



Third Sunday in Lent

27th March 2011

Deuteronomy 7: 7-11, Ps 45: 1-2, 6-9, Hebrews 4: 8-16, Luke 7: 36-50

May I speak in the name of the one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

I was in a chemist's shop not long ago looking for some shower gel, but you wander about a bit dazzled by the bright lights and the shiny bottles, and I came across one bottle of shower gel which claimed to contain glacier water and deep sea mint. Wow, I thought, this is special! You can imagine a team of people going off to the Antarctic armed with buckets, to gather drips at the foot of a glacier, while another lot were putting on deep-sea diving gear and going down to pluck herbs from the bottom of the sea. Wonderful! And all this to make a bottle of soap which cost \$10. I bought it of course - well, if they're going to all that trouble on my behalf it would be churlish not to really! Though afterwards I did just wonder whether their claims may be a little over the top, a little bit extravagant.

Well, extravagance and bottles of exotic substances are right at the centre of our gospel today, in the story of that woman bursting into the dinner party and pouring ointment and kisses all over Jesus' feet. You have to picture that scene too: maybe a dozen men in a largish room, but not sitting on chairs as we would, think of them reclining on couches on three sides of a low table, leaving one side spare for the servants to work. So these couches stretched out from the table and the men have their heads at the table end, leaning on the left elbow and eating with the right. I always think it must be a very uncomfortable way to eat dinner and you'd end up with a numb arm and you couldn't say anything to the person next to you because they have their back to you, and you can't talk to the person behind either. But it obviously seemed like a good idea at the time. So there they are, Jesus and the other guests, eating and talking, and suddenly he notices his feet are getting wet, or perhaps he'd heard her already, because I don't think she was just snivelling quietly, she was surely bawling her head off, weeping buckets all over his feet and using her hair as a towel, and then kissing his feet and pouring out this ointment. All very extravagant, very intimate, very sexual, very shocking.

In Palestine in Jesus' day a man would not be seen in public talking to a woman, even a member of his own family. It's a very basic form of contraception! So you wouldn't be seen and if you were, well people knew it meant only one thing. So here's Jesus, supposedly a holy man, allowing, inviting, this public display of sexual indulgence. That's what the host thinks, Simon the Pharisee, but no doubt they all thought the same - guests and servants alike would be shocked by this display, embarrassed to the roots. But Jesus seems sublimely unembarrassed, unanxious about it all, able to receive these extraordinary attentions as a gift of love from an overflowing heart.

Who is this woman? Of course we don't know. As so often, St Luke invites his readers to let their imagination play around the edges of the story. Had she met Jesus before, had she perhaps been present at the back of the crowd, heard him speaking, heard from him words of grace which had spoken to her heart, conveyed to her the love of God even, or even especially, for sinners, so that that now, whatever happened before, now she comes helpless with grief and gratitude, pouring it out all over him. Yes, she's out of control and that's embarrassing, it's a threat to decorum! But compared to Simon's correct but cold hospitality, this excess of tears and kisses and ointment is a sign of a life transformed. Something had happened to change her life – how can they miss it? Jesus asks Simon, 'Do you see this woman?', meaning do you see a sinner, an object for your moral disapproval, or do you really see *her*?

But what has happened to change her life? I want to bring in another of our readings to comment on this story, it's the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews. Now I hate to disagree with the Rector, but this letter can't have been written by St Paul, there are just too many differences in style and it doesn't actually claim to have been written by Paul. It is simply anonymous, we have no idea who wrote it although we can make some guesses. One guess, floated about a hundred years ago, is that it might have been written by a woman. One woman in particular, Prisca or Priscilla, who Paul first met in Corinth (Acts chapter 18) when he stayed with her and her husband Aquila, but she turns up in all sorts of other places – Ephesus, Antioch, Rome – and whenever she's mentioned they're always mentioned together, and she is usually mentioned before her husband. That's quite unusual; clearly she was a person of some importance in her own right, whatever that might imply. Now for a New Testament book to be written by a woman would be unique, but it's not impossible. And it might explain why this impressive, memorable text is anonymous, because apart from this letter each of the twenty seven books in the New Testament has a name attached, not always the right name but always a name, and always a man's name, and this one has none.

