

'Do you see this woman?' Luke 7.44

*A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist on the Second Sunday after Trinity, the Gospel being Luke 7.36-8.3.*

*Trevor Dennis's last Sunday before retirement.*

I remember being at an academic conference many years ago, when I used to go to such things, when, David Gunn, an Old Testament scholar, gave a brilliant paper on the story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11. It is a story of lust, David's lust, and, I would suggest, his rape of Bathsheba. It includes the lines, 'David was walking about on the roof of the king's house, and he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful.' 'What,' David Gunn asked us, 'do *you* see?'

'Do you see this woman?' Jesus asks Simon the Pharisee in our Gospel. What do you see? What do I see? A local prostitute who bursts in on a private dinner party, and starts washing the feet of one of the guests with her tears. She is plying her trade. It is an outrageous act of seduction. At least, that is how Simon the host sees it, and his attitude is hardly surprising. Yet he *is* a Pharisee, and all Pharisees were stuck-up, self righteous prigs, everyone knows that, and I'm not self righteous at all, thank God, so I quite agree with Jesus when he exposes his hypocrisy. And the woman gets forgiven at the end, so that's alright.

But, you see, it's not like that at all.

'Do you see this woman?' I wish we knew her name. Perhaps then we wouldn't be so quick to jump to conclusions. The story doesn't say she was a prostitute. Luke describes her as someone who was 'a sinner'. Earlier in his Gospel, when Peter first meets Jesus, Luke says 'he fell down at Jesus' knees and said, 'Get away from me for I am *a sinner*' - the same word in the Greek. Does any of us imagine for a moment Peter was a prostitute? 'Sinner' just means the woman was regarded as an outsider, that she didn't belong, that people thought she was not good enough, declared her excluded from the holy, cut off from God, ready for his wrath. She wears her hair loose, which probably indicates she is not married. Why not? Because she's too young, still only about twelve years old? Or because no man will have her? Because she doesn't belong, because no-one believes she can? Is that it? Well, if it is, then Jesus sees things, sees her, quite differently.

‘Do you see this woman?’ The story doesn’t tell of her gate-crashing the party. She is there already, it seems, when Jesus arrives. He says to Simon, ‘*from the time I came in* she has not stopped kissing my feet.’ Yet surely a Pharisee would not have invited such an outsider as this woman to his posh dinner party? Some ancient rabbis tell us of devout Pharisees inviting needy people to meals in their houses. Perhaps Simon has invited this woman out of a sense of religious duty, not realising that she and Jesus already know one another.

Because they do. The woman brings her alabaster jar of ointment because she knows Jesus is going to be there. The story says so. And she washes, dries and anoints his feet, because she is already devoted to him. She is already one of his followers, and why? Because he has already forgiven her. That the story makes plain: ‘Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.’ With Jesus she has come home, she belongs, she is good enough, she keeps God company and knows the warmth of God’s welcome; in Jesus’ circle she has found the holy, she has *become* holy, a daughter of Abraham and a precious child of God. And her God, she has already discovered to her utter astonishment, has knelt to wash her feet. No-one had done that for her before. But Jesus has, and she knows full well what it means. And so she has become a footwasher herself, no longer regarding it as a demeaning task, but as an act of love.

It has never occurred to Simon, the devout host of the party, to wash the feet of his guests. His servants will provide them with water, so they can do it themselves. But as far as Jesus is concerned, they do not get the chance. Nor are they able to anoint him and make him smell nice. Simon himself has not been able to give him a kiss of greeting. The woman has done all that. She has acted as the host, just as the risen Jesus will near the end of Luke’s Gospel, in the house of a couple at Emmaus. And she has broken the neck of her alabaster jar of ointment, and poured its contents over Jesus’ feet, just as he will pour out the wine at the Last Supper and his own blood on the cross.

Once she was not welcome. Then Jesus made her so. That has already happened before the story begins. Yet he has done much more: for the unwelcomed has become the welcomer, the outcast has been transfigured into a Christ figure. Her extravagant hospitality is an acted parable, holding within its small compass the

nature and the challenge of the kingdom of God. She is Simon the Pahrisee's teacher, and our teacher, too, if we will allow her to be.

'Do you see this woman?' Jesus asks Simon. 'If you wish to understand me, Simon, if you wish to enter the world of the kingdom of God, if you wish to find your God within touching distance, then look at this woman. You will have to abandon your honour and your status, Simon. You will have to do the work of your women slaves and wash people's feet. In fact, Simon, you don't ask them to do that, for you consider the work to be beneath them. You only ask them to bring the water. But, see, footwashing is not beneath this woman here, Simon. Nor is it beneath me, nor beneath God. Give God half a chance, Simon, and you'll find him kneeling at your feet, getting the muck and the filth off them. It's what God does, his trademark, that and crucifixion, because I can see that coming, too, Simon. And so can this woman. Why else the breaking of the bottle's neck, the outpouring of the ointment? But after crucifixion I will smell to high heaven, Simon, with this woman's ointment, and with the all-pervasive scent of resurrection.' That's what I hear Jesus saying in this story.

'Do you see this woman?' The question is thrown at us now, you and me. 'If you wish to understand me, to enter the topsy-turvy world of the kingdom of God, to feel God's tears upon your skin, then look at this woman, remember her, and go and do likewise.' That is what I hear Jesus saying to us.

This is my last sermon in this great Cathedral church before I retire, but I do not ask you to remember me. Some of you will, maybe. I have let many of you down, I have hurt some of you, and you may not be able to forget that so easily. Maybe, some of you have seen God peeping out from behind me, for God is most playful and mischievous, and works, as we all know, in most mysterious ways. You will remain an inspiration to me. Perhaps, perhaps, through the grace of our most playful God, there have been moments when I have been able to inspire some of you a little. But I do not ask you to remember me. My colleagues are not going, and soon there will be two new clergy in the team. Jane Brooke will be installed on September 11<sup>th</sup> as Canon Chancellor, and fairly soon, once a little more work is done, the advertisement will go out for a new Vice Dean. It is time for new faces, new ideas, a refreshing of the vision.

But as I retire, I do ask you to remember that woman, that unnamed woman in Luke's story. At the end of Mark's rather different version of the story, he has Jesus say, 'Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.' (Mark 14.9) Well, I've done my bit. Don't forget her, and notice the truth that lies at the heart of her story: God's welcome, God's bringing us into the warm from the cold and the dark, God's treating us as his precious children, God's extravagant, unshakeable love, these all come *first*. *Then* we turn, to bury ourselves in God's embrace, and feeling his arms about us, are changed. 'Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.' Exactly. Or, as John put it, 'We love because he first loved us.' (1 John 4.19) Don't put it the other way round, because if you do, you'll find yourselves up a rather tall and shaky gum tree.

Oh, and give Luke's unnamed woman a name. In his Gospel John calls her Mary of Bethany. That will do. Brings some colour to her cheeks. But, like Jesus, she was Jewish, so give her the Jewish form of her name, Miriam.

Do you see Miriam now? She's unforgettable!

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