

Finding A Narrative

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Homily for BBC Radio 4 Sunday Worship recorded at Most Holy Redeemer parish, San Francisco, 22 October 2006 (Unabridged)

Gospel: Matthew 9, 10-13

And as he sat at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

What I like about this story is the sense of Jesus buying time. He's having a meal with his disciples and with a whole lot of tax collectors and sinners. And the Pharisees, the local God Squad, have found out about it. They've got their sources of intelligence who are watching what is going on with Jesus. It's only partially because they think he might be a troublemaker, or a rabble-rouser, or just a bad man. They may have their concerns about that, but they're not sure. They're also curious. They want to know whether he might not, after all, be a prophet, someone who works signs from God.

The trouble is, he doesn't seem to fit into their narrative of what a good man or a Prophet should be. Parts of him do, and parts of him don't. Which makes him particularly dangerous, and particularly worth watching. Someone who is straightforwardly good, or straightforwardly bad, is easy enough. They fit in to the general scheme of things, and even the straightforwardly bad aren't that dangerous. But someone who doesn't fit in, is either really, really good, or really, really bad, but no one is quite sure what the criteria for judging him should be. And so he needs watching.

Now, because the religious leaders have some awe of Jesus, they don't actually dare to ask him what's going on directly. So they make their complaint to the disciples: "Your teacher's got you hanging around with a pretty rum collection of characters. So in addition to being ritually

unclean, don't you think he's putting you in danger of some kind of moral contagion as well?". Well the message gets passed back to Jesus through the usual Chinese whispers, and of course, the process of Chinese whispers can lead to all sorts of murmuring, making those at the meal feel uneasy. So Jesus faces down the source of the gossip by speaking up, and talking directly to those who wouldn't talk to him.

He shows his ease at being among people the religious authorities regard as sinners. He tells them that he's where he should be, with the people who need him, whereas they, the Pharisees appear not to need him. And in addition, he quotes them a verse from the Prophet Hosea: "What I want is Mercy, not sacrifice", and then tells them to go and learn what it means.

That, I think, is where he plays for time. God squads, the world over, and in all religions, want quick decisive rulings which separate good from bad. But Jesus throws a monkey wrench in the decisive-ruling machine works. He tells them that before you can apply the word of God, you need to have dwelt under it, and sunk into its digestive juices for a long, long time, so as to make quite sure that you are not using it to sacrifice people, but instead, to show them God's mercy and love.

Now the people I like to think of in this story, are the people for whom Jesus' answer bought time. The Tax collectors and sinners whose meal with him he wouldn't allow to be interrupted. That's us. One of the joys of being a lesbian or gay Catholic in a parish group like this at Most Holy Redeemer is being able to spend the time that Jesus has bought for us sharing his meal with him, and being given time to undergo his regard. He's bought time for us because he's sent off the authorities to work out what God means by saying that He wants Mercy and not Sacrifice. Which means that they keep getting themselves caught up in knots as to whether they really can throw us out or not, whether we really are such awful people as their rule books seem to say.

Meanwhile, we get to spend that time dining with him, and, just being there with him, feeling loved and cared for, and known and invited by him. And that has an extraordinary effect on us. It starts to give us new ways of receiving who we are. So that little by little we are able to let go of stories about ourselves which we have heard since we were young, about how we are sick, and our love is dangerous, and not real, and we should be ashamed of ourselves, and hide away, and perhaps kill ourselves.

Instead of this, we find ourselves, listening to him telling us stories. And as we gather in safe spaces, where we are allowed to be who we are as gay and lesbian people; and as we hear his voice, and react from our hearts, sit in his regard and lose our masks, and eat and drink his body and blood, so we find our own stories lightening up. We start imagining ourselves in different ways, finding eyes of respect for others as we find ourselves sitting with one who respects us.

We start to be able to say “we” about being with other gay and lesbian people not as though it were something threatening, or dangerous, or provocative, or pleading. But just as something given, something with the promise of fun, something from which we can maybe learn to build something. A “we” from within which we might create stories of love.

Above all, we can spend *time*, because Jesus will not allow the Pharisees to interrupt the meal, time listening to a voice which does not refer to us as “they”, but reaches in and, although he is seated in front of us, seems to come from within, saying to us: You! You have not chosen me, but I have chosen *you*!

So we learn to hear a voice which calls us by name: “You who were no people, you are MY people”. And as we hear the voice, we stop wondering whether we’re going to get it in the neck when the God Squad come back from their learning exercise, because we’re confident that we will be able to hear that voice calling us by name, and giving us a story which will be God’s story, even in the midst of whatever forms of anger they will display when they find us so free.

And it will be because of the time that Jesus bought, to be with us, because he liked us, sharing himself with us and telling us his stories, and so showing us how to become unimagined living stories whose endings know neither fear nor shame. This is what we are privileged to be undergoing when, as gay and lesbian Catholics we come to worship Our Lord in the Holy Mass.