

St Philip's Anglican Church O'Connor

Reverend Pamela Phillips

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost—12 June 2016

*1 Kings 21.1-10 (11-14) 15-21a; Psalm.1-7; Galatians 2.15-21; Luke 7.36-8.3*

From time to time, radio hosts ask their listeners whom they would invite to a dinner party if they could ask anyone at all. People list all sorts of interesting figures from history, or still living and talk about the sort of questions they'd like to ask them. Frequently someone will say they'd like to invite Jesus. It sounds wonderful, until you remember today's Gospel reading. Jesus could be a most disconcerting dinner guest. The saying, "Jesus came to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable," comes to mind.

In this case, someone really did ask Jesus to dinner. All we're told is that he was one of the Pharisees. We don't know his motive. Maybe he was curious, like Nicodemus. Perhaps he genuinely wanted to hear more of Jesus' teaching. He certainly doesn't seem to have been a particularly good host, neglecting several of the normal conventions, as Jesus points out to him. Whatever his motive, it seems he wanted to find out who Jesus really is.

Rather surprisingly, Luke tells us what Simon the Pharisee was thinking when his dinner party was interrupted by this woman's extraordinary behaviour. I imagine his thoughts were clear from his horrified expression. Could it be that some of the disciples were also guests, and were having thoughts along the same line? For a Jewish man to have been approached by a woman while he was reclining at table would have been shocking enough. The guests were presumably all men, as would have been normal. But what she did then—the extreme intimacy of her behaviour, with complete disregard for the social and religious conventions—it was probably an acutely embarrassing situation for everyone there. Except, that is, for Jesus, and the woman herself.

Jesus didn't seem to have much time for social conventions. Or for ritual cleanliness, judging from how often he touched the untouchables of his society with love and healing. There's a certain comedic element to this story. The woman was weeping over his feet and drying them with her hair, then kissing them and anointing them with presumably a highly perfumed ointment. The whole situation would have been impossible to ignore. While she's doing this, Jesus calmly starts a conversation with his host about a couple of debtors. I get a mental image of poor Simon the Pharisee, staring with horrified fascination at this extraordinary situation, and trying to reply to his guest's apparently unrelated and mystifying question about cancelled debts.

Similar stories to this one occur in other Gospels. The positioning of the stories in the narrative gives us an indication of the writer's intention in telling it. In this account from Luke, today's reading follows Jesus' healing of the centurion's servant, and his raising from the dead of the widow's son at Nain, earlier in Chapter 7. That was followed by the visit of some disciples of John the Baptist sent to ask Jesus if he was the Messiah, to which Jesus replied "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense of me."

And now we have a story of sins forgiven.

Jesus recognised her scandalous action as profound gratitude and pure love. It would appear that either this woman had already encountered Jesus, or she had responded to his preaching and found forgiveness and acceptance. Not just forgiveness—acceptance.

Forgiveness doesn't necessarily confer social niceness. She was a woman of the city—a forgiven one, certainly, but still, a woman of the city, known as a sinner. Forgiveness doesn't automatically bring social acceptability. Decent women wouldn't associate with her, and decent men wouldn't, either. Not in public at least. She seems not to have a clue about “decent” behaviour.

So there weren't many ways she could express her gratitude and love to the loving and accepting Messiah. But she trusted Jesus. She could let her hair down in the company of Christ and know that he would understand. This was a “thank you” for the healing and liberation that he had given her. We can be certain of this by the words which Jesus spoke to Simon; “Her great love shows that her many sins have been forgiven”. And later, to her: “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.”

Jesus seems immune to the scandal and embarrassment. He compares the behaviour of the woman to the way in which his host had welcomed him, and not favourably. That in itself would have rankled with a man whose social standing and self-image were both greatly enhanced by his certainty that he was above reproach. I suspect the rebuke that Jesus gave him by contrasting the woman's extravagant gesture of gratitude with his insulting lack of welcome was intended not just to defend her, but to awaken Simon himself to his own lack of contrition. “I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” There are two sinners in this story, but only one has already received forgiveness.

The story ends as Jesus addresses the woman for the first time. “Your sins are forgiven.” You are accepted, just as you are. We aren't told what the outcome was with Simon. The dinner guests, witnesses to this extraordinary encounter, are startled again, because only God can forgive sins. Just who is this Jesus?

The woman knows. “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” No deep theological debate, no questioning—she is forgiven and accepted, and she has responded with love and gratitude. Such love can only come from God.

There are three lessons I think we can learn from this encounter. Firstly, as we all know, we are all in need of forgiveness. But the need to justify ourselves runs very deep. As children we're usually rewarded for being good, and it's hard to get out of the habit. Even as adults, society usually rewards us for behaving like good citizens, however that's interpreted in our particular culture.

Let's not be too hard on the Pharisees. They would have made model parishioners. They worked very hard at being good. God mattered, and holiness in God's sight was most important to them. Simon would have put enormous effort into doing the right thing. However, that does tend to produce a sense of superiority, and judgementalism against people who just don't seem to make the same effort.

