

16 June 2013 Galatians 2:15-21 and Luke 7:36-50

What do you think about as you prepare to go to someone else's home for a meal? Who else will be there, will there be new people to meet, should I have a quick snack before I go or will I come away bursting at the seams, will I be comfortable, should I dress up or go as I am? There might have been some additional thoughts before going out in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine? And one of those might be, who will come to watch?

Now whatever else I might think of being welcomed into someone else's home, I've never considered it to be a spectator sport. But when Jesus was invited to Simon the Pharisee's home, he will have been aware that he would be invited to eat in an open courtyard where people who hadn't been invited to the meal would gather to watch.

There will also be other expectations of hospitality that Jesus wouldn't have given a second thought to. He would have taken for granted that they would happen. As a guest, he would have expected that his dusty feet would be washed, that he would have been greeted with a kiss and his hands touched with oil.

Simon invites Jesus into his home and then doesn't welcome him. He does more than that though. By failing to accord him the usual gestures of hospitality he insults Jesus outrageously. An insult that would have been noticed by everyone. Rosalind Brown in this week's Church Times likens it to not speaking to your guest or not taking his overcoat, but expecting him to sit down to dinner still wearing it.

And then Luke tells us that a woman, who has been watching this, recognises the insult and makes amends for it, in an act of adoration that is as outrageous as was the act of rudeness of Jesus' host. She breaks all the social taboos of the time; not only touching a man in public but the degree of intimacy of that touch would have been intensely disturbing to those who witnessed it. What would also have been disturbing would be Jesus' response – he didn't draw away, he accepted her ministrations, probably enjoyed them. The whole episode would have been too intense, too emotionally and erotically charged for comfort.

And then, when his host is probably as embarrassed as he could get, Jesus lays into him rather than rebuking the woman. At the heart of this story told by Luke is the response that each person has to the generosity of God's love and forgiveness given to us through Jesus. It matters not just how much or how little we have sinned (for we have all of us sinned) but that we should recognise our need for forgiveness. Jesus doesn't go looking for the dirt in us – he looks for the gold. There's dirt in each of us, it seems that Simon did not think he needed forgiveness. Jesus is saying – your basic lack of courtesy shows that you don't love me.

Interestingly the passage from Galatians, is, in some sense, set in the context of a meal too. The early church couldn't agree whether Jewish and Gentile Christians should be allowed to sit and eat at the same table. Were the only true Christians those who became Jewish first? And one of the ways that argument came out was in relation to food laws. Peter, having seen and heard in a dream that it was acceptable for him to break the Jewish food laws and to accept an invitation to a meal with non-Jewish followers of Christ, later seemed to support those who argued that Jew and Gentile converts shouldn't share the same table. Paul is responding to the concerns of those living in the region of Galatia about who can be Christian and how one becomes a Christian.

Instead of looking at food laws, at circumcision, and other marks of Judaism, he looks to Jesus. That those who follow him, take their identity from him and allow him to work in us. One of the main things that marks out Jesus is his loving faithfulness to God and that should be the main thing that marks us out. Our identity is not taken from striving to live up to a set of rules and from measuring ourselves against others, as seems to be the way taken by Simon the Pharisee. Instead, through a glad response of faith, welcoming forgiveness, we find an amazing gift that motivates us to love and to service.

John Newton knew that forgiveness and the motivation it brings. His hymn Amazing Grace speaks of how precious that forgiveness is when it is first given and then goes on to acknowledge that he needs to accept that grace daily and that Jesus will shield him throughout the rest of his life.

We need to welcome Jesus every day, to watch that we do not take him for granted. Our love for him should be extravagant. Paul tells us that we don't become Christian (and dare I say remain Christian) by trying to follow the ethics of the Bible, but by meeting and following Jesus. I must remind myself not to take that relationship for granted.

And then, what of the add-on at the end of the gospel reading? It links back into today's collect. We are told that Jesus continues on his journey, with the 12 Apostles, telling the good news of God's Kingdom. This group is accompanied by various women who have received healing from Jesus – we are given the names of three of them – Mary Magdalene, Susanna and Joanna and there were many others, all of whom gave of their money to provide for Jesus and his companions. This is as every bit shocking as the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears. They have left their assigned places of home and family and moved away from what society expected of them. Let's not get sidetracked into what this passage might or might not - say about gender specific roles within church organisations, and look simply at what, rather amazingly, it says about Jesus. It says that Jesus included women among the disciples who were part of his Galilean ministry. They had a key role to play. They are a model for our response to the collect this morning which asked for God's grace to dedicate our freedom to His service. Jesus entrusted himself to human beings, which included being cared for and provided for by women. The continuation of his work on this earth has been placed into the hands of those who love him – you and me.

As we go about the work of the Kingdom this week, may we remember that we don't do it trusting in our strength alone, or in keeping to rigid rules, or in eking out our time or other resources. We have been given the gift of forgiveness. That gift is not just for us alone. It equips us to be extravagant in our love and care for others. We come together today to worship Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the source of life, forgiveness and grace. May we learn to be wholehearted in our worship, for God takes delight in that. May we leave here, refreshed and renewed, holding lightly on to that which we have received, so that the amazing gift of grace may motivate us to love. And in that love to serve God and to serve others.

Amen

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