

When the Church was very new, religion was not an area people were afraid to enter. There was a far more immediate sense of religion in the first century, and people knew that it was a serious area where they had understanding to seek and decisions to make. In our day people are ignorant of religion, and ignorance breeds fear; it would be an idiot who suggested religion could be eliminated from human experience, and the massive experiment of Russian Communism would have been a most expensive mistake if we failed to learn from it. Religion is a huge and vital power in human nature, and it is no more a matter of taste than is the chemistry of the human body or the psychological needs of the human mind. Neglect of this area leads to a sick life.

I find the story in the Gospel today, about Matthew's call and the party that followed very thought-provoking. Here is a man who has trodden the very outer limits of respectability: a tax-gatherer. I imagine any Arab working in the tax-office in Basra would be pretty vulnerable to the hatred of his countrymen. But to collaborators with Rome, religious contempt is added to natural dislike; Matthew is a pariah, the scum of the earth in the eyes of his family and compatriots.

When he has responded to the call of Christ, he doesn't become an instant model for stained-glass artists. He gives a dinner, to which all the other outcasts are invited; and they sit down with Jesus and his disciples. What was the conversation like? How did Matthew seem to his former colleagues in the despised trade of tax?

And how are we to hold hands with the world that is so secular, so irreligious in its whole processing of the issues of life? It's much as it has ever been, pragmatic, morally questionable, ready to deny from fear or favour the most sacred principles. It is full of people who set their moral tone by the way the wind blows where they are, or by whatever the law of the land may sanction. A Pharisee would know what to do. And we could follow his way, slamming the door of the Church firmly against the "tax-collectors and sinners." But if that were the way, which side of the door would we be on? The whole message of the Gospel is about grace for redeemed sinners, not about earning salvation through your moral excellence. If we are to proclaim Jesus Christ, our doors may never be shut against people whose lives fall short of his. God forbid we should do it to people whose lives - in our judgment - fall short of ours.

The Roman Christians had to decide how they could live in a pagan world more blatantly evil than ours. They found a way that did not result in the seclusion of the Church in a holy cloister; if they had, it would have suffocated and died. We have the same task, to live as closely as we can to a world in need of Christ, so that the world may know him and believe in him.