

The call to follow

I have done something very Japanese! I've taken a micro holiday to visit my son Zach, who is studying in Japan. And what struck me – as it struck me when I visited Grace when she was studying in Scotland three years ago – is how suddenly roles are reversed – how they are now the ones who know where we're going, which direction, and how we'll get there. Rather than them following me (as they have, mostly, until now) I am following them!

Day one, when we stopped for lunch, I was watching a woman clean her table after she'd finished eating. (i.e. She was cleaning it for the next person. You know, at these moments, you're not in Australia anymore!) And I said to Zach, *"It's a pity I don't carry wipes these days."* And he looked at me, a little pityingly, and said, *"Mum, who would have thought we'd get to the point where I'd be the one with the wipes,"* and produced a packet. So, the tables – the very clean tables – have turned!

In our reading today, too, the tables are turned. The one who calls us to follow becomes a follower and thus shows us what following really means.

The passage begins, already controversially, with Jesus calling Matthew, a tax collector, to follow him. Why would Jesus call a known Roman collaborator, in a role synonymous greed and corruption to become his follower? As New Testament Professor Greg Carey writes, *"Several rabbinic sources indicate [tax] collectors' wicked reputation, but the story shares all we really need to know. The Pharisees perceive '[tax] collectors and sinners' as natural companions (9:11), and Jesus himself compares them not to those who are well but to those who are sick (9:12)."*

But at least, in this encounter, the power dynamics or the virtue dynamics are maintained. Jesus calls Matthew, and, verse 9, *"He got up and followed him."*

But then the tables are turned! Jesus calls Matthew to follow him, but then Jesus follows Matthew home for dinner – a dinner with tax collectors and sinners. And despite Jesus acknowledging their sin – their need for a physician – his companionship with them, Carey notes, *"appears to be just that, companionship and not treatment."* In fact, throughout the gospels, after an inaugural call to repent to all people, Jesus never directly condemns 'known sinners' – only the behaviour of the scribes and the Pharisees. Is it because the known sinners also know their need for Jesus?

In the two interactions that follow the tables continue to be turned. It isn't in Jesus' mission strategy to raise to life the daughter of the synagogue leader, and it certainly isn't in his ministry plan – the story makes this very clear – to heal the woman suffering from haemorrhages. In both encounters it is the people themselves, the desperate ruler and the suffering woman, who reach out to Jesus. They take the initiative.

“Follow me,” says the synagogue leader, *“Come and lay your and on my daughter and she will live,”* And Jesus, we’re told, *“got up and followed him, with his disciples”*. Jesus, who we follow, becomes the follower.

“If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well,” the woman says, and she reaches out to touch the fringe of his cloak. She interrupts Jesus and he turns around and sees her and acknowledges her faith and the work it has done.

These are challenging stories for us as the church because we would much rather be the instigators, the initiators, to carefully plan out and control how we will go about ministry. And, yes, there are times we go out and call others to follow him. But there are also times, often not of our choosing, when as Jesus’ followers, we are called to be followers. When the needs of others interrupt our dinner plans, change our mission strategies, stop us in our tracks. Carey writes, *“Like the Jesus of the First Gospel, the church needs to cultivate the art of following.”*

The writer C.S. Lewis speaks about this. Some of you will know that for many decades Lewis lived with and supported the mother of a friend, killed in WWI. Lewis’ brother, Warren, wrote in his diaries that Lewis would have been much more prolific had he not had to spend thousands of hours, at her request, shopping, walking the dog, and other domestic chores.

But Lewis spoke of being thankful for these demands that kept him in touch with everyday life in ways other Oxford Dons were not. He said, *“The great thing, if one can, is to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions of one’s ‘own’, or ‘real’ life. The truth is of course that what one calls the interruptions are precisely one’s real life—the life God is sending one day by day: what one calls one’s ‘real life’ is a phantom of one’s own imagination.”*

Catholic writer, Henri Nouwen, also reflects on a similar comment made to him by an old priest, *“I have always been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted; then I realised that the interruptions were my work.”*

To be a follower of Jesus, Nouwen says, is to be willing to be interrupted, willing to respond to the needs of others and the pain of the world. He writes, *“When Jesus said, ‘For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners’, he affirmed that only those who can face their wounded condition can be available for healing and enter a new way of living.... Suffering invites us to place our hurts in larger hands. In Christ we see God suffering—for us. And calling us to share in God’s suffering love for a hurting world.”*

Are we willing to hear the call of Jesus to follow him into the streets of this city? Are we willing to have the tables turned and our lives interrupted as others call us to follow them into their lives, to respond to their stories of pain and faith, and to discover healing and hope together?

Jesus Christ is waiting, waiting in the streets. And the people Jesus wants us to meet are waiting too. Let us sing this together.