

Read Luke 7:36-50

Jesus anointed by a sinful woman

Dear friends

In the Lord of the Rings there is a scene when the hobbit Frodo fearfully complains to Gandalf about the world he has found himself in...“I wish it wasn’t the way it is” he says

Gandalf smiles...lights his long pipe and replies,

“My dear chap... none of us choose the circumstances of our lives...we can only choose how we are in those circumstances”

In these exceptional circumstances that we are living through...

There is an opportunity for us to consider carefully the way we are...

The way we live...the way we treat others...and the world...

We have a precious moment now to see the truth...and to choose to live differently

The story of Jesus at the house of Simon the Pharisee asks us to consider the way that we are...

Are we honest about how we stand before God and each other

Are we honest about ourselves...Knowing that we held in the hands of Grace

Or are we still blinded by our sinfulness...and blaming the circumstances around us

Our passage is filled with Gospel truth and meaning

Friends...Know the truth...and it will set you free

Three characters dominate the story

Simon the Pharisee, Jesus...And the unnamed woman

In some translations she is known as a...woman of the city...described as a sinner

...Which almost certainly means that she was a prostitute

People have often supposed that this is the same story as the one we find in...Mark 14:3-9 and the similar passages in Matthew 26 and John 12....But it probably isn't...This story has its own meaning and importance

Jesus stands...or I should say reclines... once again...in the middle of the story

People used to recline on low couches at meal times...Leaning on the left arm...with their head towards the table...

On one side of him...We witness the outrageous,...adoration of the woman

On the other side...is the equally scandalous rudeness of his host...Simon

Jesus too will move and speak...into a place that the onlookers will find outrageous

He will isolate himself in his wisdom

The host...Simon... is a Pharisee...who we have to assume was not completely opposed to Jesus...At least not at the beginning of the story

There were several different positions within the Pharisaic movement

The majority were what we might call...hardliners...

Right wingers...ultra Conservative thinkers...Adherers to the law as they interpreted it

But a few...Simon amongst them perhaps...may have been prepared to give Jesus a fair hearing

Simon had probably heard rumours that Jesus was a great prophet...and that he was performing miracles

He was keen to see and hear for himself...To check the veracity of this claim

Of course as the story develops...we discover...That Simon thinks he has found the answer...

Jesus clearly cannot be a prophet...because he hasn't realized what sort of sin filled woman this is...

No Rabbi would sit next to...let alone allow an unclean woman touch him...Holiness is purity

Friends...It is for us to realize and to recognise...that Simon is completely wrong...

Jesus absolutely knows who this woman is...

He sees her...He knows what she has been...and what she is now...

AND he also knows what Simon is thinking

You may have noticed that Luke emphasises three times in the first two sentences that Simon is a Pharisee...

...and that it is to his house that both Jesus and this woman have come

We are to understand who the host is...and what his responsibilities are...More about that in a moment

This woman is an uninvited guest...But at the time of Jesus people would often come in to houses to listen and watch

Doors were open...Allowing beggars, friends or simply curious passers by...to walk in

And so it is with this sinner...She enters into the scene uninvited and unwanted

BUT...It seems that she has come with a purpose...And this gives her courage...She has come to see Jesus yes...but also to anoint him

Now...Because of the way Jesus was lying...the woman was able to approach his feet from behind

She took the perfume from around her neck and was ready to anoint him...

But in that moment... She sees very clearly the truth

The truth about herself...The truth about Jesus

And she is set free!

She is overwhelmed and begins to weep...So many tears...Of pain, or sorrow and now of joy...

Her tears fall onto the feet of Jesus...The feet of God

As her tears fall His feet become wet... and so...

She lets down her hair...something no decent woman would do in public...

It seems as if she was oblivious of public opinion in the grip of her deep emotion and devotion

And she wipes his dirty and tired feet dry...She kisses her Lord's feet

And then finally she did what she had come to do and anointed his feet with oil

Normally the perfume would have been poured on the head

The use of it on his feet is a sign of absolute humility

She knows who she is...before Jesus...She knows what she is here for

It would be fair to make a guess at this point

That Jesus had already turned this woman from her sinful life...

...and all that we witnessed is an outpouring of her love and gratitude

She may have met him face to face

She may simply have been among the crowds...She may have seen and heard

She may have been so convicted by his words that her life had been turned upside down

We don't know

But we see what effect he has had on her

She kisses her Lord's feet

She would never have chosen the circumstances of her life

But she had met Jesus...She knew the truth about herself and God's forgiveness

You have to know both

And now she had chosen how she would be in her circumstances

Luke wants us to understand something deeply important and profound

...This is what happens when God's love comes into the world

This is what happens when the truth...the Gospel...impacts on a human heart

When someone turns around and believes

Luke has already described in his gospel how Jesus... first in Nazareth...and then in the Great Sermon on the plain...

...stands the world on its head

How all the expectations...of what God's Kingdom might look like need to be redrawn...rethought

When the kingdom comes it will be a time of incredible generosity

Of abundant grace...over overwhelming love

As well as a time of fierce opposition which would in the end meet God's judgement

Now we see in this single story...what this looks like in practice

In the nitty gritty...flesh and blood of real life...In the life of a convicted sinner...and a self righteous Pharisee

What it looks like when we pray Thy Kingdom Come...Thy will be done

There are tears...There is Joy

Social conventions and rules are thrown out of the window

It is forgiveness and love that pour into the world...It is grace

These are the new standards against which all will be measured

Now people no longer appear as society has constructed them

But as God sees them

The Gospel is God's great reversal...and we see it here very clearly

As the woman appears where she should not be

As she does what the world says she should not do...because of love

And as Jesus does what he should not do...

He offers her only love and forgiveness

He offers her peace

Jesus does not gloss over our sins

But no matter how many and how great they are...God's grace is sufficient

We just have to see them and to tell the truth

Jesus is not saying that the woman's actions has earned her forgiveness

He is saying that her love is proof that she has already been forgiven

The story of the two debtors explains this

She had so much to be forgiven...AND she KNOWS her need...She knows the depth of God's love

...And so she loves

Luke wrote to a church that was trying to come to terms with this astonishing reversal

Many Jews had rejected the message about Jesus

But many outsiders and Gentiles were accepting it and coming into the church...Just like the woman in this story

They were coming into a world into which they had once been forbidden to come

They too were overwhelmed and delighted like the woman

To know that their sins were forgiven by God...The God of grace and abundant forgiveness

Jesus does what he always does...and what he is doing here amongst us in these times...He finds a third way...an unexpected way

He stands in the middle...And in doing so he turns power on its head

He sees the truth in the hearts of people

He turns the tables on the power in the room...Simon the Pharisee

In the great reversal it is the power of the world represented by Simon...that is guilty

Guilty of poor hospitality but more importantly guilty of judgement

In Simon's culture the shame of poor hospitality was almost as big a social failure as the woman letting down her hair

Simon had shown very little love...and the implication is that he had not been forgiven very much...And Jesus points it out very clearly

The Pharisee had never come to terms with the depths of his own heart

His circumstances suited him...He saw no need to change [repent]

He was blind...He had not seen...as we must...our brokenness and our need of love and forgiveness

And so he cannot appreciate the truth and depth of God's generous love

Even when the truth...That love... reclines right in front of him at his own table

True faith is what happens when someone looks at Jesus...Sees themselves as they truly are...

Then turns round...a change of heart and mind...and discovers deep inside of themselves God's forgiveness

Let us not be downhearted by our circumstances...But let us choose to live in these times in the light of God's love

The sign and proof of true faith...is love

It is tears of inexplicable joy

It is peace that surpasses all understanding

Amen