

A Tale of Two Sinners

Pentecost 3 - 13th June 2010

Readings:

Luke 7:36 - 8:3

Loving God, whose very nature is to be gracious, surprisingly gracious at times, help us not to take ourselves too seriously. When we congratulate ourselves for getting up early to go to church, or when we feel pleased with where we are spiritually or how well we resist temptation, help us always to remember that we are here by your grace. Continue to make us open to your life giving word. AMEN

I don't know about you, but I do like to have a good laugh. And it really worries me that so many many people think that when you come to church you have to be serious, because Christianity is a serious business, or so the Weary Willies say. Well I'm here to tell you that it's not!! Following Christ is not a serious business. It can be a dangerous business. It can be a surprising business. It can be a disturbing and confusing business, but it can never be serious, because it is not dependent upon us and what we do. Joy is always around the corner.

An Example: On Friday as I sat quietly with others in St. Francis' Church in Melbourne, quietly praying, our solitude was disrupted by a roughly clad man who had marched down the front to sprawl himself right in front of the altar. He was eating a hamburger, and talking all the while about the state of the world. He notices three candles burning on the altar and says loudly that it was all wrong and attempts to remove one of them. Well burly men ran from everywhere and when they escorted him out, the priest, dressed ready for Mass - ran after him, I assume to offer him help. I smiled and reflected on the grace of God. The gospel reading on Friday night was Luke's passage about the Good Shepherd.

And look at Desmond Tutu. His very name brings a smile to my lips. A man who loves the incongruent humour of the gospel. Have you noticed, he's always smiling and laughing, and for him the joke is the fact that God can love us humans despite all our efforts to put God off. God still reaches out to us with his grace. God surely has a sense of humour as he or even she watches us trying to describe God and as we try to make sense of our lives.

And sometimes we can be so sure we are right in our view of God and other people are wrong. **It's a bit like the story of a man who was bothered by continual ringing in his ears, bulging eyes and a flushed face. Over a period of three years he went to one doctor after the other. One took out his tonsils, one removed his appendix, another pulled all his teeth. He even tried a goat gland treatment from the Philippines - all to no avail. Finally one doctor told him there was no hope. He had 6 months to live.**

The poor fellow quit his job, sold all his belongings, and decided to live it up with the time he had left. He went to the tailor and ordered several suits and shirts. The tailor measured his neck and wrote down 16 and a half. The man corrected him - "No it's 15 and half!" The tailor measured again and said 16 and a half. But the man insisted - he'd always worn 15 and a half and that's how life was for him.

“Well alright,” said the tailor, “just don’t come back here complaining you’ve got ringing in the ears, bulging eyes and a flushed face.”

Well some of us are so sure of how things are as far as God is concerned that we’ve restricted ourselves to a fifteen and a half collar. We are so serious about the Christian life, so set in our ways, that we could never imagine changing. We fight to keep ourselves in the same collar size and that can be a deadly serious business.

And so we come to this morning’s gospel. It’s a story about two sinners. Two very different sinners. One who is relaxed enough to behave outrageously in response to God’s grace to her, and another who took his religion so seriously that he could see no use for God’s grace. He had the serious task of keeping himself pure and in the process soon had ringing in his ears, bulging eyes and a red face at the very thought of Jesus, a Rabbi, being touched by a sinner and woman at that! So let’s look more closely at the story.

Simon the Pharisee asks Jesus to eat with him. Now I wonder why he did that. I’m sure it wasn’t because he thought Jesus was someone special. After all, we are told that he failed to greet Jesus with a kiss when he arrived.

He failed to have his feet washed or even anoint his head as was the custom of the day when offering hospitality to a rabbi. These were calculated insults about which the first readers of Luke’s gospel would have been shocked. I think that Simon was in the process of humiliating Jesus before his mates - to put this Galilean hillbilly in his place.

