

Wrong doing and Regeneration
11th Sunday, Year C
Luke 7: 36-8: 3
13 June 2010

Bishop David Coles often told us in stewardship sermons that our monthly credit card statement is a telling account of what really matters to us, and of where our heart lies. Friday morning's Press gave us plenty of opportunity to gloat over other men's sins. In telling detail we learned of the recreational interests, spending patterns, and lack of financial discipline of some of our political leaders. My response was one of dismay, sorrow and of compassion. Shane Jones was a parishioner at St Peter's, Willis St. I recall being invited to a meal with the family as their parish priest, and of being treated with great courtesy, dignity and respect. I hope I managed to convey something of all that in what I wrote to him later that day.

Christianity is an odd religion in that it considers our moral failures to be an opportunity to deepen one's relationship with God. It does not minimise the seriousness of what we have done, nor does it underestimate the costliness of what we may have to do to put things right, and to show our contrition. The forgiveness it offers is not cheap grace.

The novels of Ernest Raymond often had an Anglo-catholic priest in them somewhere. In one of them the local Vicar has just heard the confession of one of his wayward parishioners who has confessed to murdering someone. "That was a good confession," says the priest – "I am about to give you God's absolution, and then you and I are going to walk down to the local police station so that you can tell them what you have just told me."

We may confess our sins, and be forgiven by God, and yet still have to live through the consequences of what we have done. That was the experience of King David after the most spectacular moral failure of his reign. God forgave him for adultery with Bathsheba, and the arranged murder of her husband, but the downwind consequences went on for the rest of his life. The child born out of that adulterous union died – one of David's sons raped his half sister Tamar – he was murdered by another son, Absalom, in a cold blooded revenge killing – Absalom launched a coup against his father that resulted in a civil war costing thousands of lives, including his own. Family troubles were even to the fore when David was on his deathbed, with a grim succession struggle in which Bathsheba acts with ruthless singleness of purpose to put her son Solomon on the throne.

If we are going to get our heads around this morning's dinner party story we need to understand that the woman was forgiven by God before this incident even got started. The seventh chapter of Luke's

gospel makes the connections between the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. The woman had received John's baptism of repentance, she felt that she was "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven," and she recognises in Jesus both a continuity with what John had to offer, and also the what next of God's end times offer of salvation. She has turned up to express her gratitude for a blessing already received, and proceeds to do so with great emotional directness and warm heartedness. The way the woman is described suggests that her moral failings had been in the area of sexual excess and of sensual indulgence. And the story we have just heard has, let's face it, a considerable erotic undertow. As feet are rubbed with long hair, covered in kisses, and massaged with perfumed oil, we are witnessing someone expressing their heartfelt thanks for forgiveness received in the same style that they committed their original offences.

This woman has been drawn to our attention because in her there is no gap between Divine initiative and human response. On receiving the blessing of forgiveness she does not pause to calculate how to respond, or how much of herself to measure out in return, but rather plunges in with an immediate complete offering of herself. And what she offers is first of all faith – yes, you Jesus are the future one promised by God - and then love – and I am going to let you know Jesus, exactly how I feel about you in a very tactile way.

And that is where this story is going. It is about people who have been forgiven a lot, and who love a lot in return. The depth of the love expressed is a measure of the extent to which they have taken on board the full significance of their forgiveness. The punch line in the story is about the man "who is forgiven little who shows little love." As always in a gospel parable we are left worrying, "is this about me – is this true of me?"

Martin Luther sometimes advised Christians to sin boldly. He wasn't recommending breaking the law of God in which is clearly expressed the moral will of God. Rather he was counselling that rather than tying ourselves up in knots of scrupulosity and timid low risk discipleship, we should show some courage and dash in our Christian living, and risk making mistakes from time to time. The armoured heart risks withering away in a suffocating space.

What God is mostly interested in about us is who we are on the road to becoming. Sure, he is well aware of what we got up to in the past, and of who we were back then. But, as I was saying last week, God comes to us from the future, and his perspective on us is shaped by all the surprising outcomes and potential developments that constellate around that time zone. God lives in the future fulfilment of the Kingdom, and he knows who and what his sons and daughters will be in that space and place. And he brings something of that future wonderfulness with him, and pours it into our lives when he

forgives us. That is what the dinner party gate crashing woman recognised in Jesus – he was the bearer of that end time power of forgiveness. Everything could be made new in your life if you took hold of this God like love from beyond the stars.

I have called this sermon wrongdoing and regeneration. The issue for us this morning is can we accept God's forgiveness, and like King David, get on with our lives without self-pity or further recrimination, and make something of them. God's estimation of us isn't governed by our past track record and many moral failings, either of omission as well as commission. He is the future one, the person of the future, who is watching us coming towards him over the horizon of our lives. Having forgiven us he is interested to know - can we, will we, love splendidly, and boldly, like that gatecrasher at the Galilean dinner party 2,000 years ago?