In contrast, people who have recognised their own helplessness are open to being changed by God's love—by grace. We use the word “sin” to denote actions we know are wrong and cause ourselves or others harm. In the past, this was sometimes referred to as “attachment”, a concept we would nowadays call addiction. These are things we seem helpless to stop. The many twelve-step programs around the world attest to the fact that the only way to begin escaping from addictions is firstly to admit our own helplessness, and then to surrender our weakness and inadequacy to God, in trust that what we can't achieve, God can.

Secondly, Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you.” That can sound like we need to demonstrate enough belief in Jesus as Lord and Saviour to be saved. Again, it sounds like it's up to us. But a book I read recently gave me a helpful insight into this problem with the

words “faith” and “belief”. Their meaning has changed over time, but that’s relatively new and very unfortunate.

“The Latin word translated in English as “to believe” is *credo*, which meant “I set my heart upon” or “I give my loyalty to”. In medieval English, the concept of *credo* was translated as “believe”, very similar to the German word *belieben* meaning “to prize, treasure or hold dear”, which comes from the root word, *Liebe*—love. Thus, in early English, “to believe” was “to belove” something or someone as an act of trust or loyalty, not, as it often is now, an intellectual acceptance of a fact. I think the only remnant we have of that is the word “beloved”, the one who is beloved. In the past, belief wasn’t about doctrine, or the existence of God, which was a given. It was more like a marriage vow, a pledge of faithfulness and loving service (*Christianity after Religion*, Diana Butler Bass, p.117). This changes what we understand Jesus to say the woman in our Gospel. It’s her loving response that he’s commending, not her doctrinal correctness.

One of the most confused ways that the word “belief” is used currently has to do with climate change, and this demonstrates how muddled we’ve become in the use of what was originally a relational and religious word. Climate change isn’t a question of “belief”, but of weighing evidence and deciding which presentation of facts convinces us that it’s true. One of the factors that enables us to decide is the integrity and expertise of the people presenting the facts as they see them. In the case of climate change, do we believe scientific experts warning us of the need to radically change, or people with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo? We’re talking here about an addiction that our whole culture is hooked on. Like with all addicts, denial is the easiest response.

And thirdly—it’s not always the people we expect who are close to God. If you’ve looked at the diocesan website in the last couple of weeks, you’ve probably realised where I stand on the issue of climate change. It’s featured an article I wrote recently about the experience Mike and I had last month, our first involvement in non-violent civil disobedience. We were part of a group blocking railway lines used by coal trains in Newcastle, while more than 400 canoes and kayaks stopped the world’s largest coal port for the day. This was to draw attention to the urgent need to stop burning fossil fuels. With all the others at the bridge, and a few from the harbour action, we were arrested, and are awaiting a return to Newcastle for a court appearance.

The aftermath of this experience brings me back to the Pharisees. The more than 2,000 volunteers for the Break Free action in Newcastle was a very mixed group of people, from university students to a 94-year-old war veteran, from grandparents and “people like us” to hippie types and some who didn’t fit any definition. There was a great atmosphere of acceptance and mutual respect during the training day, though I didn’t get to meet many people as the coal train group were separated from the rest. On the day of the protest, as I usually do at rallies and vigils in Canberra, I wore my clergy collar, as a visible sign that it’s my Christian faith that motivates me to take this action.

Afterwards, an email group was set up for all the people who are facing court to be kept up to date, and I posted what I’d written for the other arrestees to read. I want to end with an email I received about a week ago. I’m not sure if I met the writer, but what he wrote moved me to tears. I hope I do meet him. He reminded me of something very important—the prophetic voice isn’t always from within the Church. Sometimes it’s the non-religious ones who are closer to God. This is what he wrote:

Hi, I’m Scotty I wasn’t on the bridge, I’m not respectable, I’m not a retiree, I have long hair, a dodgy beard (the beard goes before court day) and a long

criminal record that spans 18 years. And poor spelling grammar and computer skills. I have your email because I spent Break Free day either on a coal stage hopper in Newcastle port or in police custody. I wanted to email you and thank you, I hope this gets through, like I say poor computer skills.

Your article brought me close to tears, I probably woulda cried had my emotions not been so crippled from trying to cope with watching our beautiful planet destroyed by greed for so many years. I always wondered where the Christians were. I was forced to attend Sunday school when young, when I really wanted to be free in nature and have always felt quite sure Jesus would be a greenie if he was around now. Stories of his contempt for money have always stuck with me. I've led numerous NVDA [Non Violent Direct Action] workshops and have often kicked off with "Jesus was the best non-violent activist ever to walk this planet. He treated his opponents with the truly unconditional love that I have to fake."

I was so relieved when the people from ARRCC [Australian Religious Response to Climate Change] come into my life while I was living at the Leard forest blockade of Moul's creek mine.

I don't know where I'm rambling towards but I wanna thank you. Thank you for coming. Thank you for giving me faith that we are doing the right thing, regardless of what the authorities have been pushing on me for so long. Thank you for giving the bigots of my feral community something to think about. Thank you for pointing out to other Christians that Jesus was a fighter not a conformist. Thank you for reminding me to pray

And, thank you, God, for your beloved son, Scotty.