Sermon for 11th in Ordinary Year C

Readings Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3.

i

It would be hard to find a more dramatic contrast between Simon, the morally upright, puritanically minded Pharisee and the woman who was known as a notorious sinner. Yet by the end of the story, we are not sure there is that much difference between the two and consider the sinful woman to be in a more favourable position before the Lord Almighty than the Pharisee. How does this dramatic and ironic turnaround happen?

It’s not easy to decide how suspicious to be of Simon’s motives for the invitation. He was going out on a limb, as a Pharisee, to invite Jesus into his home. Jesus had had little complimentary to say about the Pharisees.

Was it a trap? Was Simon fishing for evidence against Jesus? Or was he genuinely attracted by what Jesus had to say?

All we can say for sure is that Simon was not committing himself yet. Yes, he had invited Jesus to his home, but he had not extended the customary courtesies of offering water to wash his feet, nor an aromatic oil to dab upon his head, or a customary embrace of welcome.

Simon may have had some sympathy for Jesus’ preaching, but he certainly did not yet understand it.

Simon has the mind of a forensic accountant, adding up the sins and counting out the good deeds and legal observances. In those terms, Simon was indeed in an altogether different league to the woman. If righteousness before God were a matter of keeping a ledger of outward observances, Simon would surely have been home and dry.

We don’t know who the woman was. Scholars are divided about whether we may presume she is Mary Magdalene or not, from whom Jesus had earlier cast out her demons.

Whoever she was, she had a bad reputation and that probably means some sort of sexual misconduct . Her behaviour seems to have been genuinely immoral, for Jesus confirms she has been forgiven “many sins”; so Simon wasn’t altogether wrong in his assessment of the woman. He was just wrong about how God deals with sin.

It seems that Jesus and the woman must have met before; that is the most logical background to the story. At some earlier encounter, it appears Jesus has offered the woman forgiveness. Her actions in Simon’s house are her response.

She is extravagant; she breaks social norms of behaviour by kissing Jesus’ feet; she is emotional.

This is because sin is not about book keeping, but about love: firstly, the love of God who freely offers forgiveness in a wild act of generosity, and secondly, the response of loving gratitude by those who receive that gift.

Simon finds a false sense of security and superiority in his book keeping attitude to sin that ticks off the observances of law and custom. Until he understands that no amount of righteous book keeping will save him, he’ll never know what to do.

In the parable that Jesus tells Simon and his guests, neither party could pay their debts. The debtors’ prison awaited both. It’s a wake-up call to Simon and his friends.

ii

Simon makes another fundamental mistake concerning sin. He thinks that keeping your distance is the best way of dealing with it.

Simon does not wish to mix with sinners and he certainly doesn’t approve of this woman entering his house. He acts as if moral goodness inevitably becomes infected, or contaminated, by exposure to sin and sinful people. He does not seem to entertain the possibility that moral goodness may redeem sin.

Christians know that the pattern of God’s redemption has been set by Jesus. The incarnation is about goodness meeting with sin and overcoming. God does not abandon his sinful children, nor keep behind a safe *cordon sanitaire* in heaven, but comes to live among them.

Simon is a recipient of such grace, even if he as yet fails to see that. Jesus, God’s only Son, has come to him.

Too often Christians have modelled themselves more on Simon than on Jesus. The Puritan within us all takes over sometimes and we disdain those we see as our moral inferiors; we keep to our safe and respectable churches and stick with safe and respectable people.

Yet our incarnational Gospel is about getting our hands dirty in the belief that love overcomes wickedness. That God’s love can take on human sin and emerge the victor.

Sometimes we act as if that is not true and we retreat into our bourgeois, ghettos of respectability and churchiness. Methodists should know better.

Early Methodist history is full of tales of lives reformed, communities renewed and evils righted. For example, when Charles made his third visit to Cornwall in August 1744, the jails around Gwennap were empty for the first time in living memory.

Methodists who stay safely worshipping in their churches while society falls apart around them are unworthy of our name.

iii

There is at least one other crucial point that Simon needs to learn from the events of this day.

Jesus tells the parable about the two men who owed money they could not repay, but then by an act of grace, are forgiven those debts. He is using this image to speak about sin and forgiveness, as he goes on to say that the woman’s many sins have been forgiven.

Jesus then boldly states – and not for the first time – “Your sins are forgiven.”

Immediately, the other guests bridle at this pronouncement. It was not a gentle pious platitude, “God will forgive your sins’, as he might have said in order to get rid of her and get on with his dinner.

“Who is this that even forgives sins?” ask the astonished guests. And well they might.

This is the most crucial lesson of all for Simon and his Pharisee friends and for the entire world. The way that God deals with sin is centred upon Jesus. That is the revelation and challenge of the Christian Gospel. You stake your life on that or you don’t; that’s the choice and the challenge.

Righteousness is not about keeping your nose clean and distancing oneself from sinners – although a few Christian communities around the world still exhibit such an assumption.

Righteousness is not about a book keeping tally of good versus bad deeds.

Sin is fundamentally about broken relationships between us and God and between one person and the next. And no amount of effort, however assiduous, can mend that breach.

It can only be healed from God’s side. And God has reached across through Jesus. It may not be what you would have done if you had been God. Perhaps you would have preferred the book keeping method. Book keeping seems fairer at face value, until you realise that no one can pay their debts that way.

But since you are not God, you have to accept what God has chosen to do – and that is to offer himself to us in a renewed relationship through Christ, because Christ has moved the obstacle between us – sin.

And it is in believing that claim that salvation is found.

Salvation is not dependent on the specific nature and form of human response – for that would simply degenerate into another form of book keeping one-up-man-ship.

Wesley says of the woman’s extravagant gestures, “Not thy love. Love is salvation. It is faith that saves.”

Simon cannot find “more salvation” or buy “better blessings” by washing Jesus’ feet more thoroughly, or by anointing him with finer perfume, or by embracing him more times. The woman’s actions are her personal response and that is for her alone to decide. It is her faith that she has been forgiven by Jesus that is her salvation.

For this reason we read these words of St Paul, the ex-Pharisee, in his letter to the Galatians:

“We…know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ…I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:16, 20).

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