

Do you see this woman? 24th June 2018

Ruth 2:1-12; Luke 7:36-50

Many years ago when I was still living in England, I was at an evening service with a friend of mine. Part way through the service this rather large roughly dressed man came and sat down next to us, uncomfortably close to us, in fact. He made himself at home, putting his feet up on the pew in front giving us ample opportunity to experience his very dirty, smelly feet. In fact all of him had a certain rather unpleasant odour. We were embarrassed and uneasy and what made it worse for me was that during the next hymn my friend got up and moved to another pew! I faced a dilemma: I had no desire to go on sitting on my own next to the guy but at the same time I didn't want to get up and join my friend because what sort of message would that have sent to him about how Christians are supposed to behave. Fortunately the situation was resolved when he decided to go back to his mates hanging out in the local park; and the church heaved a collective sigh of relief.

I don't know whether you have had a similar experience or how well you coped with it, but often we don't know how to handle embarrassing experiences or embarrassing people do we?

As you are probably aware, in our current series we are exploring what it means to be Christ's church, how to be a community of God's people who are following Jesus and trying to live in ways that express his values and attitudes. Today I want to take the story we had read to us from Luke's Gospel and see what it might mean to look at people and situations through Jesus' eyes. I am not so much supplying answers as asking questions – questions I hope we will go on thinking about as we seek to follow Jesus and build community.

Tom Wright says that in this incident “social convention is thrown out of the window; forgiveness and love set new standards and raise new expectations; human beings appear not as society has ‘constructed’ them, but as God sees them.” I hope we will see what he means as we go through this story.

Luke sets the scene for us: - it takes place in Simon's house at a formal meal or banquet – we know that is the case because Luke tells us that they are reclining at the table. Jesus often took the opportunity to demonstrate or teach something whilst everyone is relaxing around the meal table. As well as the invited guests there are probably other townsfolk present who are listening in to what is going on.

There are three main characters in our story today and they are?? Jesus, Simon the Pharisee and the unnamed woman, and the focus shifts between the three of them as the story progresses.

Let's take a closer look at these three beginning with Jesus.

Jesus has been travelling through Galilee, preaching, teaching and healing people as he goes. He is attracting large crowds; some of them are sure that Jesus is a prophet sent from God (Lk7:16); others are even wondering whether Jesus is the 'one who was to come' – in other words the Messiah. But Jesus is content with the description of himself as a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Lk 7:34). Maybe that is what attracted the woman to Jesus in the first place - and that is also our first

challenge, isn't it? What would it look like for us to be a friend to the last, the least and the lost in our society: the homeless, druggies or people with mental health issues for example?

What about our second character – Simon. What do we know about him apart from the fact that he was sufficiently well off to throw a banquet?

Well, we know he was a Pharisee – what were they all about?

They were a religious group that was trying to keep the Jews on track, to guard against heresy, and against the infiltration of Greek and Roman attitudes and ways of doing things. They were concerned about religious purity and maintaining a distinctively Jewish identity. I wonder who we might see as their modern-day equivalents?

The people of Jesus' day would have regarded the Pharisees as the good guys, but unfortunately they had become so entrenched in traditional structures that they didn't know what to do with Jesus and his controversial ways of doing things. Some were intrigued by him, curious, like Nicodemus who came to Jesus secretly at night; but others were openly opposed to Jesus. They were already wondering what to do about this troublesome teacher and miracle-worker. (Lk 6:11). So whether he was just curious or whether he wanted to force a confrontation, for whatever reason, Simon invites Jesus for a meal.

But during the meal something unusual happens, not just unusual but embarrassing. A local woman 'a sinner' a woman with a bad reputation,' enters into the story. She stands behind Jesus and begins to wash his feet with her tears, dry them with her hair and anoint him with some expensive perfumed oil. Her behaviour was certainly outrageous, totally inappropriate and socially offensive. I'm sure Simon wasn't the only one asking himself: "If this man (Jesus) were a prophet he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner."

