

V17b

▲ Towards the end of his life, when he knew he didn't have long to live, a man called Henry Lawson decided to write down his account of his time in the First World War. It's such a fascinating book, partly because he writes with such clarity so many years on, and partly because it's so remarkable that he lasted for 20 months in the trenches while so many around him were killed. I was given his book by his daughter, now a grandmother in my parents' village.

With only three weeks before the 1918 Armistice (which we are remembering today), Henry Lawson was hit (I think in the leg) by machine gun fire as he attacked a railway cutting. He described it as like being kicked by an elephant. He tumbled broken and battered onto the barbed wire he was trying to cross, as another bullet grazed the palm of his hand, and a fragment of a grenade pierced his eyelid. He was carried away by enemy stretcher bearers with shrapnel wounds all over his body, and a chaplain stood at the end of his bed pronouncing words for the dying.

But wonderfully his life was saved. He was operated on, and later in his life surgeons back in London said that the doctor who did the operation had saved his life.

As a committed Christian, he always considered his survival as a gift from God, and went on to become a very famous lawyer, whose career culminating in becoming the president of the Law Society and getting a knighthood from the Queen. But he owed his life to that doctor.

Today as we continue our sermons in Mark's gospel, we think about **Jesus the Doctor**. We are transported away from Huntingdon in the 21C, and away from thoughts of the World Wars in the 20C, to a tranquil lake- the Lake of Galilee in the 1st Century AD, as Jesus meets a tax man.

Let's look at the story in four scenes, and then let's draw out 2 lessons from that key verse in v17 and from the fact that Jesus is the Doctor.

Scene 1) The Lake

V13 Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them.

We are back at Lake Galilee where we met Jesus calling the fishermen to follow him a few weeks ago. And as we have seen every week, the crowds are flocking round him.

No doubt many have failed to understand that he hasn't come primarily to heal, but to teach, and that's what we see him doing by the Lake, just like we saw him doing at the paralysed man's house last week.

God sent his Son to earth, as a preacher, and we must listen to what he says. We're going to need to listen closely to understand how Jesus is a Doctor, but hasn't come primarily to heal our bodies.

Scene 1 the Lake.

But the story moves from the general to the specific as we see Jesus interact with an individual.

Scene 2) **The Taxman**

v14 As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

Now while Levis today make jeans, this was not this Levi's trade. He was a tax man. And if you don't like the tax man today, you certainly wouldn't have liked him back then. He was a crook. **First** he was siding with the occupying Romans and taking money from the people for them, **second**, the Jews considered him unclean from his interactions with them (quite a turnaround if he was from a priestly family as his name suggests), and **three**, most tax collectors would take a massive cut for themselves, slipping others' hard earned cash into his own back pocket. Yes Levi would have loved **tax**.

But this day was different. It wasn't council tax, fish tax, income tax, grammar and syntax, blue tacks and tick tacks that was on his mind.

"Follow Me" Jesus said, and like the paralysed man last week, he arose instantaneously, new life in his body and started to follow Jesus.

It's incredible. We've seen Jesus' authority like this before. Authority in preaching, over disease, over evil, and here authority to speak into people's lives and say "Follow Me" and they leave their old lives behind.

What power and authority Jesus had to call people to follow him, and many in this room will know the same experience of Jesus' incredible magnetic attraction.

The Lake, the Taxman.

Scene 3) **The Dinner**

V15 While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.

Levi didn't just open up his life to Jesus, he opened up his home. It's often the way when someone becomes a Christian. They want all their friends to have this relationship with Jesus that they now have. And Levi had some very interesting friends!

Imagine the equivalent from Huntingdon today... [This is not to point the finger, we are going to see shortly how dangerous that is]. But if living in our town there are drug dealers, people involved in human trafficking, people who have been involved in violent crimes and sexual assault, it's people like this who would have been eating with Jesus. The notorious "sinners" of the town. And that raises a problem.

Scene 4) **The Problem**.

¹⁶When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?'

