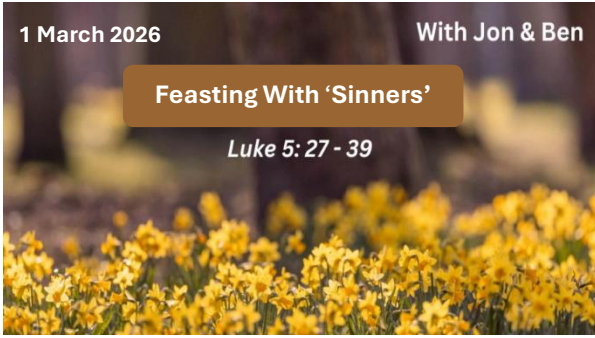


Feasting With 'Sinners'

Luke 5: 27 - 39



The book of Luke is all about Jesus: all the anecdotes, the things he did, all the evidence for who he is so we can appreciate and understand him and get his message. We get close enough to Jesus to be able to see his relationships with people. Some remarkable things had happened just before this next event. Wherever Jesus is, there is extraordinary abundance of life. Jesus said, "I am

the life..." and these events bears that out. In the run-up to verse 27 his teaching had caused such a stir that people from every village in the Galilee as well as the neighbouring cities of the province of Judea have been drawn to Capernaum to hear Jesus. Some of them were high and lofty theologians, bishops and priests who travelled to this small town in the north to make their own evaluation of Jesus so that they could comment on the sudden appearance of the carpenter's son. This house, which was the synagogue built by the Roman Centurian in chapter 7, was crammed full to the gunnels. The tiny town of Capernaum was a military base on a very important trunk road that connected the Roman province of Syria (the front line between the great Roman empire and the great Parthian Empire in Iran) with the Roman province of Galilee. Galilee was the source of food for the troops in Syria and the wealth of Syria was shipped along the silk road through Capernaum to the Mediterranean and on to Rome. There was an added source of income from a tax levied against anyone travelling along this road. Rome used important local people like Mathew Levi (one of the priesthood) to collect those taxes.

Jesus decided to preach in the middle of this conflict zone. He called five burly, local fishermen including the Sons of Thunder from close by Bethsaida and another sturdy five from the pottery region of Cana in the other direction. Names like Zealot and Iscariot indicate their hostility to Rome. There is such a huge variety of people who came to hear Jesus from the north, south, east and west. The poor, wise, foolish and rich gathered to hear Jesus. It is safe to say there were a lot of people in the room who didn't like each other. Some were called tax collectors or sinners, others hypocrites, or supporters of the Romans and people who opposed the Romans. All from different tribes, languages religions and cultures. There was a complete lack of unity here. It was a social gridlock like the paralysed man who had no capacity to do anything or to go anywhere. The different parts of his body didn't work together until, in the power of God, he gets up on his feet and dances. That is how people can be if we can put aside all our differences and become one in the animating life of Jesus because we know what it is to have our sins forgiven. We are all plagued by a sense of unworthiness but Jesus said that the Son of man has been given authority on earth to forgive sins. That is the amazing thing. We all have got it wrong in our own special way. Jesus not only has the ability but the desire to forgive our sin and to treat us as friends and family, uniting us and making us one. Hundreds of people poured out of the house praising God for the great miracle they witness but maybe not for the realisation that Jesus has come to forgive our sin.

A church service is the gathering of all kinds of people all with different points of view, backgrounds and positions, theologies and all the rest of it in an open meeting. Everyone is welcome to come to consider Jesus, to hear Jesus, to see him in action and observe him through the Word. Some in this passage went away furiously offended and annoyed. Some would go away full of joy and thankfulness. We want Wales and the world to have the opportunity to hear and consider Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Jesus goes further than that. He issues an invitation. He says, "Follow me." We count ourselves blessed to be in a church where the gospel is preached. It's not enough just to attend a church service to consider and evaluate week by week. We have to hear this incredible voice from Heaven in the person of Jesus Christ as he says, "Come, follow me". Jesus' voice is unique. It is life-changing and irresistible. It is authoritative when you hear him speaking to you. He gives you a personal invitation to become a follower.