I'm not sure what come into your mind when you hear that the woman was a 'sinner.' Many people, including many commentators have assumed that she was a prostitute, and that her sin was of a sexual nature. There is, in fact, no hard evidence in Luke that this is so; maybe we are reading our own preconceptions into the text. Maybe, we also need to ask ourselves about what presumptions we make about people today – the unemployed, those living on the streets, or even those who dress in a particular way. It's what we do, isn't it, to judge people by what they look like.

Whatever she has done, this woman has been labelled by Simon and the local people and has become identified by her past. She is not only labelled by them but also because she is a 'sinner' she is excluded from the religious life of the community. Today she represents those on the margins of society – the last, the least and the lost – the 'losers,' not named but labelled, not an individual but a statistic, the people most of us, myself included, know only at a distance.

Two things come to mind here, the way that in the early days people avoided any contact with HIV sufferers even burning their sheets and throwing out cups, plates and cutlery they had used. By contrast, I think of Bishop Justin who said people had often criticised him and his wife for taking people with problems into their home in case they were a bad influence on his children – yet God has used him to reach

people that the conventional church has not been able to reach. Please note I am not saying this is for everyone but it is the way God has led him and his family.

I'm going to add an extra character in here— one from our OT reading. If you remember, part way through the story Boaz asks a question: "Who is this woman?" His workers tell him that she is the Moabite who came back with Naomi. Throughout the book she is identified as "Ruth the Moabite," Her name is Ruth. She has a name but she also has a label –Ruth the Moabite. Now, that might not mean much to you but it would to Boaz and his workers. The Israelites had a grudge against Moab because of something that had happened in the past (Numbers 22-24) and as a result Moabites were by law excluded from the community of God's people. (Deut 23:3). Being born a Moabite meant you couldn't take any part worshipping Yahweh – Israel's God. - I'll leave you to reflect on who Ruth might be represented by today.

So far we have been looking at how the society around them viewed these individuals, but how did Jesus see them?

Society saw Simon as the upholder of Jewish beliefs and practices but Jesus read his thoughts and recognised that he had become entrenched in traditional structures and wasn't open to change. What we are really talking about here is a heart attitude – the gospels often tell us that Jesus looked with compassion on individuals and on the crowd. Paul talks about the love of Christ compelling us to reach out to others for, he says, we no longer regard anyone from the world's point of view. It is that heart attitude that Jesus has to deal with in Simon the Pharisee.

So Jesus doesn't write Simon off, he accepts his invitation to dinner and the opportunity to speak with him. Jesus doesn't lay into Simon – instead he tells him a story. Jesus loved to do this – to tell a story that challenges us and our preconceptions, that leaves us to draw our own conclusions and then choose whether to act on them or not. It is a story about debt and cancelled debt, about gratitude and the expression of gratitude.

Jesus then asks Simon a crunch question – Which of them will love him more? Simon – who is an intelligent guy begins to get the drift of what is going on and reluctantly admits what is actually pretty obvious – I suppose the one who was forgiven more. Right on says Jesus – you have judged rightly. I wonder what Simon did with that story – we're not told, Luke leaves it open-ended. Maybe, like that other Pharisee, Paul, he later became a follower of Jesus. I hope so.

Then Jesus asks another question? - Do you see this woman?

Well, yes, everyone in the room would have been looking at her - but what did they see?

Society saw her as a sinner, but how does Jesus see her?

Jesus is, of course, well aware of her past but he hasn't recoiled from any contact with her. Nor does he let her past define her. Instead he recognises the possibility for a different future. Actions speak louder than words, do they not? So Jesus makes his point quite clear – that the woman's many sins have already been forgiven. He realises that her actions show that a change has already begun in her life. "The

conclusion I draw is this,” he says, “She must have been forgiven many sins! Her great love proves it!”¹

So he says to the woman: “Your sins are forgiven.” When he says this, Jesus is not only giving the woman further assurance that her sins are forgiven, but also he is emphasising to Simon and the others present that the woman is no longer ‘a sinner’ (but a forgiven sinner); no longer to be regarded as a social and religious outcast, but someone they need to welcome into the community of God’s people.² I wonder how they did with that?

