

Views from the Pews – You did not choose me but I chose you

Conventional wisdom advises us to choose our friends wisely. We often evaluate a friendship based on the way it benefits us. Friendships formed with others who are popular, or good-looking, or rich or athletic, are appealing, although often only one way. Real connections form between good people who enjoy each other. The best of friends are those who share the same interests, who will stand by and help you when you need it and, if necessary, put your welfare before their own.

By those measures, Jesus chose some extraordinarily unconventional friends. His open acceptance of those at the bottom of the social heap often caused massive offence to those who considered themselves well above it. Take, for example, the touching little episode recounted in Matthew 9:10. ‘And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples’.

Clearly, Jesus was completely at ease with them, and they with him. Such familiarity could only have developed after they had experienced the kind of life-changing understanding and personal forgiveness that radiated from Jesus with every breath he took. By contrast, nothing could have been further from the accepted etiquette of the day.

Matt 9:11 illustrates the shock-horror reaction of the self-righteous witnesses to this radically challenging scene. ‘When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?’ This simple question makes clear that the Pharisees considered themselves belonging to a different social category to those they denigrated as sinners. Their inclusion of tax collectors with sinners must have been offensive to Mathew, a former tax collector himself.

Jesus would have none of it. Yes, the Pharisees made valiant attempts to keep the Law, including regular Temple sacrifices, assuming that nothing else was needed to achieve righteousness. But Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6a, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice”. He saw that reliance on ritual alone could not cure those who suffer sin-sickness but long for healing. On the contrary, he said, ‘I came not to call the righteous, but sinners’ because those who are well have no need of a physician, only those who are sick.

Happy are those who see the Church as a refuge for friends who know and trust each other to share their need of God.

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