

Grumbling Luke 5:27 – 39

When Jesus calls Levi the tax collector, Levi hosts a feast to which Jesus is invited along with other tax collectors among the guests. The Pharisees grumble. At least they do in my English Standard Version, other translations use the word complain. I like the word grumble. I like it as a word, but it seems to fit the tone of the story quite well. A triangulated conversation is depicted with the participants being Jesus, the disciples and the pharisees. At no point in the story do the pharisees address their feelings about Jesus to him directly. They complain to him about the disciples and they complain to the disciples about Jesus. None of them complain to Jesus about Jesus. Pent up feelings misdirected, lead to grumbling. Grumbling is not related to action or direct dialogue but to barely heard, muttering discontent. You see this kind of subterranean distorted communication in organisations all the time. It is usually a sign of trouble brewing.

Yet you have to have some sympathy for the grumblers. There is an understandable grievance here. How do we protect our distinctive identity and calling in circumstances of occupation, where crippling taxes are fuelling an empire? Their solution lies largely with ideas about purity and separation. Visible markers indicate what side of the fence you are on and mixing with tax collectors was for them, the wrong side of the fence, as a category they were already sinners. It is difficult for us to imagine societies where the idea of consciousness was quite different from our own. In the ancient world you were respected and had virtue by fulfilling expected roles linked to your place in society. Homer is not interested in depicting Achilles as a nice guy and many Old Testament character are not nice people. Some thinkers distinguish between shame-based cultures - failing to fulfil an expected role, and guilt-based cultures focussing on an internal mental state. The latter seen as a later development with a more complex relationship between the individual and their community. David's behaviour is appalling at times although James Woods describes the psalms as being one of the earliest depictions of an inner mental state prefiguring the soliloquy. Nonetheless it's the actions of David that count in the longer arc of his story, not his inner mental state. Sinners, to the pharisees were categories of people and here is Jesus in the thick of them.

If I had been in S Africa during apartheid, it would have been inconceivable that I would have accepted an invitation to a banquet with De Klerk. (Not that I'm normally invited to the banquets of world leaders!) These are people I just would not want to mix with. Mandela was bigger than that of course. Who could forget him wearing the South African rugby shirt – to many a dirty shirt, when South Africa won the rugby world cup. Strong political conviction can lead to binary ways of thinking. Sometimes this is necessary, because somethings are just plain wrong, and you need the energy and push that comes with clarity. I need only mention Greta Thunberg – what a Godsend she is to all of us. However, there are dangers. I taught a student social worker who was an active member of the socialist workers party. Much of her politics I had some sympathy with, and she was a scrapper who could turn anything into a fight. Her black and white approach to life worked for her in some contexts, and if I was in a tight corner, I *might* want her on my side. She might well

have been a pharisee, she had a similar mindset. But sometimes things are more complex and binary ways of thinking become part of the problem.

It's not that difficult to imagine being appalled at Jesus going to this dinner. If I am honest, I wonder if I would have found it difficult to be associated with that 'kind of people'. However, it is important to remember the beginning of the story – Levi was called, and he got up and left everything. So, it is probably important to understand the meal in this context with the direction of travel rather than fall into the trap of just viewing Levi as a type, a sinner. The pharisees saw him as a fixed category rather than someone on a journey. Levi as host is someone who has already made a commitment and left his previous life. As such he is a host who is opening up new possibilities and binary thinking does not tend to allow new possibilities to flourish. When the pharisees grumble to Jesus about how little asceticism they see in his disciples with their eating and drinking, compared to John, his response is that while you have the bridegroom with you, you feast! The one who calls us to pick up our crosses is at one and the same time the source of life, celebration and possibly even riotous carnival – something of a trickster. New wine, new ways of thinking.

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