

Luke's Gospel is interesting in the way he portrays outsiders as central to the story he tells about Jesus. We've seen this over recent weeks – two weeks ago we looked at the Roman Centurion and servant whom Jesus healed, last week we looked at the raising of the poor widow's son in Nain. Today we look at the woman who anointed Jesus with her tears.

Luke has a particular interest in telling women's stories and in showing how they were central to Jesus' life. At the start of his Gospel we read of Elizabeth who, in her old age, became pregnant with John the Baptist. After Jesus' birth we're introduced to Anna, the old prophet, who lived in the Temple. At the end of today's reading some women are named and many others are mentioned who travelled with Jesus and worked with him and the disciples. This passes almost without comment but, given the later debates in the Church about the place of women, it would be fascinating to know if their roles were similar or different from the male disciples.

So we have a writer who is concerned with stressing Jesus' relationship with and attitude to women in his Gospel, an emphasis that is not found in the other Gospels. In the foundation documents of our faith are the tools needed to counter the sexism that is so often seen in the Churches, but it could be argued, there is some sexism in the passage.

There is a contrast between how Simon treats Jesus – as a tolerated guest – and the extravagant hospitality that the unnamed woman shows to him. We are told that Simon is a Pharisee – a religious person, concerned with keeping the law and obeying the traditions of his ancestors. He has invited Jesus for a meal, a singular honour. Perhaps he was impressed by Jesus, perhaps he wanted to know more about him. Many think that Jesus' approach and education was similar to that of the Pharisees so maybe Simon saw something of a kindred spirit in Jesus. Yet we know from Jesus' rebuke the welcome he offered was correct but not lavish. He didn't have Jesus' feet washed or offer him the customary rituals of hospitality.

In contrast the unnamed woman washed his feet with her tears and anointed him with costly ointment. We know little about her other than she was a notorious sinner. Simon and the others all knew about her which puts them at a certain advantage. Many commentators have concluded she was a prostitute and I'm not sure why. Nothing in the text indicates this – I wonder if men are more inclined

to ascribe sexual sin to women than to themselves? Perhaps it is the intimacy of her actions; crying on his feet, drying them with her hair, anointing him with oil. These are all bodily functions that are all intimate and may have been embarrassing to watch.

The hostility shown to this woman – simply naming her as a sinner is a hostile act – may indicate that she was believed to be a prostitute by Simon and the others. There is a huge irony that straight men can be very hostile to women who work as prostitutes – abusing, beating and vilifying them yet also using and controlling them for their own physical, emotional and financial gratification. Maybe it is this shadow side in the male psyche that has made so many interpret this woman as a prostitute.

We don't know what her supposed sin was. Maybe she lived with someone who wasn't her husband like the woman at the well, maybe she had stood up to the men around her and lived her own life, maybe she lived with another woman, maybe she was a prostitute. We can never know. What we do know is that in her experience of Jesus she found acceptance, healing, wholeness and forgiveness.

Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, wrote;

“There is something in the depths of our being that hungers for wholeness and finality. Because we are made for eternal life, we are made for an act that gathers up all the powers and capacities of our being and offers them simultaneously and forever to God. The blind spiritual instinct that tells us obscurely that our own lives have a particular importance and purpose, and which urges us to find out our vocation, seeks in so doing to bring us to a decision that will dedicate our lives irrevocably to their true purpose. The man who loses this sense of his own personal destiny, and who renounces all hope of having any kind of vocation in life has either lost all hope of happiness or else has entered upon some mysterious vocation that God alone can understand.”

“Being broken isn't the worst thing. We can be mended and put together again. We don't have to be ashamed of our past. We can embrace the history that gives us value, and see our cracks as beautiful.”

Anna White, *Mended: Thoughts on Life, Love, and Leaps of Faith*

Perhaps that is how the woman in the gospel reading felt as she wept over Jesus and suffered the derision of Simon.

Robert Graves once wrote;

“Because the world is in a sick condition and we are all somehow infected, against our will, even if we think we are whole in mind and soul and body.”

It is through the resurrection of our Lord that we are brought back into wholeness with God. It is through forgiveness and being forgiven that we are brought back to wholeness with our fellow men and women.

The woman who washed and dried Jesus’ feet did it because she felt he was accessible, safe and approachable. Unlike Simon and his friends, Jesus spoke with authority and power. She recognised these features in Jesus; he was focused in his approach to the faith.

I remember well trying to light a fire using a magnifying glass. I gathered up my fire and tried to light the fire by circling the magnifying glass all over the prospective fire. It was not until I realised that I needed to concentrate the light in one place that a fire would happen. Simon and his friends are a bit like the waving magnifying glass, Jesus and his teaching is the concentrated light that causes the fire to light in the hearts and minds of men and women today.

This gospel story speaks about sin and forgiveness. Little sense of sin will mean a superficial sense of forgiveness. If we excuse and try to explain away sin, then we do not allow the overwhelming forgiveness of God to be accepted as has happened to this woman. Simon has treated Jesus badly and cannot understand what is happening in his own household, right under his nose, so to speak.

And so we see how, after this Jesus and the Twelve,

“Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him,

<sup>2</sup> as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,

<sup>3</sup> and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them<sup>[a]</sup> out of their resources.”

So we see the role that women have played in the ministry of Jesus and the early church right from the beginning of Christianity. The women listed at the end of today's gospel give an interesting insight into Jesus' attitude towards women. It is unlikely that many of his contemporary itinerant preachers had women as disciples who supported his ministry from their own resources.

What a shame it is that the Church in the West took so long to understand this aspect of Jesus' ministry and how sad it is that some parts are still so far behind us as Anglicans.

Amen.