What about Ruth? Ruth has made a declaration: “Where you go, I will go and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God, my God.” (Ruth 1:16), and far from being excluded she becomes the great-grandmother of King David and an ancestor of Jesus himself.

[Just an aside here. Every week, as Anglicans, we confess our past, receive the assurance of forgiveness and recognise that we can now be at peace – with God, with one another and with ourselves. By saying our Amen to the words spoken from the front we are agreeing that we are now in a position to see ourselves as Jesus sees us, and to see those around us as Jesus sees them. We can see one another through the eyes of Christ and realise that we are called to be accepting of one another as the community of God’s people here at Church on the Hill. This is what we commit to every week as we meet together.]

I hope you can see how Jesus saw people differently, he accepted and welcomed them and then he invited those he encountered into a commitment to a different way of living – to follow him and to practise new ways of being a community of God’s people. This commitment to follow Jesus, to give him our allegiance, to put our trust in him we call faith. We heard Ruth’s commitment in her declaration: “Your people will be my people and your God, my God.” We know the woman had faith because Jesus says to her: “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

What do you think he means when he says, “Your faith has saved you?” What are we saved from?

What is the story of salvation/rescue that dominates the OT and is entrenched in the Jews’ understanding of who they are as God’s people? – The Exodus.

How does that help us to understand what salvation is all about? What were the Israelites saved from? What was God leading them into?

Perhaps some of you might like to explore that a bit further in a moment.

What about “Go in peace.” We say it each week as we leave this place. What are we saying? Remember Ruth. Boaz prayed that she might come to experience the blessing and protection of the God of Israel, under whose wings she has come to take refuge. Can anybody remember the occasion when Jesus said something similar? - Matt 23:37 – “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ... how often I have longed to gather

¹ Lk 7:47 Tom Wright Jesus says: NRSV “Therefore, I tell you, her sins which were many have been forgiven hence she has shown great love.”

² Remember the first readers of Luke’s gospel were probably Gentiles still wondering if there really was a place for them in this new community of God’s people.

your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing, and you were not willing.” Ian Smith spoke to us about that didn’t he, about the chook gathering her chicks, about the way God creates a safe, sheltering space for us. So when Jesus said to the woman: “Your faith has saved you; go in peace,” he was saying come, come enter in to God’s shalom God’s place of safety, security, well-being and flourishing. Not pain-free not all plain sailing but a place of peace.

We have a notice at the back of the church about how we are trying to be a welcoming community. That’s good. But I suggest that if we are looking with the eyes of Jesus we are about more than welcoming in a non-judgmental way. I hope we are also saying: “Come, come and experience a new way of living; a life where God’s presence is with us to give us peace whatever the difficulties and heartbreaks we may encounter on the way ahead. Come, come and be part of a community that sees things differently.”

Let me finish with a more encouraging story than the one I began with. Last August John and I went to St Nicholas’ Church– a pretty traditional evangelical church with a strong teaching ministry situated in the centre of Durham. The service was an informal Communion – much like our 10.30 service. As we began the Eucharist liturgy an older guy came in and sat down. From his appearance he may have been someone living rough or semi-homeless. The vicar paused for a moment at this interruption, then he smiled and said “Hello John, welcome. We’re glad you have joined us today.” I don’t know this man’s story but what I took from this incident was that whoever he was, he felt comfortable at coming into this church, he was known by name and welcomed. He didn’t stay for tea and biscuits – that was too much for him but he felt welcome at the table of our Lord. Would he get the same welcome here – well, I like to think he would. But let’s keep challenging ourselves to see people through Jesus’ eyes, to welcome them in his name, and invite them in, to experience the acceptance, the forgiveness, the new life that Jesus offers us; to experience along with us the shalom of God.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, Living Word, thank you for showing us yourself in the written word. Please help us to see people and circumstances through your eyes and to act and react as you would do. Help us to be welcoming and accepting of one another. Amen.