

Pentecost 3 C
June 17, 2007: St Aidan's & Wesley 10.30am
Rev Peter Walker, Canberra Central Parish, UCA

Luke 7: 36 – 8: 3

Not so long ago the media ran very strongly with a story about the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Rudd, attending a dinner in Perth organised by Mr Brian Burke. Mr Burke was - and is - a character rather on the nose in that state for his past and it would seem continuing corrupt activities. "Did you have dinner with that man?" "Did you know he was going to be in attendance?" "Did you know he was to be your host? What else have you had to do with him – At what other times and regarding what other business have you met with Mr Burke?"

Soon after Mr Rudd's transgression, the government Senator Ian Campbell declared that he too had met with Mr Burke. They'd held a brief meeting to discuss certain matters of interest to Mr Burke. Senator Campbell declared that, because of this lapse of judgement, he would resign his cabinet portfolio so that his actions would not besmirch the reputation of others. The keeping of bad company is a costly mistake.

Jesus was consistently in trouble for the company he kept and the people he dined with. The persistent charge against Jesus is: "This man eats *and* drinks with sinners!" It is a scandal – and what a scandal. He eats with prostitutes, with religious dissenters, and with those we might call white collar criminals; corrupt tax collectors and the like.

Luke's gospel depicts Jesus at a succession of meals. And each meal reveals something important about who Jesus is and what being part of his kingdom means. Luke wants us to see that there is something important to be learnt, and to be followed, by the company we see him keep. The chief criticism of Jesus was not that he espoused an unorthodox theology; it was that he chose to give dignity to those whom society deemed to be beneath it. The Pharisees charge that he is a notorious "drunkard" who eats with those who have either decided to be ungodly – or have been told they are ungodly – is pretty well documented, especially in the Gospel according to St Luke.

Which brings us to today's passage.

"One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him",
we are told.

And that is where the trouble starts.

Luke presents the Pharisees, as do the other gospels,
in a manner well illustrated by a phrase from Mark Twain:
"He was a good man, in the very worst sense of the word."

In other words, Jesus is in the home
of very good, very righteous, very religious person. A Pharisee.
And argument breaks out around the table.

A weeping woman wets Jesus' feet with her tears
and wipes them with her hair.
She kisses and anoints them
and it is more than the Pharisees can take.

"If this man were a prophet, he would know what sort of woman it is who is
touching him, for she is a sinner".

In other words:

"If this man really were religious,
if he had the insight of the prophet,
he would be able to tell what kind of woman this really is."

After all, what is religion for
if it is not to enable us to discern
between the good and the bad,
the righteous and the unrighteous?

At this dinner in the home of Simon, a Pharisee,
Jesus focuses on a woman who we are told is a woman of the city. You do not
need me to break those biblical code-words for you.

And with her, he teaches the whole group, especially his host,
about forgiveness, acceptance and grace.

If it happened today, the media would be all over it in no time.

And so we have to say,

what a remarkable thing that the early Christians do not hide from it.

They do not hide from the actions of Jesus
in reaching out to those who have no-one's respect.

If Jesus were a politician or religious leader today
his main backers would be ducking and weaving questions.

It would be a case of

"There was no comment from Mr Jesus' office today
as scandal mounted
and cries for his resignation came even from his closest colleagues"
More news in half an hour."

But what about the church?

Are we hiding from the company Jesus kept?

Are we, unlike Luke – and Matthew, Mark and John –
no longer telling the stories of those who Jesus ate with?

Those who he came for?

Those for whom the kingdom of God is their only treasure?
Or have we become hardened like the religious folk of his day?

“Simon” Jesus says to his host in the middle of this incident,
“imagine two people with a debt,
one debt very large and one quite small,
and the one to whom they are in debt
forgives both those people and the amount they owe is erased.
Which of the two will love him the more?
The sins that were many and scandalous in your eyes
are forgiven in just the same way as yours.
And yet isn’t it sad that those to whom little is forgiven,
can love only a little in return?”

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It was a scandal to beat many other scandals.  
Jesus let a woman of the city welcome and bless him  
with the hospitality of washing his feet  
and by anointing his head with oil.  
*It is a scandal, and yet at one and the same time,  
it is a gracious promise.*  
In fact, it is the great and gracious promise by which the church lives.  
Jesus eats with sinners.  
It is the great and gracious promise by which we all live.  
Jesus welcomes sinners.  
And he does it in the name of God  
and in the power of God’s forgiving grace and mercy.

Among the many things about this event that stand out  
there is also the very last phrase on Jesus’ lips.  
Turning to the woman he says:  
“Your faith has saved you; go in peace”.

Faith is a word we use often,  
but perhaps without really thinking about what we mean by it.  
Jesus uses it often too.  
Quite a few times he uses this sort of phrase –  
“Go, your faith has made you well”, or  
“Woman, great is your faith”, or, as in today’s passage,  
“Your faith has saved you, go in peace”.

It is a pity that the word faith is so often equated  
only with a list of things Christians believe.  
When asked, “What might be another word for *faith*”,  
many people will say *belief* or *believing*.  
And often by saying *believing* what we mean is  
“believing *something*”.  
That something might be the six day creation,  
or the parting of the Red Sea, or the miracles of Jesus.

And the close link we give to these words faith and belief can lead us to suggest, even unwittingly, something that simply is not true : that those who cannot attest to the literal-factual truth of these beliefs, do not have *faith*.

Faith, in this understanding, becomes a matter for the head; of giving mental assent to a set of things to be believed. And if you cannot give mental assent to them, then you haven't a good enough faith. But this woman's faith, which in Jesus' words has "saved" her and given her "peace" is nothing of the sort. She has not committed herself to a statement of beliefs or recited a creed. She has placed herself before Christ, just as she is, she has responded to his presence with an act service, which is a sign of the transformation of her life, she has heard his word of forgiveness, and she has gone on her way in the peace of God. Her faith is in *him* and God's forgiveness found in him – not a set of beliefs.

Do you know that the English word "believe", coming from the Latin *credo*, does not mean to give mental assent to certain things as being true. Its' Latin roots combine to mean – *I give my heart to*. A commitment of the mind to the truth of a set of beliefs is a commitment made by all people of faith; it is easy for some, more difficult for others, and the details of our beliefs differ. But this is not the first, nor the most important thing. The giving of the heart is first and most important, and the heart is given, not a set of statements, but to a person. That is faith.

And that is what this woman has done today. Our own life of faith can be the same. We come as we are, for Christ receives us all, in his presence we are transformed and drawn into service, and from his presence we may stand up and walk in forgiveness and peace.