

"Do you believe that people can be changed?"

That is one of the two questions that I believe lie at the heart of our Gospel reading this morning. It was a question that confronted Simon the Pharisee. He had invited Jesus to his house and a notorious woman came in and, in what to him was a quite shameless behaviour, she threw herself weeping at Jesus' feet, pouring perfume on his feet. Clearly if Jesus saw himself as some sort of prophet then, in Simon's eyes, he certainly did not show it by condoning this sort of behaviour.

What had brought this woman to Simon's home that night? She certainly was a woman with a history, a woman that respectable people steered clear of. Why was she there, tears in her eyes, at Jesus' feet? There were a number of reasons - a sense of remorse, a realisation that her life was in a mess and going nowhere. Remorse alone would not have brought her to a place of certain condemnation. Perhaps remorse along with a resolve to do better - I don't think that even that would have brought her to Simon's house. What had brought her there was Jesus. It was at his feet she fell, his feet she washed with her tears, that she anointed with perfume. This for me presupposes a prior experience of Jesus. Had she heard him speak, as she listened had she seen that there was a way out of the mess her life had got into, sinner though she was? Recognising in her own situation, words God had spoken through the prophet Ezekiel when the people languished in exile; "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live." (Ezekiel 33:11) - words you may recognise from the declaration of absolution in the service of morning and evening prayer.

It was a different woman who knelt at Jesus feet in Simon's house. Do people change, can people change? What do you think as you hear of former terrorists, such as Rev Packie Hamilton, finding faith, taking a new direction in life. Groups such as Prison Fellowship working in our prisons tell of life changing experiences.

Can lives be redeemed? Or, like Simon, do we continue to see the sinner?

I spoke of two questions facing us as we read our Gospel reading. "Do you believe that people can be changed?" The second is "Do I believe that I need to be changed?"

Simon belonged to the Pharisees, meaning literally "separated ones", a group who believed that by a meticulous observance of the Law in all its detail, you established a right relationship with God. Part of this involved steering clear of those with a less rigorous approach to life.

When John the Baptist appeared on the scene, calling the people to repent and receive a baptism of repentance as a sign of cleansing from past sin, the Pharisees would have been appalled. Part of the reason, from their standpoint, was that they felt that they did not need it - besides which self discipline, self righteousness was the way to peace with God.

I suppose you could call it the DIY approach, the do it yourself way to righteousness. The Gospel accounts contain a number of incidents in the life of Jesus, a number of stories told by Jesus that show a stark contrast between the approach of Jesus and that of Simon and the Pharisees.

The first that comes to mind is the account of the woman taken in adultery hauled before Jesus by a crowd declaring "Moses said such women should be stoned - what do you say?" Jesus turned the focus back on themselves, challenging their self righteousness, "Let him that is without sin cast the first stone." - they at least had the honesty to walk away - at the same time calling the woman to repentance, "Go and sin no more."

The that story of the Pharisee and the tax collector who went to the Temple to pray. The pharisee so full of his own self importance, his own self righteousness, sees only

the sin of the other. It is the tax collector, who sees only too clearly his own sin, who goes home at peace with God.

Then of course that ridiculous but pointed illustration of the futility of presuming to take the speck out of your brother's eye, while we still have a plank in our own.

If nothing else, Jesus was a very shrewd observer of human nature. Our tendency to focus on the faults of the other, the tendency to play down our own. Those two questions I have raised in the context of our Gospel reading this morning:-

Do people change?

Do I need to be changed?

go to the heart of this issue.

I would suspect that there is something of Simon in each one of us. If the answer to second question, "Do I need to be changed?" is no, then the odds are that we will be very pessimistic in our approach to the second "Do people change?"