When along comes this woman, who everyone knows has a bad name around town. And she behaves scandalously! Walks in and starts crying all over Jesus’ feet. (Let me interrupt myself: have you ever wondered why she was crying? Had she previously heard Jesus preach about forgiving grace and is moved to tears? Or is she driven to tears by Simon’s rudeness?) No matter. All we are told is that tears start to flow and she uses them to bathe Jesus’ feet. And it can’t be a planned thing. She’s brought no towel - so she undoes her hair, (can you imagine Simon’s face getting redder by the second!) And she uses her hair, her hair! to dry Jesus’ feet. And then she takes the perfume that is hanging around her neck (I’m told that it was part of her tools of trade) and she anoints Jesus’ feet with it. And Simon, the joke’s on him - all he can see is this sinner - a woman upstaging him. How dare she! Surely that proves that Jesus is not a prophet! He doesn’t even know what sort of woman she is. But that’s the joke! Jesus does know. Better than Simon. And it doesn’t matter what she was like. Jesus can only see a woman reaching out for forgiveness and responding to God’s grace to her in Jesus. And poor hidebound Simon can only see a sinner, and an unclean one at that.

So Jesus gives him a parable to chew on- the story of the two debtors. One owes much. The other owes little. And both have their debts cancelled when they cannot pay. Who will love the more? Even Simon is forced to concede that the one who owes the most is the one who loves the most. The tables are turned. God’s grace is not just for the holy, the religious.

God’s grace is not just for us who are blessed enough to be in church this morning. It is extended to all, regardless of what we say we believe. And we who sit in church ought not

forget that. We can be like Simon who sits in judgement on so called fallen brothers and sisters, forgetting that it is only by the grace of God that we are here. Forgetting that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

Like all the stories that Jesus told, if we take them to heart, we are asked to identify who it is that is us in the story. I know the character I would like to be in the story. The woman - so grateful for the love that Jesus shows that she is moved to tears. But being the religious person I am, perhaps it is Simon who has more to say to me than the unnamed woman.

But even if I am like Simon, that's the irony of the story. God still loves Simon. God still loves me. Still offers his grace to Simon, just as he is, a pompous, judgmental, religious man. God through Jesus the Christ still loves him and calls to him, "Come as you are Simon, that's how I want you." We are not told what happens to Simon. My hope is that he eventually saw the grace that is in Jesus the Christ and not just the sin in others.

And what about us? This morning are we overcome with the grace of God in our lives? Or do we only see the sin in others? God call to each of us to come -just as we are.

And just a postscript. Just in case you think Jesus' behaviour with the unnamed woman at Simon's house is an aberration, Luke drives his point home by talking about three other women whom he names - three women who also experienced God's grace in their lives. Mary Madeline, a demented woman, Joanna, a member of a corrupt ruling elite, and Susanna, a wealthy woman.

Each hardly the sort of person that decent religious people would meet with. But we are told that it was these women and others like them who provided for Jesus and his disciples out of their own resources. No mean feat in a blatantly patriarchal society. But then the grace of God knows no bounds. And thank God for that.

Finally, let me end with a quote from Leslie Newbegin from an essay called, ***"He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh."***
"If everything depends on our moral effort, then surely there is no time for laughter. And if all good people go to heaven and all bad ones go to hell then there is nothing to laugh about. But if the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church is really just a bunch of escaped convicts who ought to be in jail, but by some extraordinary miracle have been let loose, then there is plenty to laugh at, including the said Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church!"

Jesus of our gospel, asks us to come as we are. In the next few moments I ask you to bow you heads in prayer and listen to the words of the first verse of the hymn as I sing it. After that Linda will play the music through and then I'd ask you all to stand and sing the entire song.

Let's Pray: Come as you are,
 That's how God wants you-
 Come as you are,
 feel quite at home.
 Close to God's heart, -

Pilgrim Uniting Church
Rev. Tony Duncan - Sermon

Loved and forgiven;
Come as you are,
Why stand alone?

Rev Tony Duncan
13th June 2010
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