

LUKE 7.36-50: HOW MUCH DO YOU LOVE JESUS?

[Chelmsford 5 February 2012]

We Brits are taught to hide our emotions – American politicians may cry in public, and Southern Europeans may be extravagant in their demonstrations of love, but in adversity true Brits maintain a stiff upper lip, and when things go well exuberance is frowned upon, unless of course it is a sporting occasion.

For the most part we Brits are not an emotional people.
But the truth is that there is a very valid place for emotion.
It has been said that “nothing great happens without emotion”.
Certainly, when it comes to serving God emotion is a necessity.

With that thought in mind, let us turn to the occasion when Jesus was at the home of Simon the Pharisee – a story which is only to be found in Luke’s Gospel – Luke 7.36-50.
To get a real feel for what happened, I propose that we view it as a drama with three scenes, each scene dominated by a particular character.

SCENE ONE: SIMON THE PHARISEE ACTS AS HOST

V36: “A Pharisee invited Jesus to have dinner with him, and Jesus went to his house and sat down to eat”

Imagine the scene:

The dining room in question was very different from your average British dining room. It is not an enclosed dining room – but rather a dining room which abuts a courtyard. In the ancient Mediterranean world the houses of the well-to-do were normally built around an open courtyard, which took the form of a hollow square. The courtyard normally would have a fountain, or a small pond – there could be a small garden. In warm weather the doors of the dining room were open – with the result that dinners were a much more public occasion than ours. Uninvited people could come and go.

There was another difference too. In our homes people sit up at the table. But in the Middle East guests reclined at table. They lay on low couches, resting on their left elbow, leaving their right arm free; what’s more, their bodies were angled away from the food, so that their feet were on the perimeter/edge of the meal configuration. Women and slaves or uninvited watchers would have stood outside the circle, near the feet of the guests.

Imagine the scene – Simon the Pharisee has invited Jesus for dinner – along with Jesus, there were, probably some if not all of the disciples; and some of Simon’s friends were present too. We have no idea what was on the menu: one thing for certain, the main dish was not roast pork.

There at the head of the table was Simon.

I imagine him to be a proud, portly figure, with a smile on his face.

He is pretty pleased with himself – Jesus is here. I think he was playing a game of on-up-man-ship on his fellow Pharisees. For Jesus had become the talk of the town, and Simon had managed to get this strange young man to come to dinner.

I think it is fairly clear that Simon was much more interested in himself than in Jesus.

- Had he really been interested in Jesus, then he would have made sure that his guest's feet were washed. Remember that in those days roads were only dirt tracks, and shoes were open sandals – it wouldn't have been very pleasant reclining at dinner with someone's dirty feet less than 6 feet from your face.
- Nor had Simon bothered to really welcome Jesus – he had failed to give the traditional kiss of peace. Nor had he provided any other niceties such as freshening up his guests' hair with some oil. Incidentally, all this may seem over the top to us – but it was standard practice in ancient times. Indeed, we have a record of one extravagant banquet where the servant wound little garlands around people's feet and ankles.

So there was Simon, pleased to play host to Jesus.

Unlike that other Pharisee Nicodemus who came to see Jesus by night, Simon does not appear to have had any sense of spiritual need. He had not invited Jesus because he wanted to unburden himself and find help from Jesus.

No, he was pleased with himself and with his spiritual standing before God.

He really thought he was more than OK: he had no idea that 'the greatest of sins is to be conscious of no sin'

SCENE TWO: A PROSTITUTE GATECRASHES THE PARTY

Vv37, 38 **"A woman who lived a sinful life.. heard that Jesus was eating in the Pharisee's house, so she brought an alabaster jar full of perfume, and stood behind Jesus, by his feet, crying and wetting his feet with her tears. Then she dried his feet with her hair and kissed them"**

Yes, an unknown woman enters the house. No name is given to her.

Some have suggested she was Mary Magdalene, but there is no ground for that.

All we are told is that she was **"a woman who lived a sinful life"** (lit: "a sinner").

Almost certainly there is an allusion to her being a prostitute.

What's more, she seems to behave like a prostitute.

- She lets her hair down in public – in those days no respectable woman would do that – such an act was deemed not just shameful, but seductive.
- Then she anoints Jesus' feet with perfume, kisses them repeatedly, and dries them with her hair – in another context this would have undoubtedly been an erotic act.

But in fact she was not acting erotically – her tears show that.

Letting one's hair down could also be a sign of religious devotion – and that was the case here.

