

Sermon for Wednesday of Holy Week: hospitality Luke 7.36-50

According to the English theologian Charles Williams, even the basest of human beings owes some gratitude to the devil; “for while the devil exists there is always something to which we can be superior”. This line of thinking is inconceivable to Orthodox theologians (by whom I am influenced), not least because clinging to claims of any superiority is itself devilish and spiritually corrupting. As one Russian monk put it, “in a society where each one sees themselves as superior, no-one makes any progress”. The monk goes on, “If however one always considers oneself to be the last, meeting someone else becomes each time the opportunity for spiritual profit and progress. So it is best to be last. If I am the first, life is infernally tiresome. If I am the last, life is a continual joy, because I am always learning something useful”. And more than this, the attitude which focuses on our own weakness rather than that of our neighbour can make us more compassionate towards those around us. The revered monk Abba Moses was once asked to come to the monastery from his hermitage to help in judging a monk found to be sinning. Abba Moses rose up and went, taking with him an old basket which he filled with sand and carried on his back. The people who went out to meet him said “what is this father?” The abba replied “my sins burden and follow me and I do not see them – have I come today to judge the sins of someone else?” They listened to him and said nothing to the erring brother but pardoned him. Of course we are always tempted to do the opposite to Abba Moses. To neglect to see the virtues or goodness in another but to see their faults writ large and yet to neglect our own defects and shortcomings but to see our goodness writ large. “Consider your own sins and judge not your brother” counsels Ephrem the Syrian in a prayer found in many ancient liturgies. And behind this teaching to be alert primarily to our own shortcomings lies not some masochistic inclination, but a desire to rely ever more profoundly on God, and a desire to cultivate a deeper personal awareness of God’s astonishing mercy towards His wayward children, and rejoice then not in the shifting sands of our erratic performances but in the rock of his extravagant hospitality towards us, reflecting that extravagant hospitality in our own lives towards others.

One can see the opposite in Simon the Pharisee, just how much reliance on his own performance and spiritual self-congratulation hardens him to our Lord. The gospel suggests that Simon is notably rude from the moment Jesus arrives. Simon seems to have invited Jesus to dinner not to revere him but to test him, anticipating that this rabbi’s inadequacies will be shown up. The accepted rituals of offering water, of giving a kiss are omitted – equivalent in today’s terms perhaps of not greeting one’s guest, not taking their coat or offering them a seat or a drink. And these calculated snubs of Simon are seen by a woman, maybe from the courtyard or an open doorway, a woman who seems to know and revere Jesus, perhaps from a previous meeting. But what can she do about such an insult, given her status? She can kiss his feet, and so she rushes forward to do so, breaking down as she does so. She pours ointment, perhaps oil or perfume onto his feet. Notice she lets her hair down to dry Jesus’ feet, an act regarded as sexually provocative in the Talmud and which a woman was only supposed to do in privacy with her husband. None of this is lost on Simon, who instead of being shamed by the woman’s attempts to make up for his own disrespectful inhospitality rather mutters to himself about Jesus’ lack of discernment. And when he says that Jesus should have known the kind of woman it was that was touching him the verb used for “touch” is equivalent to lighting a fire, a verb also sometimes used for sexual intercourse – Simon is clear in his own mind that Jesus’ impropriety is smutty, dangerous and lewd.

What he does not see at all is the hospitality of this penitent woman towards Jesus – she was written off long ago no doubt by Simon who presumably knew her history. Jesus responds with a story about a creditor and two debtors; one debtor owes an irretrievable 2 years worth of wages while the other owes 7 weeks worth of wages. Both debts are cancelled, forgiven, the creditor responding to human need rather than human merit. In the same way, Jesus' compassionate forgiveness responds to human need, and he wants Simon to see that the depth of our love is an indication of how great we realised our need of forgiveness to have been. Jesus goes on to expose not just Simon's inhospitality but also his lovelessness, rooted in a lack of any sense of need for forgiveness. The woman in contrast appreciates she has been forgiven much, and so loves much. Simon has many sins, arrogance, pride, judgementalism, self-congratulation but perhaps most tragic of all is how all this blinds him to his neighbour and generates a wall of inhospitality. "Do you see this woman?" asks Jesus at one point – do you even see her? The irony is that the great unrepentant sinner in this story is not the woman but Simon. He is so hardened to seeing his own virtue and another's vice that even when challenged directly by Jesus it remains unclear whether he realises his spiritual blindness. And to the woman Jesus says "your faith has saved you" – God's freely offered love has been accepted as amazed, unearned grace, and responded to with costly acts of love.

This Gospel helps us to understand why some Christian traditions are so keen for us to dwell on our own unworthiness relative to others rather than our superiority. Our superiority will have the effect of hardening our hearts to our neighbour and God, as it did for Simon, whereas to be aware of our need, and simultaneously to understand that God rushes to meet that need out of love and longing, this strengthens our awareness of God's loving hospitality for us and overflows in compassionate hospitality for our fallen neighbour. The story of Simon and the woman is the story of two quite different responses to Jesus and these are responses which Jesus experiences often during his final week. And this story comes now to give us the opportunity to consider whether we stand with Simon, or kneel with the woman; whether we pick over the bones of another's vices, or consider first our own shortcomings; whether we are affronted by offences against our pride and virtue, or humbled by the one who seeks us out in our brokenness; whether we are defensive and independent in our outlook, or open and dependent on the one who has found us out; and whether in consequence we look with harsh inhospitable judgement or with hospitable compassion, upon our neighbour's plight.