

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Do you see this woman?...Her many sins have been forgiven, because she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

Luke 7, 36 - 8, 3

There was a time not so very long ago when some professionals working in hospitals used to refer to patients as “cases” rather than people. So, it was not unusual to hear nurses and doctors referring to “the case in bed 15” or “the broken femur waiting to go to theatre”. They saw illnesses or medical conditions instead of the people suffering from them. That’s the sort of thing Simon the Pharisee did when he saw the woman in today’s gospel approach Jesus and anoint his feet with expensive perfume and then dry them with her hair. Simon immediately categorised her according to her reputation as a sinner. He failed to see her as a person who deserved to be treated with dignity, whatever had been her personal history.



Of course, that’s something of which we are all capable. Maybe we have even caught ourselves categorising others according to their race, personal wealth, sexual preference, social status or even their public misdemeanours. There have probably been times when we have all labelled people as “no-hopers” or “unreliable” or “fond of the drink”, because of how we’ve seen them act or because of what others have told us about them. Prejudice stops us from seeing them as people and allowing that they could change. Like Simon, we can be hasty to make judgements about others and, in the process, make them prisoners of a past we like to attribute to them.

When people are imprisoned or, indeed, imprison themselves, by their past mistakes, they sometimes begin to believe that they are a mistake. But Jesus says very clearly in today’s gospel that making a mistake is very different from being a mistake. No matter how messy or sinful our past has been, we all have the dignity of being created in the image of our God who loves us immeasurably. Today’s first reading is very clear testimony to that. King David, whose lust drove him to have Uriah killed in battle so that he could steal Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba, could hardly have sunk any lower on the depravity scale. Yet, when God’s prophet, Nathan held up the mirror to him, David recognised his own sinfulness and repented. In similar fashion, the woman in today’s gospel recognised Jesus as God’s prophet and, in her own unusual way, came to him for forgiveness. The irony of the story is that Simon, the Pharisee was unable to see his own sinfulness and his consequent need for forgiveness. The point of today’s readings is that even though we all have our shadow sides and are all capable of being trapped by them, God’s forgiveness is offered to us all. This is also illustrated in the second reading where Paul, who had spent his early adulthood ferociously persecuting Christians, tells how he found faith in Jesus Christ and, as a consequence, was able to leave his past behind him.

There's another aspect to the gospel story. Not only was Simon the Pharisee closed to see any good in the woman who came to Jesus, but he was unwilling to see Jesus himself as anything but a charlatan. He extended to Jesus no welcome at all, denying him the normal courtesies of the time. In Simon, there was not the slightest trace of gratitude or hospitality. He was not able to recognise how blessed he had been in life.

There's a delightful Japanese folk tale that points to something of which we all need to take heed if we are to be good news to others. There was once a school master whose school had grown too small for all the students who were turning up to be taught. So, he approached the wealthy people of his village for help. One of the local merchants decided to donate five hundred gold pieces towards the construction of a new school. The school master accepted the merchant's donation without a word. The merchant, in his turn, was peeved by the school master's apparent lack of gratitude and could not contain himself: "You know, school master, that there are five hundred gold pieces in that bag." "Yes," replied the school master, "I believe you have already told me that." "Even though I'm quite wealthy," said the merchant, "I need to point out to you that five hundred gold pieces is a lot of money." "Indeed it is," said the school master, "Do you want me to thank you for it?" "Well, I think you really should," replied the merchant. However the school master responded: "Why should I be thankful? Isn't it the giver who should be thankful?"

The school master, of course, was making the point to the merchant that real gratitude is to be found in the realisation of how much we have been given and in the understanding that the true blessings of life are to be found in giving from our treasure rather than in the possession of the treasure itself. Gratitude is the first response we can all make to the realisation of God's boundless love for us. The woman in today's gospel is held up to us as a model of gratitude, as one who appreciates the forgiveness and compassion of God which she has found in Jesus. Can we find it within ourselves to do likewise?