

⁴⁴Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? *Luke 7:44*

A simple direct question that comes half way through our Gospel reading this morning. As I reflected on this my mind went back to early on in my ministry. The late Canon Cecil Faull, then Rector of St George’s, had asked me to act as Chaplain to Arbour Hill Prison while he was on holidays. We met up to discuss what was involved and he gave me the details of the prisoners I would be visiting. ‘What are they in for?’, I asked. ‘Cecil smiled and said, ‘You know, Kevin, I never ask them that. I prefer to meet them as individuals who happen to be in prison rather than as someone who has committed such and such an offence.’

Our Gospel story is well known. Jesus has been invited to a Pharisee’s house. In the course of the meal, as everyone is gathered around the table. A woman, a woman with a past comes in. She kneels at Jesus’ feet and weeping, she wets his feet with her tears. Then she proceeds to loosen her hair and dries his feet with her hair. It is all very embarrassing as people do not seem to know where to look as this woman proceeds to anoint Jesus’ feet with the jar of ointment she has brought along. No one would have needed to have said a word – the body language would have said it all. We’re told of Simon the Pharisee’s thoughts – he clearly doesn’t think much of Jesus’ reaction – if this man were really a prophet he would know just what sort of woman this was.

Jesus breaks the silence with a Parable, the story of two debtors, one forgiven a small debt, the other ten times the size, finishing by asking who would love

their creditor the more to which Simon replies, I suppose the one who was forgiven the most.

It is at this point Jesus asks this simple direct question. ‘Do you see this woman?’ At one level that is a ridiculous question – of course he has seen her. He has seen the embarrassing carry on – but has he seen her, has he seen the woman herself or has he just seen the reputation? Jesus goes on to contrast the welcome Simon gave him on his arrival, none of the courtesies given to a visitor, with the devotion the woman had shown to him.

None of us come to any situation devoid of assumptions, our own particular viewpoint. Like it or not we are all products of our own background, our own culture. We have views about ourselves, we have views about others.

Simon in culture, in training was a Pharisee so he views both the woman and Jesus through the lenses of his training and discipline as a Pharisee. In the woman he sees a sinner and in Jesus he sees a teacher of dubious credentials. Jesus sees the same woman and sees one who, acutely aware of her sin in the past is moving on from her brokenness. Simon’s body language no doubt spoke of rejection; Jesus spoke words of inclusion and forgiveness.

As I read this passage I think of the Parable told by Jesus of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, both of whom had gone to the Temple to pray. The Pharisee, so full of his own self importance, 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 there was that ridiculous

but pointed illustration of the futility of taking a speck out of our brother's eye while we still have a plank in our own.

To go back to our Gospel reading:

⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' ⁴⁸Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.'
Luke 7:47,48

⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; What Jesus is saying here is not that her sins do not matter; rather they do not define her future. And so the contrast now becomes one of the contrast between, on the one hand, Simon's self righteousness and, on the other, the woman's awareness of her own failings. It is as if the Parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is being played out at Simon's dinner table.

I will often remark that one of the core understandings of the nature of man that comes out of the Bible is that we are all made in God's image. So we have both Simon and the woman as ones made in the image of God. Both have fallen short of that image, so both are sinners. The woman, by reason of her former way of life, was the more obvious sinner but so was Simon, by reason of his self righteousness. So, I go on to ask, what is Simon's understanding of himself, what is Simon's understanding of God? Because I think that is what lies behind Jesus' words to Simon:

But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.

Simon was so confident in his own righteousness, that he had little patience with the woman who fell short. But it went further than that; he assumed that God had the same view of her as he did.

‘Simon do you see this woman? Not the category, not the reputation but the person. As I think on that and on Cecil Faull’s reply to my question, ‘Cecil, what are these fellows in for?’ I find myself asking uncomfortable questions about myself and my attitude to others. I used to find it troubling that people who were most fervent in their faith, most fervent in their confidence before God, could be most severe in their condemnation of others, most questioning of the possibilities of new starts, new beginnings.

So as we come to the end of our story, we see the lines being drawn for the future conflict that was to end up on a Cross outside Jerusalem, as bystanders ask ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’

The God we worship, the God we meet in the person of Jesus, is a God of new beginnings; a God who led his people out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land; the God who brought his people back from Exile; a God who is revealed in Jesus Christ, who taught his disciples to turn the other cheek, to go the second mile and to forgive not once, not seven times, but seventy times and one, who in the face of the criticism of human respectability responded to the full some tears of that unknown woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee, saying ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’