

10th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 9:9-13

God who likes to keep bad company

Adrian Plass, who is a popular writer on Christian themes, including novels, biographies, and reflective works, tells this story about himself.

When I was sixteen I loathed myself. I hated my face and my body, I had been expelled from school for truancy, and I had neither a job nor any visible prospect of getting one. The chaos inside my head was quite frightening. To make matters worse, I had developed a strategy of using scathing sarcasm in the conduct of my relationships with almost anyone who made me feel silly (that is, almost everyone).

Miserable and unpleasant, I was definitely the sort of lad my mother didn't want me to go around with. Then I was introduced to a married couple who lived in a secluded cottage. Their home was a place of log fires, oil lamps, interesting books, stimulating conversation and (as far as I was concerned) total acceptance. Murray and Vivienne took the loaves and fishes of my better self and believed in me so wholeheartedly that, in their presence at least, that better self flourished and grew to a point where I actually began to believe I could be worth something. Murray and Vivienne were not Christians, nor was I when I first met them, but their unqualified support was the first and most practically effective step in the salvation of Adrian Plass. I will always thank God for them.

It was something like that for a man called Matthew. Matthew, who was a tax collector, was regarded by most people as a rat. His story was a first century version of Adrian Plass' story. Tax collectors were very unpopular members of society. It wasn't just that paying taxes is never regarded as a matter of joy. Rather, their unpopularity lay in the fact that these Jews were the agents of a foreign occupying power. They were seen as traitors, and as such, were hated by their compatriots. Moreover, they were a corrupt lot. They were entitled to make their living by taking a share of the taxes. Human nature being what it was, they generally took far more than their share. Small wonder that one ancient writer tells of seeing a monument dedicated to the memory of an honest tax collector. Honest men in this profession were so rare that the citizens erected a memorial to one when they found him. And so, men like Matthew were lumped together with sinners and outcasts. No respectable Jew would associate with them. But then, this outcast, this rat, this man who was a failure in almost every way that really mattered, met up with Jesus. Jesus believed in him and loved him for who he was. As Adrian Plass put it, 'Jesus took the loaves and fishes of his better self and believed in him so wholeheartedly, that the better self flourished.'

Those looking on, who were the respectable religious people of the day, found Jesus' acceptance of people like Matthew very hard to take. Yet Jesus saw beyond what people presented, to what they could become. He believed in them. As he explained it, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (Matthew 9:12-13)

It's all too easy to forget this – not only when we look around at others, but also, when we look at ourselves. Christianity, being the minority concern that it is today, often leaves people thinking that it's for people who regard themselves as morally right and virtuous... or, hypocritical. Somehow, Christianity is seen as a goody-goody pastime. But you and I know differently. Eucharist begins with a time in which we remember our failures and sins. Even on our best days we Christians are a pretty rough and unwashed lot. Not physically perhaps, but certainly spiritually and emotionally. Whatever

our outward appearance, we know that we're sinners – that we aren't the people we've been called to be. We're painfully aware of letting down God and ourselves.

The people who gathered around Jesus – the Matthews, the Adrian Plasses, the sinners and sick ones – felt just like that. Perhaps they didn't feel worthy to be invited to dinner with Jesus. But at least they had the good sense to take him up on the invitation, for this is God's way of working. What Jesus showed, was that God isn't particularly interested in the upright people who are so sure of their virtue and goodness. God invites people who know they're unworthy, who might be rats like Matthew, who, like Adrian Plass, are the sorts that our mothers wouldn't want us to go around with. God invites such people because they know the healing, new life, and acceptance on offer. The good thing is, that the good news affirmed in today's Gospel still holds true. Jesus still hangs out with sinners, with the sick, with the outcasts... with you and me.

When we come to Communion we're in the same place as those described in the Gospel reading. We're being invited to sit down with Jesus and share a meal with him and receive his healing and accepting love. Perhaps we don't always feel worthy to sit down with the Son of God. But then we remember, it's not our virtue that matters, but God's great mercy. This is why I keep coming back to Eucharist. It's why I need to receive communion. This is the place, here at this altar-table, where I'm with the one who will always accept me, who will offer me compassionate tenderness, who forgives and heals, and loves. And all this, not because I'm worthy of it, but because, like Matthew, I need it.

Sometimes the church is hijacked by very respectable and self-righteous people. In consequence its image has been changed in many places into the very opposite of Jesus' intention. But underneath it all, the same reality is there – the reality of a gracious and kind God who likes to keep bad company.

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