

Matthew 9: 9-13

<sup>9</sup> As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

<sup>10</sup> While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. <sup>11</sup> When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

<sup>12</sup> On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. <sup>13</sup> But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'<sup>[a]</sup> For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Matthew 9: 18-26

<sup>18</sup> While he was saying this, a synagogue leader came and knelt before him and said, "My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live." <sup>19</sup> Jesus got up and went with him, and so did his disciples.

<sup>20</sup> Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. <sup>21</sup> She said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed."

<sup>22</sup> Jesus turned and saw her. "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you." And the woman was healed at that moment.

<sup>23</sup> When Jesus entered the synagogue leader's house and saw the noisy crowd and people playing pipes, <sup>24</sup> he said, "Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him. <sup>25</sup> After the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. <sup>26</sup> News of this spread through all that region.

## Contamination

A man I was talking to recently commented that people don't like going to funerals because they fear that they are going to be next! I found this fascinating and disturbing in equal measure. Do people really think that death is 'catching'?

And yet this theme of contagion comes very clearly to the fore in our reading from Matthew (the theme enhanced by cutting a small section). Let me explain.

We begin with Jesus calling Matthew, the tax-collector, to be his disciple. What an odd choice!— think all the more religious Jews. But it's worse — a large dinner ensues with all the other tax collector friends. 'Why would you do that?', ask the pharisees. 'They're sinners — you are contaminated by association'. Jesus replies that it is the sick who need the doctor, not the well.

Straight away we learn of a girl who is not just sick, but dead! And it is the leader of the synagogue who is reporting this — but still he wants Jesus to come, he has faith that Jesus can raise her from the dead! Now, you may be aware that dead bodies were ritually unclean — and as a Rabbi, people expected Jesus to maintain ritual cleanliness. So the surprise is all the greater when the synagogue leader has such faith that he wants the life of God to flow from Jesus back into his daughter, rather than supposing

that her lifelessness would pollute Jesus. I suppose the pharisees carping at the meal would have picked up on this immediately.

But that's not all — because while Jesus is making his way there a woman in the crowd reaches out to touch Jesus! She has been subject to bleeding for twelve years. And that makes her unclean. She is a contaminant. What has happened? Has Jesus been made unclean? No! Quite the reverse — in her faith his goodness, his healing power passes from him to her. And despite the urgency of the ongoing story — got to race to raise the daughter — Jesus doesn't brush her aside nor recoil (as all the religious men had for so many years) but he stops and turns to her to assure her that her faith has healed her. And if she is healed, she is not only free from her physical malady, but she is also ritually clean. She is free to take a full part of society again. Jesus has restored her, socially as well as physically.

So in all three stories there is a tension: will Jesus heal, or will he be contaminated by the encounter? And each encounter ends in health and victory — the tax-collectors are transformed by Jesus's love and welcome, the bleeding woman is restored to health and social standing, the dead girl is raised to life. It's a good day in Jesus's ministry all round.

Part of the undercurrent of these stories is about ritual cleanliness, a Biblical idea that had served well to reinforce to a small tribe the message that they were to be wholly different to the neighbouring nations — focussed on God's code, not on the ways of the powerful people next door. We don't have this code, but does this then mean nothing to us?

Actually, I think Jesus's revolution against the cleanliness code can teach us a lot.

If Jesus had been of weak character hanging out with tax-collectors and prostitutes might have corrupted him — but he was the son of God, and he was incorruptible. If I were to spend too much time with the wrong sort, I'm sure that I would struggle to keep moral north fixed in my head.

Each of us has an influence on others, each is shaped by others. The wrong company can drag down the good, but the right company can redeem the bad. That's what is happening with Matthew, Zacchaeus, and others — Jesus's goodness overwhelms and redeems the evil in their lives. Jesus's goodness is contagious too!

There is more, too. Perhaps you remember at the height of the fear of AIDS in the 1980s, Princess Diana hugged someone with AIDS, and the world was shocked and wowed by this. This is what God's love in us urges us to keep doing — to touch, to minister to those who might be 'contagious' in some way — just as Jesus did, over and over again.

How then can we ensure that we are a healing influence — contagiously good?! I think there can be a tug of war going on for each of us — in me natural selfishness draw me towards, well, selfishness, and Jesus keeps calling me to go on loving and caring and seeking to be a loving influence. Perhaps you can identify with that?

And my only thought, which is not revolutionary nor clever, is that each of us knows that God loves us, and that God's love has changed us, softened us, shaped us, redeemed us, cleansed us, and breathed life into us. And so we need to ensure that we continue to receive from God, that we keep returning to receive the bread of life, or to ensure that we are truly grafted into the vine, so that his goodness flows in us, that we bear fruit.

The cleanliness code had recognised the vulnerability of a small tribe, a small religion, to outside religious influence. But it ended up in exclusiveness. The salvation of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit has given his people the strength to be strong in faith *and* to reach out into the world and make it more like the kingdom of God.

I have not raised anyone from the dead. But we can, perhaps be part of God's wonderful change in the world. We can go out and mix with whoever is the modern equivalent of tax-collectors — and care. We can notice the isolated woman and heal her socially. And there are many more such things that Jesus may present to us, for us to have a part in.

But we must do this in prayer, in God's strength not in our own. And if we do, we too can see life restored and freedom returned.

Amen. SDG.