

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford at Evensong
The First Sunday of Lent
February 22, 2015

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For his own reasons Saint Mark decided to leave the calling of Levi out of his gospel account. But Levi and his subsequent dinner party are what provoke the confrontation in our second lesson. And out of it comes our Lord's *first recorded parable*. "No one puts new wine into old bottles."

Here is a reason why your exposure to the Scriptures must not be limited to the Church's appointed lessons for Mass or the Breviary. There is no substitute for reading the Bible! And when you *do* read it you remember the Pharisees used to fast *twice* in the week. (Luke 18:12) The day of Levi's party was likely one of those days when the Pharisees were fasting. This makes their question all the more pointed, and fasting (and being hungry!) probably made the Pharisees even more *ornery* than usual, and feeling more superior to those that did not.

Our Lord did not allow the Pharisees to rain on His parade. Here was an occasion for joy. A new disciple had been added to the apostolic band, and it put the Lord in an expansive mood. So when the Pharisees criticized the setting and offered some advice on how to behave Himself, God Incarnate replied by comparing Himself to a bridegroom, told a story about a man whose bottles of liquor blew up, and gave some advice on choosing a good wine!

"No one puts new wine into old bottles." This parable always reminds me of one of my biology professors in college. Dr. Emmons enjoyed making his own beer, and being a biology professor, he usually made good beer. But sometimes the ingredients got out of balance. The fermenting beer was bottled and shelved underneath the football stadium grandstand. And every once in a while, at a Saturday afternoon game in the fall you could hear one of these beer bottles explode. Nobody ever got hurt. I hope this isn't the part of the sermon you will go away remembering!

In the parable the Lord was giving the Pharisees something far more worthwhile to ponder. Almighty God was offering man a new covenant and a new life. It could not be used to patch up Judaism. The forms and customs of the old religion would not be able to hold the new. The Pharisees, and everybody else, would have to

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choose which side they were on. Making the right choice would be no easy matter. In first-century Palestine God-made-man was a stumbling block for Jews, a folly to the Greeks, and the Cross a scandal to everybody.

Even for us who have the advantage of 2000 years of Catholic teaching and witness the right choice is still no easy matter. Our customs and current thinking can get in the way of God's work and "make the Word of God of none effect." (Mt. 15:6) Every one of us has a track record of substituting for the demands of God things which we think suit us better. We can and do avoid facing God by taking refuge in conventional wisdom.

For the Pharisees the conventional wisdom was that tax collectors were collaborationists and traitors. The conventional wisdom was that anybody who set himself up as a religious teacher should fast twice a week as did the Pharisees and the followers of John the Baptist. The conventional wisdom was that we are known by the company we keep and by our actions. In all this reasoning and more it just so happened the Pharisees were building their indictment against Almighty God!

That is our warning. We substitute benevolence for charity, conscientiousness for obedience, and integrity for perfection. In any way our conception of the good life is formed by conventional wisdom rather than by divine revelation that way forms a barrier and block to what God is trying to do in and through us.

The celebratory party in the house of a new disciple named Levi was convivial and happy. It showed Divine Humanity perfectly at home in a society the respectable people were quite ready to condemn. And it is a reminder that because we live in the world but are not to be *of* it, we must always test our beliefs and actions by *the Word of God*.