

Sunday 13 June: Second Sunday after Trinity

“I have something to say to you...”

Readings: Galatians 2.15-end; Luke 7.36–8.3

OK, so let's imagine you're a pretty well-established Christian. You're on the PCC, involved in outreach, contribute generously to the church and several charities. Everyone says you're a pillar of the community. The church you belong to is orthodox, certainly, but not in a dogmatic way. And, you, personally, pride yourself on being pretty broad minded. So someone in the congregation tells you about this radical new clergyman in town, and you decide to make your own mind up. You go and hear him preach. You don't agree with everything he says, but you're really intrigued. So, completely on impulse, when you're leaving his church, you invite him round for lunch – and to your surprise he says yes. You immediately call some friends from your church and invite them round too. They're all pretty dubious, but they agree. However, the crucial flaw in the plan becomes clear when you get home – and your rather conservative spouse is considerably less than amused. After the usual too-and-fro about “you have to check with me first”, and so on, she lays down the ground rules for this visit. It's outside in the garden, not in the dining room; plastic plates and glasses; burgers on the grill, and, the cheapest possible wine. And, your spouse says, if you expect me to say hello, far less kiss him, then you're nuts. Meekly, you agree.

The big day rolls around. The guest of honour arrives, and you sheepishly shake his hand, while your spouse remains a brooding presence behind the kitchen blinds. Everyone sits down and things actually seem to be going OK. He's a great talker, and even the Tesco's Bulgarian red doesn't taste as bad as you thought it would. And suddenly you hear the garden gate open and in walks – or, perhaps, totters, on 4 inch heels – well, in walks what? Your eyes work up from the heels to the skirt – actually, you think, is that a skirt or just a belt? – and your eyes go up further, but finding almost nothing in the way of clothing there, they quickly drop back to relative safety of the knees. You stand up, just about to shoo her out, when she waves at your reverend guest, and he waves at her. Just as you're coming to grips with that, she staggers over the table and sits down on his knee. You hear your spouse smashing something in the kitchen. But there's more to come. She kisses him – thankfully, on the cheeks – several times, and then starts stroking his hand. All she seems to be saying is thank you, thank you, thank you. “Thank you for what” you're thinking, and it's then you remember where you've seen her before – the mug shot in the police section of the local newspaper. While you're still trying to decide what to do, she dramatically sweeps the bottle of Bulgarian red and his plastic glass off the table. She reaches inside her bag, and you think “Oh my God, what now!” And she pulls out . . . an absolutely exquisite crystal wine glass. And then she pulls out a bottle of incredibly expensive wine – you know it's expensive because you've got the same bottle in your cellar. You can't figure what's going on. Anyway, she opens it, pours the glass, and lifts it to his lips. And there must be something about the look on your face – what is it, disgust, horror, embarrassment? – because, suddenly, he looks at you and says: “I have something to say to you, Will Morris...”

We have a habit of sanitizing bible stories. Partly because we lose the historical context, but also because, if we don't, they often take us way outside our comfort zone. This story, for example, has become a classic Pre-Raphaelite painting: long flowing hair, tears of joy, a beautiful alabaster jar, all in a gorgeous middle eastern setting. But, in fact, it really is a story that would have

shocked many first century Jews, and probably gentiles, too. Simon is a Pharisee, a man of purity, the woman a sinner. By crashing the party, therefore she causes him, his meal, and probably his house to become impure. She invades what was almost certainly an exclusively male gathering, and the ritual immodesty of letting her hair down was the rough equivalent of going in there topless today. She completely upstages the host in a society where hospitality was one of the most important things. And, finally, in the one thing we can probably still fully comprehend today, the physicality of her actions, the way she touches Jesus, where she touches him, would all have been thought scandalous. But it is only by understanding the shock that all this would have caused, that we can also understand what this story is trying to say to us here.

We in fact come into this story half-way through, and we leave before its end. It's clear the woman already knows Jesus, and the act of forgiveness has already taken place – although where, we don't know. What the woman is doing now is giving thanks for that forgiveness, thanks for having been released from her sin, thanks for again being able to be in full relationship with God. And nor do we know the end of the story because Simon is presented with a challenge by Jesus, but we don't know how he ultimately reacts to it. Well or badly? We simply don't know. And that, of course, is part of the genius of the story – because we become the Pharisee and we are left to finish Simon's story in our own lives.

And that story, as Jesus makes clear, is a story of forgiveness. And it's actually not a terribly complicated one. We can read the embedded parable about the debtors as being about the relative weightings of sin, and the relative weightings of forgiveness. We can get tied up by questions on the gradation and classification of that sin. But that isn't the point. The point is simple, and the point is that however great our sins we are all forgiven. We can complicate that, but for God it is that simple. So how is that? Christ called upon us to love our neighbour as ourselves. And as with love, so with forgiveness, which is, of course, part of love. We must forgive others, as we would forgive ourselves. We must not judge others to be mired in sin, in the same way that we must not let our own sinfulness imprison us and separate us from God. Timothy Radcliffe, in our Lent book, puts this point about forgiveness so well: "We do not plead for forgiveness from God, but thank him for it. When God forgives our sins, he is not changing his mind about us. He is changing our minds about him." We don't need to earn God's forgiveness. That's why he died on the cross – for all of us and for all of our sins. But we do need to open our minds and hearts to God. We need to want forgiveness for ourselves and to practice it with others.

The story of Simon the Pharisee is our story, in so many ways. And it's certainly my story. Simon is not a bad man. He has invited Jesus to his house, he has entertained him, if not particularly generously, and Jesus thinks Simon is worth trying to change. I, too, am a pretty conventional, comfortable, middle class professional, so if the story I told you at the beginning had happened in my front yard, I'd have been shocked just like Simon. And that's natural. But like the story in Luke, that should only be the halfway point. The real question is what end to this story do I supply after hearing the challenge of Jesus. Am I thankful enough for what I have been forgiven, not to judge others? Am I aware enough of my own stumbles and falls, not to be busily counting up other people's? Am I aware enough to be humbled by other people's deeper, more extravagant, more sincere thankfulness for what they have been forgiven? In short, I suppose, am I aware enough to ignore surface realities, and be taught by others how to truly love God?

I don't know. But I do hope that the next time I feel morally superior to someone else, when I'm tempted to judge, that I can stay quiet just long enough to hear that voice: "I have something to say to you, Will Morris..."

Amen