We've met the teachers of the law before. In fact this is episode 2 of 5 in which we see increasing hostility from them towards Jesus. Last week over his claim to forgive sins. Here as the friend of sinners, and in the next two weeks over fasting, feasting, and healing on the sabbath.

If we look closely there's a progression in how directly these religious leaders approach Jesus with their questions. Last week it they were just thinking them. In today's passage they ask them to his disciples. But soon we shall see them ask Jesus directly, and by 3:6 they want to kill him.

So what is the problem exactly?

Well it's easy to see. Here's a man who is claiming to be sent from God to bring God's Kingdom, a Kingdom of light and love and purity. And yet he's hanging out with the most dirty, unlovely, impure people. It brings into question what kind of a person Jesus is.

▲ Just imagine if in your workplace or neighbourhood someone disappears each lunch time to be with their new friends. You decide, James Bond style to follow them at a distance. And you discover that each lunchtime they enter the most dodgy pub in the area and meet up with class A drug dealers, paedophiles and prostitutes. Your view of that person changes. Just who are they? Are they one of them?

The Pharisees who saw Jesus eating with Levi and his friends were moral people. And their whole philosophy – the “Pharisee Project” if you like was separation.

It went like this... “We know that God is pure and Good and Holy, and that we shouldn't become contaminated with what is not good and pure and Holy, so we will separate ourselves from sin and sinners”.

But the trouble was that because of this attitude and the many rules that they had added to the Scriptures as tick

boxes to keep, they were always seeing sin as something in other people.

So Jesus' response in verse 17 to this conversation he overhears between the disciples and the Pharisees is a bombshell. It does 2 things at the same time. It both **encourages** the tax collectors and prostitutes, but it **challenges** the Pharisees.

“On hearing this, Jesus said to them, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’

Let's dig into the lesson that Jesus wants to teach us from this verse in two halves.

1st there's... Good news for bad people.

Jesus is the Doctor who has come for people who are sick.

Now if you realise that you are sick (spiritually), not necessarily in your body but in your soul then this is good news. If you know that the very way you have lived in God's world is wrong, then this is wonderful.

You see do you compare upwards or downwards? Do you compare **downwards** on others who are worse than you, so that you always feel a bit better about yourself?

▲ In prison they do that too. There's always someone who's committed a worse crime than you. “I'm not that bad. At least I didn't do *that*”.

Or do you compare **upwards**? Do you see yourself before a perfect God who always tells the truth, is always faithful, is always just, always does the right thing?

Well you will never understand Christianity until you take your sin very seriously.

▲ There used to be a street preacher in London who used to shout out “don’t be a sinner, be a winner”! I heard him as I came out of Hammersmith Tube one day. He’s called Philip Howard and he got an ASBO from Westminster city council. No doubt for shouting at people and calling them sinners.

But he was right. It doesn’t matter if you are a bit better than some people outwardly in your manners. It doesn’t matter if you give money to charity or help on the coffee rota at church. We have all fallen short of God’s Glory and face his anger at our sin. We are sinners.

All of us have a desperate disease which spoils, spreads and separates and the quicker we face up to it the quicker we understand the wonder of Jesus Christ.

This verse is one of three sayings in Mark’s gospel where he tells us exactly why he’s come (the others are on the handout we will be using in homegroups on our website).

And it says that Jesus is the doctor. The doctor for our hearts. The doctor who mends not first of all bodies (that is secondary in Mark’s gospel) but relationship with God.

Jesus is the doctor who has come to put us right, like Henry Lawson’s life was saved when the doctor operated on him,

or when others’ lives have been saved by the doctor cancerous tissue being removed.

So when Jesus was hanging out with the paedophiles and the prostitutes, it wasn’t because he was agreeing with what they were doing....No like Levi, he had come to change them.

He was operating on them. First to forgive their sins so there was no barrier left with God, and second to transform their lives so that they were weaned off their addiction to having to be right or to sex or reputation or in Levi’s case money.

