

4th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 12/6/2016

1 Kings 21:1-21
Psalm 5:1-7
Galatians 2:15-21
Luke 7:36-8:3

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

I must admit to feeling a little tricked, a little sucked in by the Gospel writer, Luke, today. And he did it all so skillfully that I almost didn't notice it happening. I wonder whether you did or not... let's look again at the passage:

Jesus is invited to dinner at the home of Simon the Pharisee. While Jesus is reclining at the table, a woman comes up to him and weeps over his feet. To us it seems like a strange, intimate maybe erotic thing to do- particularly when she goes on to let down her hair, dry his feet and then kiss and anoint them with ointment from an alabaster jar.

We don't know her name, but we know she has a reputation of being a sinner. Some suggest that she was a prostitute, but there is no biblical evidence to support that- it could be that those retelling the story over two thousand years - and most would be men, have concluded that 'sinful women', generally are.

This woman is intriguing. Something very significant has just happened in her life. We don't know what she did, and we don't know the circumstances of how she was forgiven, but it would be reasonable, given that her attention is directed towards Jesus, that he has had an encounter with her before- which was life changing. So she comes to the dinner forgiven. Her actions suggest that she has been released from a great burden. Her generous response to Jesus is an outpouring of her gratitude and love- for him, but not only for him, but for herself.

By her actions she shows the strength of someone who has forgiven herself. She is happy enough in her own knowledge that she is worthwhile, that she is loved. She can even go to the house of Simon the Pharisee and risk being criticised.

And Simon *does* criticise- but not out loud. Luke tells us “Simon said to *himself*, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner’”. So often the condemnation is silent- but just as deadly.

By what was not being said, Jesus knew that Simon was condemning her and so he “names the elephant in the room”. In typical rabbinical style he poses a hypothetical question to Simon who is forced to conclude that the one who is forgiven most would have to be the most grateful.

Simon is saying that, because she is a sinner she should clearly be excluded from our group. Jesus says look at her, you can see by her actions that she is forgiven (no longer a sinner). You can see that she knows the love of God for herself and her generosity of spirit is demonstrated in the way she has responded so extravagantly to me.

And here is where I stand condemned. You see, as listeners so often we expect that Jesus, (who is always on our side), will show compassion and heal the sinful woman. Meantime there are always the “others”, the nay sayers and critics”, who mumble and complain on the sidelines about the sinner or Jesus actions. To our surprise Jesus doesn’t heal her,... - she is already healed, you see - and we are drawn to conclude that it wasn’t the woman at all who was in need of healing but Simon and perhaps through the story Jesus is challenging us as the listener, because we didn’t recognise who had the problem.

Jesus demonstrates the generosity of the sinner when compared to the stinginess of the host and shows that love, forgiveness and inclusion is the essence of God’s Good News.

Unfortunately, too often in our society, in our lives, and even in the church we fail to recognize these qualities of love, forgiveness and inclusion as being central to God's reign, and so we remain narrow-minded, feel threatened, stay resistant to things that frighten us or challenge us.

One only has to look at the ways in which refugees and asylum seekers are demonized by politicians and many in society as a clear example of exclusion. And what about the way in which women are viewed and objectified by so many in society? These last couple of weeks have seen a quite remarkable story of a young American University student, on trial for rape. And yet those around him continue to defend him, perpetuating the attitude that "he's a good boy who made a mistake", whilst trying to portray the victim as somehow responsible for what happened!

Our Armed Forces and Police Force continue to be places where I certainly wouldn't want my daughters to go, given the stories of those who have suffered as a result.

The church is also very good at exclusion. The place of women, the complete lack of support for same sex attracted people in many congregations, the need for gay clergy in many cases to almost deny who they are and live a lie are examples of this. And the Scottish Church is currently debating the issue of marriage for same-sex partners, with the threat hanging over its head that its Primus (the equivalent of our Primate) would certainly be removed by the Archbishop of Canterbury from leading the World Anglican-Reformed Dialogue - an ecumenical series of international meetings if the synod votes to approve such marriages.

I can only offer the words of the great Richard Rohr, who said that "When any church defines itself by exclusion of anybody, it is always wrong. It is avoiding its only vocation, which is to be the Christ."

I was reminded of all of this as I reflected on the visit to Melbourne 3 years ago now of Bishop Gene Robinson, a man who has faced extraordinary resistance to his ministry because he is gay. And most especially I was reminded of a story he told:

During WWII in France, 4 servicemen developed a strong bond of friendship with each other as they withstood the agonies and triumphs of war together. One was tragically killed and his three friends carried him some distance to the church in the nearby village where they called on the priest. They asked if they could bury their friend in the graveyard. The priest asked if he was baptised. They replied that they didn't think he was. To which the priest replied that he regretted that then he couldn't be buried in the graveyard. The men were clearly distressed by this news and so the priest suggested that there was a nice field, with a great view next to the graveyard and that perhaps they could bury their companion there. So the men, because they had little choice chose to do that and placed a simple wooden cross on the spot to mark the grave.

After the war the 3 men returned to village, wanting to arrange for a proper headstone to place over the grave of their friend. They returned to the field and to their dismay found the grave had gone and there appeared to be no evidence of where it had been. They went looking for the priest, and asked if he remembered them. They told him that they couldn't find the grave and did he have any idea what may have happened to the body of their friend. The priest said he did remember their visit very welland went on to tell them how after they departed that he was very troubled about his strict and strident ruling about whether their friend could be included in the graveyard. He said he prayed about itand said that he had moved the fence.

In this story Jesus invited Simon to move the fence

When we move the fence we are the Christ. When we welcome the outsider we heal ourselves and encounter Jesus.....as the woman did. Amen.