It's only a guess and a possibility, but if it shocks us, and it does shock some, we may need to ask why we feel that inner resistance. God breaking down the barriers between what we expect and what we don't expect, that's what the gospel is all about and what this letter is all about too. 'In Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek', says St Paul, 'no longer slave or free, no longer male and female' [Gal 3: 28], and we could add, no longer sinless and sinner. All this because the barrier between humanity and God has been broken down, as this letter to the Hebrews, whoever wrote it, delights to say. And the writer talks repeatedly about how Jesus, Son of God, reflection of God's glory, shares our human weakness, our flesh and blood, the weakness which binds us to mortality, makes us a slave to sin because of the fear of death, the writer, says, and leads us to live our lives deformed by that fear. So the writer affirms that Jesus shares all that. We heard today that Jesus is 'tested in every way as we are, only without sin' [Heb 4: 15]. And so he can sympathise with our weakness and be the source of comfort and mercy and grace. Because the barrier between earth and heaven has been broken down, this writer says, because in Jesus we see the living and loving presence

of God, the holy one, source of all life, all things are possible, (even that a woman might write a book of scripture!), even that a woman whose whole life had been degraded into an object of male lust and disapproval should find in herself the freedom of a child of God, and come and pour out her gratitude at Jesus' feet.

Now you don't get to freedom without some pain, as the writer to the Hebrews points out also, in some really quite threatening verses in the middle of today's reading: *'the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing so to divide soul from spirit, joints from marrow judging the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before God, the writer says, no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare [4: 12-13].* And the image, actually, is of having your throat pulled back and exposed to a knife. It's a situation of acute exposure.

There's a moment in the story of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 44) when the ten brothers who had gone to Egypt to buy grain for their starving families are accused of stealing the governor of Egypt's silver goblet and there they are, exposed, defenceless, far from home, in this place of alien power. Their leader, Judah, comes to the governor and says, 'What can I say, my lord, what can we plead? God has uncovered our crime'. Now the odd thing is that they haven't stolen the silver goblet and they know that and yet they are guilty – 'God has uncovered our crime' - the real crime being not this one, but what they did twenty years before when they conspired to throw their brother, Joseph, into a pit and left him to die. It's a crime which has burdened their lives - at some point their father Jacob says, 'Why do you stand looking at each another?' and we know what those guilty looks are all about. So now there's a real relief that's the truth is out at last - yes we are guilty, we deserve any punishment you choose. Suddenly in the story guilt gives way to grief, grief for what they've done, and in place of their selfishness, a sudden love for their suffering father.

I see the woman who came to Jesus' feet in the same way. We don't know what happened, but something brought her to a moment of being exposed, her sins laid bare before God's judgement. She found herself transparent, seen through, with nowhere to hide, but what she found then, to her complete surprise, was that the divine face was not glowering, but smiling, with eyes of love and acceptance that said, 'Welcome home'. She experiences that divine hospitality so wonderfully dramatised in George Herbert's poem, 'Love bade me welcome'.

So we see in her poured-out tears and her kisses the relief of being able to let that go, all the effort of keeping up appearances, self-justification, staving off self-hatred, all that running away from God, from herself, from reality. Now she is accepted and can accept herself, and Jesus says to this crowd of men, 'I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; that's why she has shown such great love.' But then he looks sharply at the Simon, 'But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' There's Simon trapped in his boundaries of righteousness and self image, trapped as we all so easily are by these things, trying to keep up appearances, like shiny bottles on a chemist's shelf, no matter what's inside. Jesus' words can't reach Simon through that shiny packaging, but the woman has become transparent. She has nothing to hide

and hides nothing. And to her Jesus can say, and he says it to us too, 'You are a loved, forgiven, graced child of God, go in peace'.

The Lord be with you.

John Dunnill