

9 - THE NEW AND THE OLD

Luke 5:27-39 tells of the calling of another disciple and incidents about the value of what is new and what is old. The calling of Levi represents a somewhat startling innovation for the Jewish community. At the same time also it recalled ancient religious traditions in Israel.

The location of the event would have been a semi-public place - a tax collector's booth where custom's duties on trade goods and other tax revenues would have been collected for the Roman government. The new disciple's name was purely Jewish: Levi was the son of Jacob and Leah (Gen. 29:34) and namesake of one of the twelve tribes. He was best known for the priestly role of his descendants, the Levites. Whether Luke intended the paradox or not, Levi had a strange vocation for someone with his name.

The banquet at Levi's home including both other tax collectors as well as Pharisees and scribes extended the paradox almost beyond belief. Was Luke exaggerating to make his point that Jesus had come for all people, not the exclusive Jewish community? The Pharisees and scribes thought that Jesus was going too far in having table fellowship with such sinners. But why were they there too? Surely they knew who their host would be when they accepted his invitation to dinner. Strictly religious Jews would never have eaten with such "unclean people."

Despite the gaps in the story, Luke obviously used it to point out to his own Jewish and Gentile

audience many decades after the resurrection that Jesus was the friend of all sinners. It was "precisely because they were sinners that he had singled out the tax collectors." (Ringe, 84) There was also superb irony in his words. The Pharisees and scribes did not see themselves in the same light as Jesus did. Luke's message to his audience was that the Christian community was totally inclusive of both Jews and Gentiles. That is a principle with which the church continues to have serious problems.

The next anecdote in Luke's narrative (5:33-39) brings out other elements of our Christian tradition with which the church still wrestles. What is the "right way" to worship?

In Jesus' time, Jewish ritual laws were very strict. The Torah laid down exactly how the liturgies of temple and home were to be carried out. The spiritual disciplines of fasting and prayer had to be meticulously followed. Then as now, however, weddings were family and community celebrations with much feasting and drinking. When the celebration was over, everyone went back to the traditional religious practices.

The twin parables of new cloth patching old garments and new wine stored in old wineskins were just common sense. On the other hand, neither the new or the old is to be wasted. Both are valuable at the appropriate time and place. Jesus' presence is what is most significant to the church in every age. He can be associated with either ancient traditions or new transitions without violating basic principles of inclusiveness and community.