But Simon doesn't see her devotion
All he sees is a notorious prostitute.
He says to himself **"If this man really were a prophet, he would know who this woman is who is touching him; he would know what kind of sinful life she lives"** (v39)

She was everything he was not.
Remember, the term "Pharisee" means *"a separated one"*.
Pharisees did their best to separate themselves from the world and its sin.
They sought to be paragons of virtue.
To understand from where Simon was coming, let me read to you from the Book of Sirach, written just over 100 years before Jesus' birth:

- *"No one pities a person who associates with a sinner and becomes involved in the other's sins"* (Sirach 12.14)
- *"What does a wolf have in common with a lamb? No more than a sinner with the devout"* (Sirach 13.17).
- *"A prostitute is regarded as spittle"* (Sir 26.22).

Simon is appalled by this woman – but not Jesus.
As Luke makes clear in the passage immediately before this story, Jesus was known as **"a friend of tax collectors and other outcasts"** (7.34) – he was the friend of sinners .
Jesus did not fear to associate with the 'wrong' people.
Unlike Simon and many religious people since Simon, he thought that holiness was stronger and more contagious than sin.
Of course Jesus did not approve of the woman's past – Jesus did not approve of sin in any shape or form. But Jesus never rejected the sinner: rather, he embraced the sinner.

I love the question Jesus asked of Simon: **"Do you see this woman?"** (v46)
All Simon could see was a prostitute, but Jesus saw a woman who was of value to God, and in particular a woman in whom God was at work.

SCENE THREE: JESUS TELLS A STORY

Jesus told a story, which we today know as the story of the two debtors
Interestingly, Claude Montefiore, a Jewish NT scholar, called *"this exquisite story... one of the treasured religious possessions of the Western world"*
"There were two men who owed money to a moneylender. One owed him 500 silver coins (literally 500 denarii), and the other owed him 50. Neither of them could pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Which one, then, will love him more?"

Just as today, so then debt was a major issue in society. When the temple of Jerusalem was taken over in the revolt against Rome, the first act was to destroy the records of debt.

A denarius was one day's wage for a common labourer. Therefore, the first debtor in the parable owed a little more than a year and a half's wages, and the second owed about two month's wages.

Jesus in this story is making an analogy between sin and debt.

This analogy was common in Judaism – and it appears elsewhere in the teaching of Jesus.

Some versions of the Lord's Prayer have, for instance, the request '*forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*'.

Simon clearly understood what Jesus was getting at. And he was trapped.

“Which one, then will love him more?” The moral was clear.

In effect Jesus was saying, '*Can't you see Simon that this woman is showing love and gratitude toward God for his having forgiven her? You've got it wrong Simon. This woman is not to be condemned, but to be affirmed*'

There then is the story – a drama in three scenes, or three acts.

But what does this story say to us? I want to suggest it says two things in particular:-

1. JESUS SHOWS EXTRAORDINARY LOVE IN FORGIVING US ALL

At the conclusion of the story, Luke tells us that: **“The others sitting at the table began to say to themselves, ‘Who is this, who even forgives sins?’”** (v49)

Simon had called Jesus **‘Teacher’** (v40), but Jesus was far more than a Teacher.

If all Jesus had left us was the Sermon on the Mount, then he would be an irrelevance to us today.

No, Jesus is above all the Saviour.

He saves us from our sin, in the sense that frees us from the consequences of our sin.

Jesus forgives. He forgives even the worst of sinners– he forgives even people like you and me.

Jesus said to the woman: **“Your sins are forgiven”** (v48).

Repentance in this story is assumed – the woman knew that her previous way of life was unacceptable – but she also had heard from the preaching of Jesus that God accepts those who have failed. Her tears, her kisses, her anointing of Jesus are her responses to the love of God.

Jesus says: **“The great love she has shown proves that her many sins have been forgiven”** (v47)

Here is wonderful news: It doesn't matter what we have done – where there is repentance, there forgiveness may be found. What an extraordinarily loving and forgiving God we have!

2. EXUBERANT LOVE IS THE RIGHTFUL RESPONSE OF THE FORGIVEN

The lesson of the story is not just that the “**one forgiven more will love more**” – there is more to it than that.

Jesus defends the woman’s exuberant love, and in so doing encourages all his followers to respond with exuberant love.

Jesus, quoting from the Book of Deuteronomy, encouraged his followers to love the Lord their God “**with all their heart, mind, and strength**”. And we should do the same.

Faith in the God who forgives is not just a head matter, it is a heart matter too.
As Leesa was saying the other Sunday, we need to be ‘blown away’ by the love of God.

The reality, alas, is all too different. In the words of one commentator: “*Is the tepidness of our commitment to God because we have a very small sense of a huge debt forgiven?*”

If we care about what God has done for us in Jesus, then we will want to love Jesus with all that we are – with our heart, mind and strength

.
Like the woman in the story, we will not be afraid to be emotional
We will allow emotion to drive us to acts of kindness and service
We will allow emotion to drive us to share our faith with others
We will get excited about ‘Looking for Love’
We will stop being ‘cool’ traditional Brits
We will be enthusiastic followers of Jesus!
We will love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind and strength!

.