It is not up to you or me who Jesus calls. If he calls your worst enemy and they end up sitting next to you at the communion table, rejoice!! Jesus has just called Mathew Levi the tax collector. Everyone knew him. Everyone had paid their taxes, grumbling under their

breath about the Romans, the tax burden and the collaborators but Jesus calls Matthew and Simon the fisherman and Simon the zealot from Cana. He forgives their sins and welds them together into a new community where it is necessary to forgive each other no matter how hard and difficult that may be. That is the ground of our fellowship.

When Jesus said follow me, they left what they were doing at that moment to follow Jesus. They didn't necessarily spend all their time walking around with Jesus. The point is a change had taken place. Levi followed Jesus and he led him to his own home, to his life, his friends and community. The mission is not necessarily going off here there and everywhere. When we answer the call we of necessity leave everything because everything has changed. Your priorities have changed, and that means you just want to be where Jesus is and if that means your house with your friends and your job, well, that's fine. There was a large crowd of tax-collectors when Mathew opened up his house for a great feast. The Pharisees frequently complained to the disciples about eating and drinking with tax-collectors and 'sinners'

Everybody has a group of people they call 'sinners' "They don't live my way." The thing is the people who are called sinners think the people calling them 'sinners' are 'sinners' too. And they are all right. Because that is exactly what we are. We are not sinners because someone doesn't like the way you live. We are sinners because the holy and pure almighty God cannot abide the hatred, judgmentalism, the grieving of his grace that is a regular feature of every human heart. God hates sin and we are truly sinners. That puts us in a perilous situation with the one who is in charge of all things. Are you as a follower of Jesus, prepared for others to point their bony finger at you and say, "What are you doing hanging around with those people, with this Jesus? Are you prepared to be hated, despised and rejected? Are you prepared to take up your cross knowing that as far as God is concerned, your sins are forgiven as is everybody who puts their trust in Jesus Christ. "If I'm all right with him then that will just have to do for me." Are you prepared to suffer all the complaints and finger pointing that will come your way? If you are then there is a feast for you. Jesus is at the feast for sinners and he will meet you there.

There is the church service and embedded in that there is another service, the communion service. It is a fellowship service, a gathering around the Lord's table to feast on the bread and the wine. We are invited to stay and eat and drink together recognising that he is forming this people from within the public meeting. Have you heard the voice of Jesus saying, 'Follow me'?

If you have been to A&E you will want to take a thick book. It may be a long wait but you are there because you are sick. When your name is called you leave everything and go to see the doctor. We are all sin-sick people. But there is a doctor in the house. Praise the Lord for doctors. Praise the Lord for THE Doctor! Doctor Jesus. He came to heal the sick with the only possible cure for sin. Without it we die the ultimate death. With it we get to live forever. Praise the Lord there is a doctor in the house and his name is Jesus. It will mean a change because that is always what the doctor prescribes. The prescription is repentance which basically means change. Good positive change starts here. There is a whole lot of people who have been prescribing a diet of praying till you get callouses on your knees and fasting with a long face. People in the Bible fasted when they were in trouble and they needed God's saving help. Yet when Jesus is there with you it is time for feasting and rejoicing because God has heard your prayers. Is Jesus the answer to your prayers? Is he really your Saviour? Are you at peace with God and Heaven? Are you spiritually well now? If so rejoice and feast at the communion table. Surely there are times to fast but Jesus offers a new thing; leave your old ways and follow Jesus. Don't mend your old shirt with patches from a new one. Get rid of the old one Get rid of the old cracked wine bottles. There are lots of people who are stuck in the old way of fasting. They think the old is better; much like those who think the older the wine the better, whereas only between 1 and 5% of grapes are suited to maturation into old wine that often becomes corked and sour. Between 95 and 99% of all grapes produce far better fresh young wines. Jesus got it right. Young wines are vital and fresh, perfectly fitted for rejoicing and feasting. Take a step of faith. Jesus is offering you a new way of living. Come, eat and rejoice. Christ has given his life for us.