus does, the very reason He came into this world. This truth is affirmed at the meal at the tax collector's house, where He proclaims, "I did not come to call the just but sinners" (Matthew 9:13; Mark 2:17. Luke 5:32 adds "to repentance."). Again, it is in the context of the call of another tax collector, Zacchaeus, that Jesus says, "the Son of Man has come to seek and save that which is lost" (Luke 19:9).

One of those "lost" was the apostle Paul, who remembered himself to have been "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man." But then he recalled that the same Lord who received the friends of the tax collector also received him:

"This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" (1 Timothy 1:13-15).

Christ can call sinners, only because He can really do something about their sins. And He can forgive their sins precisely because He has paid the price of those sins. Therefore, Jesus' forgiveness of sins is theologically inseparable from His dying for sinners. Correct repentance, then, brings the sinner to the foot of the Cross.

In truth this soteriological dimension of the call to repentance is implied in the gospel stories under consideration. Both at the forgiveness of the paralytic and at the tax collector's dinner, all three Synoptics speak of the hostile presence of Jesus' enemies, the very men who will contrive to kill Him. They accuse Him of blasphemy on the first occasion ("This man blasphemes"- the very charge for which He will be condemned to death) and find fault with Him on the second ("Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"). In both cases Jesus confronts them on this matter of His relationship to sin and to sinners.

Every time an Orthodox Christian approaches the Cup of Salvation, the Church exacts of him a twofold confession, explicitly and out loud. First, "I confess that Thou are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." And second, "who didst come into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" This double formula, combining the confessions of St. Peter (Matthew 16:16) and St. Paul (1 Timothy 1:15), means "You-Lord, me-sinner,"; which pretty much puts us tax collectors in our place at Communion time. Truly this is the meal at the tax collector's house, and only sinners have been summoned.

But calling myself "chief of sinners" is not a quantitative statement. It is not a thesis that I prove by demonstrating that I have committed a larger number of sins than other people. To think of myself as the chief of sinners is not an inference based on a comparison of myself with others. Indeed, the notion of "other sinners" here is nearly a metaphor; there are no other sinners right now, at this moment of Holy Communion. Only one sinner, and only one Savior.

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