

Feast or fast? Mark 2.13-28



Our pilgrim party feasting on "Peter's fish" (with ice-cream and jelly!) at a lakeside restaurant. Thanks to Rod for today's TFTD.

Interestingly, today marks 9 months to Christmas Day, or to put it another way, 3 months since last Christmas Day. Feast to fast, in 3 months! What a ridiculous way to refer to today's date, But what a ridiculous story Mark gives us today! Just imagine: Jesus has gone out by the lake and he just happens to see Levi sitting at the tax collector's booth –Then he says to Levi "Come and follow me!" and without so much as a bye your leave Levi says "OK, then" and off he goes. I mean, that's pretty ridiculous isn't it? It just doesn't happen like that in the real world, does it?

Wouldn't he have to give notice to his employers? Wouldn't he have to close all of the bank accounts and hand them on to someone else to look after? Wouldn't he have to sell his house, or at least rent it out? I mean, there's a lot of things to sort

out when you give up one way of life and take up another. It isn't as straightforward as just "Oh, OK then!" is it?

But maybe, just maybe, that would be to miss the whole point of the story. Perhaps the reason for Mark giving us the story here is to help us to notice just how radical a change this encounter with Jesus brings about.

So here are these religious Pharisees thinking, "How can this man, this rabbi, this one who claims to forgive sins—how can he recline with sinners and allow his disciples to do what is not lawful? How can *this* man be the Christ?"

But Mark makes it clear that Jesus is just that. He is the King of God's Kingdom. He was misunderstood by the religious leaders, but Mark goes to great lengths to make Jesus clear to us. In a way, these Pharisees and devout Jews do us all a great favour. In observing Jesus and questioning him, they give us further insight into the Kingdom of God. More than merely theological debates, these stories are revelations of the radical, even scandalous, nature of the Kingdom of God.

What are those revelations? There are at least three.

The Kingdom of God is for sinners (vv. 13-17)

Jesus goes down to the sea and calls Levi the tax collector to follow him. Soon after, Jesus is sitting in Levi's house, reclining at table with his friends. The Pharisees want to know "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus' answer is simple. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." It's a common-sense answer, a proverbial quote known far and wide. A doctor *must* go to the sick. What good is a doctor who never does that?

The Kingdom of God is radically new (vv. 18-22)

When Jesus appeared, the Jews expected him to fall in line with the status quo. And when he didn't, it proved troublesome. It angered the Pharisees, and it confused the common Jew. That's what we see in verses 18-22. It's not the Pharisees who question Jesus but the "people." They want to know why the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Jesus' don't.

But Jesus' disciples didn't fast at all, and that was confusing. So Jesus answered by appealing to a cultural norm. "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?"

No, he says. They can't. That wouldn't be right. When something joyous happens you don't think of fasting, you think of feasting. How are we going to celebrate? Weddings in Israel were not an afternoon affair. They lasted a full week. All week long, everyone would eat and drink. No one was fasting. Everyone was celebrating. Jesus is saying his disciples are doing the same.

The Kingdom of God is for us (vv. 23-28)

Here's Christ's Kingdom offer: it's not for the "good" people over there somewhere, because they don't exist. It's not for the people who achieve some great state of perfect obedience, because they don't exist either. It's for people like you and me: sinners in need of a saviour. To our weary, worn out, self-justified-out hearts, Jesus Christ's call is simple. "Come to me, and I will give you rest."

So, is the story that Mark gives us so ridiculous after all?

Isn't the simple truth that he gives us as plain as the nose on your face?

When you meet Jesus it marks a point of absolute transformation in your life and whether that's instantaneous (as seems to be the case for Levi) or over a much longer period, as is the case for many of us, meeting Jesus is utterly transformative and does not conform to social rules.

©Rod Hill
Methodist Minister
February 2021