

Pentecost 4 – Wesley 9am & 10.30am – 16th June 2013

Theme: “Accepting the unaccepted people of society”

Reading: Luke 7:36- 8:3 ‘Jesus anointed by a sinful woman’

Introduction

What an amazing passage of Scripture our Lucan reading for today is – so much crammed into just a few verses. Luke, the story teller, crams these verses with a variety of people, actions, a parable, a telling off for his host and an inclusion of the women around Jesus.

Jesus casts an ever-widening net to catch the people of God standing on the fringes. In so doing he changes the ‘rules of the game’ for those of the Jewish faith.

Right at the beginning of the Gospel the angel proclaimed of Jesus’ birth, “See – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” (Lk 2:10) Jesus lives out that grand pronouncement through embodied good news for everyone. Jesus draws a circle around people previously standing at the margins of society, drawing them inside to his inner circle. What a challenge this passage is for us today as we seek to live out the way of Christ, especially on this Sunday when we are specifically asked to reflect, pray for and include the refugees and asylum seekers, who are on the fringe of our society, not wanted by many and through government policy being processed, where possible, not on mainland Australia.

But for now let us think further upon this section of Scripture.

Luke 7:36-8:3

The whole passage is about ‘exclusivity’ or ‘inclusivity’ not to put too fine a point on it. The Pharisee saw faith as an exclusive club for a minority of faithful people who ‘kept the rules’ so to speak. We are not sure why the Pharisee bothered to ask Jesus to have a meal with him, but he did. However his host did not show the common courtesies towards Jesus of offering water to clean himself from his travels and purify himself, he obviously did not give him the usual kiss of welcome and the sign of peace –wishing the best for each other. It is indicative that the Pharisee simply wanted to know what Jesus was teaching and wasn’t interested in him as a person let alone wanting any friendship. Maybe he thought it was the ‘right thing to do’ to invite the travelling rabbi to his place but he certainly showed him no usual niceties.

In contrast, the woman who we are told ‘had lived a sinful life’ came and washed his feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. An amazing act of humbleness, of servant hood, of not caring what others thought of you but doing this as an act of love and generosity towards Jesus. The Pharisee could only see this as horrific, Jesus allowing himself to be defiled by some sinful woman. Jesus reads the mind of the Pharisee and for the first time we learn his name – Simon. Jesus tells him in parable form a story about two debtors. One owed a lot of money to a moneylender and the other only a small amount. Both have their debts cancelled. Which will be more grateful? Simon seems to answer reluctantly, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled.”, is his reply. Jesus affirms his answer and then explains the parable by explaining the gratefulness, the love and the generosity of the sinful woman compared to his lack of care and common courtesy. We do not know Simon’s reaction to what Jesus tells him (which is a pity) but we do know that Jesus offers forgiveness to the sinful woman.

“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she has loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”

(Luke 7: 47)

Quite a slap in the face for Simon, the Pharisee, who sees himself as a faithful person of God. Jesus tells him other-wise and says to the sinful woman ‘Your sins are forgiven – your faith has saved you; go in peace.’ We don’t know if this nameless, sinful woman continues to follow Jesus, but it is in this context that that we read that Jesus moves on with the disciples and ‘also some women’ including Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna and many others. We also read:

“These women were helping to support them out of their own means.” (Luke 8:3b) These women knew the inclusiveness of Jesus’ ministry and no doubt loved hearing the repartee between Jesus and the Pharisee. They all had their stories to tell of how Jesus had become a sign of God’s extravagant love for them and how they had begun fresh, forgiven, new lives and were consequently following and supporting Jesus.

As an aside, the Greek word used for the woman’s sinfulness here (*hamartolos*) is the same word used when Simon Peter sees the large catch of fish in Luke 5:8 and says to Jesus, “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man’ in Luke 5:8. Simon Peter’s sin is not named nor is the sin of the woman with the alabaster jar. Both Simon Peter and this woman, though broken and flawed, become a means of grace for the glory of God. This gives me great hope that we too may be part of God’s continuing story!

Teaching for us today

This passage of scripture teaches a huge amount and here are but a few points.

1. Firstly we are called not to an exclusive club in Christianity but to be an inclusive bunch of people saved by God’s grace and mercy.
2. We are called to be outward looking to the margins of society and see those who are on the fringes. Today especially we are reminded of those who come as refugees seeking asylum in our country, whatever their means of entry are, we need to be compassionate, caring and looking to encompass those who are here into our society.
3. Thirdly we are reminded of the fact that we are God’s forgiven people and we need to be careful not to judge others but to celebrate our forgiveness and that we are loved by God, in spite of our past sinfulness. This should bring joy and love.
4. Fourthly, we are reminded that God uses a variety of people, with all sorts of backgrounds. While Jesus had previously named his disciples who were all men, now it is as if there is a new group of disciples, all women, some who are named in this passage – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and others not named. Could/should they be included with the twelve? They were there at the cross and are named as such as well as at the empty tomb – should we be challenging our male theology at this point?! The point for us is that we are all included and called to follow Jesus. Certainly these women are exemplars of the communal humility that must exist among all of Jesus’ disciples.

Praise be to God for his wonderful word for us today. Amen.