This is wonderful news. Jesus is the doctor who has come for sinners. If you know you are sick, this is really good news.

And when he died on the cross he performed a substitution, a massive swap. He took on his back our wrong doing. And he gave to us his perfect righteousness as a gift. It was a swap.

▲ Occasionally in wartime you hear amazing stories of sacrifice. People putting themselves in front of their friends to take a bullet for them. Well Jesus did that.

Jesus took the curse that we deserved for our sin, and bore it for us, so that we might be safe. Except he didn’t do it for friends or for people who deserved it, but for his enemies.

This episode with the taxman takes us right to the heart of Christianity, and it’s very **good news for bad people**.

But on the other hand, it’s bad news for good people.

2nd there's... **Bad news for good people.**

Look carefully at what Jesus says in verse 17 again.

*'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have **not come to call the righteous, but sinners.**'*

If you are not sick you don't need a doctor.

A few weeks ago we were in Hinchingsbrooke hospital running a service. But we were there as guests of the Chaplain and not as patients. We even got free parking!

But imagine one of us had a terrible but curable blood disease and we didn't know it, and we went up in the lift with the consultant. When she asked if they could help us in any way, we would have said no. We would have rejected the one who could help us, thinking that we were OK.

But Levi's friends knew they were patients. They knew they were ill. It's much easier to see that you need Jesus if you have lived an obviously morally dubious life.

Don't get me wrong, this isn't saying that it's good to live a sinful life. Sin is an offense against God and rightly stirs up his settled moral indignation.

But the trouble with some of us is that I'm respectable, middle class, upright, and outwardly moral. I'm even a vicar!

But if we are honest, on the inside we know that we are a cess pit of selfishness, greed. Even the good and moral things we do can be done for us, to make us look good rather than God.

This is why outwardly moral and upright people can often be the furthest from God. They don't think sin is their problem, they think it's other people's problem.

It's bad news for Good people.

Some of us might need to learn this for the first time.

Admit your sin sickness to yourself, and to the doctor. Book yourself in for a check up with him where in the silence of your own room, you close the door and tell him just what you are like. Turn away from your wrongdoing, and with his help, start to put him first. And wonderfully, he will cleanse you from your sin, and as a free gift, at that moment make you ready for heaven, forgiven by his death on the cross.

But some of us need to learn this for the hundredth time...

How easy it is that the Pharisee project slips in again when we are already Christians. We deal with the imperfections in our life by comparison with others, and by achieving small goals that make us feel better. I went to the gym. I filled a shoebox for charity. I read my Bible. These are all good things, but they aren't rules that make us confident that we are better than others.

Keep coming back to Jesus. Keep short accounts with him. He loves to forgive and cleanse. Enjoy the forgiveness he gives.

It also slips into our outreach (or lack of it).

▲ One of you gave me the analogy this week of how we pull up the ladders on the lifeboat. As Christians, we are those who have been rescued from the sea, and we are

now safe on the lifeboat getting warm. But there are still others (tens of thousands of them in our neighbourhood) who are drowning in the sea.

[If you think I'm exaggerating, read on in this gospel to chapter 9 where Jesus himself speaks about hell].

Why would we pull up the ladders on the lifeboat? Why would we stop others from coming to safety? Let's get out there in the rain helping others to get to safety.

We have a job to do, in making the doctor known to others.

But can I finish by talking to the person who doesn't see anything wrong with their lives.

I was playing with Martha yesterday and she was pretending to be the doctor. Interestingly she has a blanket which she calls "Salvation" which she puts over someone who is sick (don't know where she gets that from)!

I asked her, do you ever help people who aren't sick. She said no. I said, but what if they are sick but they don't realise it. She said, they need to come to the doctor.

Please come to Jesus. He loves you. He is able to show you your sickness and clean you up.

Christianity is not advice so that nice people become more nice. It's like a doctor operating on a critically ill soldier. But saving his life. Come to him. Come to the doctor.

Let's pray.