

Pentecost 4C 12 June 2016 St Peter's Upper Riccarton

Galatians 2: 15-21; Luke 7: 36 – 8:3

Forgiveness – a novel approach

I've always enjoyed reading novels. I prefer reading about ordinary people overcoming difficulties and emerging changed for the better. Usually I identify with one character. When I was younger it was the beautiful young heroine. Nowadays it's more likely to be the grandmother, reflecting on the past and speaking out of hard-won life experience. A good novel can be read many times. But when I revisit an old favourite, I often find my perception's changed. Another character draws my attention and 'speaks' to me. Where am I heading on this? Well, I've been thinking that this morning's gospel has some of the elements of a novel; dramatic action and the possibility for profound life change.

"She stood behind Jesus, ... crying and wetting his feet with her tears".

That this unclean woman should even dare to enter the house of a righteous Pharisee was scandalous.

It was even more scandalous that she stood by the feet of the guest of honour and wet his feet with her tears, then loosened her hair and used it to wipe his feet, before anointing them with perfume.

A respectable woman in that culture would never show her hair in public. But this wasn't a respectable woman. Letting down her hair was one of the tricks of the prostitute's trade.

Everyone was greatly offended; everyone that is, except Jesus.

Jesus recognised her actions as showing profound gratitude and love. Presumably she'd previously responded to his preaching and found forgiveness.

Now she was thanking him for the healing liberation he'd given her.

How might we react if we'd been there?

Hopefully we might show even a little of the understanding Jesus showed.

But speaking for myself I doubt it. As a decent woman, I wouldn't even have been there.

I'd have been safely out of sight in the kitchen. But if I can possibly imagine myself there, I would have been embarrassed; anxious that the woman might be causing offence.

But Jesus shows no embarrassment. His love for others was so profound that his thoughts were not on himself but on her. She was the one that mattered.

Our embarrassment would be because we worry about what others might think of us. We care about keeping the social rules. But Jesus was free of all that. He doesn't react as we might.

He doesn't say to the scandalised Simon:

"You see, Simon, we public figures have to put up with messy and embarrassing situations."

Or, *"Now Simon, you mustn't think that this unfortunate woman is a close friend of mine. I've never met even her."*

He doesn't even say: *"Remember, Simon, we must hate the sin but love the sinner."*

Instead, Jesus focusses on the woman and her brave actions.

He stands up for her, offering no excuses to lessen the disgust of the people at the party. He shows unconditional love; the kind of love which God has for us all.

This woman is now freed to live her life differently. Maybe she could join the women we hear about, who went with Jesus and provided for him and the disciples.

If this was a novel, she's the heroine whose been rescued from her former life, found redemption, and will now live 'happily ever after'

But what of the other character - the Pharisee, Simon?

With the benefit of hindsight it's easy to see him as a bad character but he's more complex than that.

We shouldn't be too hard on the Pharisees; they were among the best people in their society.

They worked very hard at being righteous.

It was crucially important to them to keep God's law in the tiniest detail, and to show holiness in God's

sight. As a Pharisee, Simon would have made huge efforts to ‘do the right thing’.

However, he was probably self-satisfied and despised others who didn’t live like he did, seeing them as weak willed, bringing their troubles on themselves. Most Pharisees assumed that they deserved God’s blessing. They’d earned their place in God’s kingdom and were unaware of their own deep needs for forgiveness.

No doubt Simon imagined his thoughts were unnoticed but his disgust was plainly written all over his face and Jesus homed in unerringly with his parable.

Who do we identify with in this Gospel narrative?

Mostly, I think we identify with the woman – we’re aware that we’ve sinned, and long for forgiveness. We also love our Lord and want to thank him.

But we miss the point of this encounter if we focus simply on a woman being forgiven.

The challenge for us is to recognise the Pharisee in ourselves..

Throughout my ministry I’ve talked to people who’ve left the church, about their reasons for going. Invariably I’ve felt ashamed. They didn’t leave because they couldn’t be bothered going.

They left because they felt unwelcome or judged.

Sometimes they felt hurt because their gifts weren’t valued – they were taken for granted, or expected to contribute more than they felt able.

Sometimes they felt that their preferred style of worship or theological understanding wasn’t accepted.

But overwhelmingly, they left because they felt judged – their children weren’t well enough behaved – their floral arrangements weren’t up to scratch - they couldn’t afford to wear ‘the right’ clothes.

More seriously, they experienced discrimination– their skin was the wrong colour, or their sexual orientation wasn’t acceptable. They left because they came up against the attitudes of modern day Pharisees like Simon.

We don’t know what happened to Simon. Which way did he go?

There are some examples in the Gospels which may give us a clue.

Was he one of those who plotted to kill Jesus?

Or did he have a change of heart and become like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea?

Could he even have become like that other righteous Pharisee, Saul, who became Paul after his life changed dramatically after his encounter with the risen Jesus? This morning’s extract from Galatians is part of Paul’s response to those who were discriminating against new converts by insisting on circumcision.

As someone who likes ‘happy endings’, I like to think that Simon the Pharisee did take this experience to heart and changed his attitudes. Many others who experienced Jesus’ loving compassion changed their lives – so could he. On the other hand, perhaps he couldn’t let go of his need for status, his desire to live by the rules, making him one of those the King James Bible described so graphically as ‘stiff-necked’ people? Perhaps he found it impossible to see himself as a sinner in need of forgiveness, just as much as the woman was. Sadly, Jesus couldn’t usually help such people.

Jesus said: *“The person who asks for only a little forgiveness, does not have much love to show. But the person who knows there is much to be forgiven can receive much forgiveness.”*

The prostitute shows much love, but Simon’s love is meagre.

She had a large capacity for grace but Simon had only scant room. God’s grace is always freely available for us. We receive it when we allow the way of love to guide our actions. **Amen**

A PRAYER:

Loving God, we are glad that you have drawn us together again.
We come as a motley people from a motley world, seeking that abundant love
which does not count our follies or number our sins.
Help us to delight in your free grace more than birds love the air and fish love the sea.
Give us an eager desire to worship you wholeheartedly, and to serve you
without conditions or selfish expectations.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen!

A POEM: ***LOVE PROVES IT***

*Did you see her slip in
by backdoor from the street,
and the prophet accept her
to tear-wash his feet?*

*Did you see the proud host
draw back with a glare,
as the woman of faith
towelled with her hair?*

*Did you see holy fire
as he rebuked the bore,
and the woman so grace-full
leave by the front door?*

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