

Levi and the Nazarene

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In the gospel reading for Saturday 19 January, Jesus meets Levi, son of Alphaeus. Bill MacCurtain SJ imagines how that meeting would have affected Levi – how did this Nazarene change his life?

Levi sat at his desk feeling vaguely dissatisfied. He watched the passers-by, some looking busy with a spring in their step; others walking slowly and looking hungry; still others carrying heavy burdens. Levi was his own boss, had more money than he could ever spend, and yet he was not satisfied: making money was a dead-end job. Admittedly he was admired and looked up to by his fellow tax collectors; but he was despised and envied by 'respectable' folk such as Pharisees and scribes and those who looked down their respectable noses at him and his fellow fat cats, although they were not averse to doing business with him when they needed to pull off a deal and needed a bridging loan or some such.

He spotted the Nazarene, surrounded by his usual knot of companions, and he envied the man's freedom and independence: he was barefoot and his clothes were patched and frayed but he was held in veneration even by some Pharisees. Most people loved him and wanted to be near him and listen to him. He was somehow different; he was his own man, confident about who he was without needing to measure himself over against others, and when he spoke there was a ring of authority in his voice that did not need to assert itself. There was a quietness and directness about him that engaged his listener in its friendliness.



Such a person, Levi realised, was a threat to those who operated the levers of power: his freedom of spirit showed up their 'power' for what it was – manipulation by those who sought to rob people of their independence by convincing them that respectability and correctness meant the same thing, and that conformity to their rituals was the basis of integrity.

Levi felt drawn to this Nazarene: he did not feel alienated; rather that he was accepted and valued. He hoped that when the Nazarene came by with his friends that he would pause and greet Levi. He wasn't expecting the man's companions to show him the same friendliness, but he was well used to that. What actually happened was that the Nazarene asked Levi to become one of his companions. Levi had no hesitation in accepting this offer of freedom.

His first decision was to invite Jesus and his followers to a celebration and even his fellow tax collectors joined him and shared his good fortune. The Establishment was furious. They felt their hold on the levers of power begin to slip. The very basis of their way of life was under attack. This Nazarene was an anarchist, a terrorist! He would have to be dealt with quickly and firmly if they were not to be undermined.

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