

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – 16th June 2013 at Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle 7.00am Eucharist 8.00am Eucharist 9.30am Solemn Eucharist Readings: 1 Kings 21:1-10 (11-14) 15-21a; Psalm 5:1-7; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

What do you see when you arrive here on a Sunday? What do you see when you walk down the street? What do you see when you watch the nightly news on TV? What people and things do you notice as you go about your life day by day?

Jesus is having dinner at the home of a Pharisee. A woman from the city comes in, lets down her hair, starts sobbing uncontrollably, bathes Jesus' feet with the tears, and wipes them with her hair. She then pours ointment on his feet, all the while kissing them. To behave in such an unashamedly emotional and erotic manner was taboo and caused great offense to the religious people reclining at the table.

Jesus had no doubt been invited to the Pharisee's house because the Pharisee, Simon, recognised him as a respectable rabbi, even a prophet. But this little episode made him wonder: "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman who is touching him – that she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39). After all, what is a prophet for if not to recognise and name sin, especially when it's staring him in the face?

Jesus tells Simon he has something to say to him, tells a parable and concludes with this question: "Do you see this woman?" (7:44). The Pharisee has labelled her a sinner but has he really seen her? A well-known prayer in our Confirmation liturgy invokes the gifts of the Holy Spirit for those about to be confirmed. One of the gifts is that of discernment, the ability to see, to notice, to recognise.

Jesus displayed this ability repeatedly throughout the Gospels. One day he and his disciples were watching as worshippers placed their gifts in the temple treasury. Rich people put huge sums of money in while a poor widow put in one tiny penny. Insignificant and unrecognised until Jesus pointed it out to them. Guys, did you notice this widow? No, but now you come to mention it.

A major reason we come here is to train ourselves to see as Jesus sees. In many churches of the Anglican tradition, including this Cathedral, a crucifix is situated above or near the pulpit as a reminder that what is proclaimed from the pulpit must always be through the crucified Christ. The preacher looks to the congregation through the crucified Christ and is thereby enabled to see them differently, aiming to see them as Jesus sees them. Conversely, the congregation looks beyond the words of the preacher to the crucified Christ. They are being trained to see the world through the eyes of the crucified Christ.

Well what do we see in this story? The inability of Simon and the other guests to see is voiced in their objections. She is a sinner. To add to that effrontery she touched Jesus. In sum, Jesus can't be a prophet. Any prophet worth his salt knows the proper distinctions: who is in, who is out, who is naughty, who is nice.

Years ago when I was living on the Central Coast, I drove past a church displaying one of those signs with a short message that's changed every few months or so. I must admit I feel a bit ambivalent about them; some messages are quite good, others are just what my kids would call 'lame'. Anyway this one said, "Practise random acts of kindness and senseless beauty." That's a good summation of today's story from Luke's Gospel.

Jesus tells a Simon a little parable about two debtors who been forgiven. One owed a small amount which was forgiven; the other owed a spectacularly huge amount and it was also forgiven. Now Simon, think hard before you answer, which of the two would've been the most grateful? Simon replies, less than enthusiastically, "I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt." Correct! Ten out of ten. Of course it's the obvious answer.

Then Jesus makes it personal. Simon, who is good, upright, orthodox, makes all the proper distinctions, never cheats on his income tax, never drinks too much, in short has very little for which to be forgiven, has done a pretty poor job of showing gracious hospitality to Jesus compared with this woman. Her reckless, random, effusive extravagance makes his poor efforts look pathetic. No water for Jesus to freshen up, no proper greeting, no expense, no extravagance, all costs strictly accounted for, no unnecessary waste, no frills or non-essentials, all the food probably 'Home Brand.' In the woman's actions he saw only waste.

Well an important question to ask ourselves in any parable is where are you in this story? With whom do you identify? At first I thought I was Simon, the religious expert. But as I reflected a bit I realised Pharisees were not priests, they were pious laypeople. So maybe Simon is most of the people sitting in churches this morning. After all, they're the ones who made the effort to get out of bed and get dressed to come to church. They're the ones who know the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, saints and sinners.

"Practise random acts of kindness and senseless beauty." If we're like Simon we're offended by such extravagance. Acts of kindness ought to be deserved and well-thought-through. For a start, choose those who've at least earned it and will appreciate what you're doing for them.

Well, let's see. Later in Luke's Gospel Jesus heals ten lepers. How many came back to say "thank you"? Just one, and he was a foreigner, a Samaritan, an outcast. Jesus didn't say to them, "Now if you're grateful you'll be healed." Again later in Luke's Gospel we hear about a son whose reckless extravagance and irresponsibility is rewarded by a new wardrobe of clothes,

and new ring and a big party all lavished on him by his father. There's no record he asked for an assurance the son had learned his lesson and that he would be more responsible in future. In fact he interrupted the son's prepared speech to ask the servants to get everything ready.

When Jesus fed the 5000 he didn't take a survey to check credentials: whether they'd been to church that week or whether they kept all the commandments or would be sure and say thank you after they'd eaten.

Like Simon we may be offended by God's lavish unearned grace and mercy. The woman who anointed Jesus didn't hope for anything from Jesus nor did she seem to care how much expense was spared; just extravagant, exuberant love and devotion. The Pharisee seemed to display a wait-and-see attitude. "If she's measures up I might even invite her to my next dinner." Her expression of love was extravagant and tangible. She had much to be forgiven for and that's why she showed so much love.

To the extent we're tight and conservative and careful to make the proper distinctions *or* to the extent we're exuberant, effusive and extravagant, to that extent are we demonstrating how much we're grateful for God's grace and love and forgiveness. "...the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

Fr Mark Watson