

BEING ACCEPTING AND FORGIVING: 11TH SUNDAY C

Our gospel is a touching story about a meeting in the house of a Pharisee between Jesus and a sinful woman. Jesus shows himself to be *'the friend of sinners'*, which is Luke's favourite way of presenting him. Pharisees, whose name means *'the separated ones'* had nothing to do with sinners. As a Pharisee, Simon was shocked at seeing Jesus let a sinner not only come near him, but even touch him. In Simon's mind the woman was only a filthy sinner, and would always be one. So he wanted nothing to do with her.

Simon reckoned that Jesus too must have known the woman's bad reputation, must have known that she was a prostitute, a whore. Surely, then, he should not be letting her touch him and letting himself become ritually unclean through contact. So Simon concluded that Jesus could not be a prophet after all – the agent and spokesperson for God that many imagined him to be.

Luke, our story-teller, contrasts the cold reception Simon gave Jesus with the warm reception by the sinful woman. (Incidentally, there are no grounds for saying she is Mary Magdalen). What Jesus went on to say to Simon in his parable of the debtors, was that despite her sinful past, that woman was nearer to God than Simon was.

There is a debate about whether the woman was forgiven because she loved much, or whether she loved much because she was forgiven. Either meaning would fit Luke's stress on the mercy and forgiveness of God shown by Jesus and on the loving response that this attracts.

While others looked at the woman and saw only mud, Jesus looked at her and saw her wounds. He saw that she had been sufficiently judged and punished by life. What she needed was not condemnation and rejection but healing. By treating her with kindness and tenderness, he helped her believe in her own goodness and her own potential. Treating her with contempt would only have sent her back to the darkness from which she had come.

The woman had never experienced anything like this before. Jesus was the finest man she had ever met. He not only forgave her, he loved her. The sheer goodness of Jesus made her feel that she too was good, and made her want to be like him. As a result of her meeting with Jesus she began to live a new and better life. Ever afterwards she would travel further down the road of goodness, integrity and generosity than any of those who were now judging her. By welcoming her as he did, and graciously accepting her affection, Jesus was, as that famous song goes, *'the wind beneath her wings'*.

Jesus affirmed the woman's sorrow, humility, courage and love. His way was the right way and remains the right way. So too must you and I recognise the goodness in one another,

and affirm it. We never improve people by rejecting them or shunning them. We cannot change anyone unless we accept them as they are. Condemnation does not liberate. It oppresses.

So let us respond to God's word today and pray thoughts like these from God's word: *'God of mercy and compassion, help us to keep our hearts pure, our minds clean, our words true, and our deeds generous and kind. We pray for this through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.'*

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