

Jesus Calls Levi

New Ministers

Mark 2.13-17

This is not the first account of somebody being called by Jesus in Mark's gospel – that honour belongs to the fishermen – but it definitely describes the call of somebody to ministry in some form. This story is particularly interesting because it is not clear either who is being called or to what ministry he is being called. Often vocation and discernment can be rather messy affairs, and quite hard to understand; but that does not make them any the less real.

So, in the first place, this is the call of somebody, but it is not absolutely clear who he is. The parallel text in Matthew's gospel has Matthew as the subject of the call, while the list of apostles has James. So is this person Matthew, or is he Levi? Or is he James? Are James and Levi brothers – they both have a father called Alphaeus – or are they the same person? The question of identification remains unsolved.

Moreover, the status of this person's ministry also is not clear. This is certainly a call not only to discipleship but also to ministry; but it is not certain that 'Levi' is an apostle – albeit a son of Alphaeus is among those listed as apostles. What is clear is that Jesus has called this man, but then it seems that Mark is trying to work out how to fit him into his Register of Ministers form – he is not sure what category to write down, but he cannot deny the reality of the ministry.

What is apparent is that – like Matthew (who he might in fact be!) – he comes from a different background from the first to be called: he is a tax-collector, not a fisherman like them. The place of his call is correspondingly different – not the lakeside, but in a house. And when he has been called by Jesus he does not, like them, leave his associates behind; on the contrary, he introduces Jesus into his own circle.

So we could describe this as a very contextual ministry, which does not fit with the norm of the apostolic fishermen. The gospel says that Jesus was 'walking along' when he saw this man – as if he were to catch a glimpse of him out of the corner of his eye. And his call comes to him in the middle of his very secular (and, to many contemporary Jewish eyes, definitely sinful) business: outside the circle of holiness, he is not listening to Jesus when he is seen by him.

The gospel talks then about a meal that is held in 'his house': the 'he' in this passage may be Levi, but it may possibly be Jesus (indeed that would be the most natural reading of the Greek text, though there are no other references to Jesus' house in the gospels). Whether the Lord is the host or the guest, he has broken down barriers of division through table fellowship, and it is through this action that a new ministry appears. This is in fact the first occasion in Mark's

gospel where this radical table fellowship takes place: all are welcome, all belong together, and there needs to be a ministry to express this coming together.

We should remember that this is not the first call to ministry in Mark – undoubtedly the apostles come first, and their vocation shapes our classic understanding of ministry. Nevertheless, we do also have this narrative of somebody whose identity, status and reputation are unclear and unconventional, but whose call is certain. Levi's story must expand our expectations of the kind of people who are called into ministry, and how and where such vocations take place. Notice also that in his previous life, although unpopular, he would have been wealthy and of high status; he has to lose all that, and find a new, poorer and humbler identity as a minister of Christ.

What sort of people do we expect Jesus to call to ministry? How do we recognise unusual vocations?