



Smashing Barriers

Luke 7:36-50

I don't know if you've ever come across somebody who thinks they are "too bad to be a Christian". They are usually people that look at their own lives and can't see how their lives fit into what they think a Christian ought to be. That's sad because actually all human beings are too bad to be a Christian. There's an important truth in Romans 3:22-24 *For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

But there's the good bit
and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

What does that mean? We're all too bad to be a Christian, but because of what Jesus did on the cross, God offers us the opportunity to become one – to become one of His children. And He offers that as a free gift if we accept our badness (sin) and come to Him for forgiveness and life. That's Good News!

In London I had a friend called George. He was a genuine New York gangster. He was in to all the usual gangster things - robbery, extortion, drug dealing, protection rackets and all that. But one day his luck ran out after he tried to rob two banks in a day. The Police cornered him and he took a hostage. Eventually they captured him but not after putting a bullet into him which is still lodged in his side today. He was sent down to a hard US prison in Connecticut - but there he found that Jesus wanted to forgive even a hardened criminal like him. He accepted Jesus and his life was truly transformed. After a few years the US authorities wanted a clear out of their prisons and found that he was a British citizen so they deported him here. He quite fearlessly tells everybody he meets about Jesus. Why? Because he knows that he's been forgiven and accepted in Christ.

Bill Bennett: *"Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future."*

The story we read together this evening goes to the heart of what this means as we seek to be salt and light here in the 21st century. We see Jesus accepting anointing from a woman of ill repute who desired God's forgiveness for what she had done. It was just another ordinary person having her life transformed by Jesus - read the earlier chapters and you'll find other people who experienced the same. They were all ordinary people and it wasn't surprising that crowds of ordinary people thronged Him to listen to His miracles and hear His teaching.

It must have been an amazing sight to hear the words of Jesus and to see the sick healed and the dead raised. But not everybody was thrilled. Right from the outset of Jesus' ministry, the religious folk, the scribes and the Pharisees wanted to check Him out. You'd have thought that they'd have welcomed Him as a man anointed by God. But they didn't. He wasn't "one of them". He wasn't learned in their way. He didn't come from Judea where all the "best" people came from. And worse: He embarrassed them. Listen to what Luke writes earlier in chapter 7: *16 The people were all filled with wonder and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people." 17 This news about Jesus spread all through Judea and the whole country.*

Ordinary people recognized Him and welcomed Him. But He embarrassed the scribes and Pharisees, because He had the power and presence of God and they didn't - and the people were following Him. The scribes and Pharisees were the people who were tasked with teaching people the things of God. It was their job to be an example to the nation. And this upstart from Galilee was doing all that and more - and seeing amazing things happen. And what He said and did showed them up for being people steeped in their traditions yet not honoring God, in the end Jesus called them

Whitewashed Graves!

Were they happy? Of course they weren't - and we read of lots of incidents in the gospels where the leaders tried to trap Jesus.

It begs a question? Why didn't they just say: "Wow, God is doing something here - we must listen and respond." Because they were too steeped in their own traditions and way of interpreting scripture to see what God really was saying and doing.

I find this a challenge as we try to reach a whole new generation of people. When I was in London, the ethnic mix meant that people did church in different ways. Services were noisy, colourful, long, full of movement. It could have been easy to say that what they were doing was irreverent but people came to Christ in large numbers and still are. Many people I knew said that. But God was and is doing something in those churches. Why? Actually it was because they are faithful to the gospel – very faithful – in fact, very conservative. Yet they seek to relate the unchanging truths of God in a way that their African or Caribbean people can understand and relate to. And it hits the mark and one can see the anointing that there is on it as people come to Christ.

Back to our passage. It was clear that Simon the Pharisee was “examining” Jesus in quite a negative way. He wasn't ready to embrace the idea that Jesus was of God. He was there to do the reverse. We know that because he didn't give Jesus the appropriate eastern welcome – the kiss. He didn't extend the courtesy of seeing to it that Jesus was washed and anointed as a guest. His actions spoke as loud as words “I don't approve of you, and I don't approve of what you do - it's unlawful, unscriptural or whatever!” So when the woman came to Jesus and anointed Him with her own tears and expensive ointment it was more grist to the mill.

Here was this woman crashing a men's party. Worse, she was a fallen woman – probably a prostitute - and there she was kissing Jesus feet and anointing Him. Simon keeps his thoughts to himself - *"If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is--that she is a sinner."* How could a prophet allow a sinner to even touch Him? It confirmed Simon's worse suspicions that Jesus was not reverend or religious. But Jesus knew His thoughts – oh dear! *40 Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. 41 "Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."*

This is a story about grace. And Jesus shows how true spirituality is not based on being religious, but on giving and receiving forgiveness. The woman showed Jesus respect, love and devotion. In fact, to kiss the feet of someone in those days was an ultimate act of devotion. The “righteous” (maybe self righteous) Simon showed no respect, love or devotion in not extending common courtesies even.

The woman found acceptance and forgiveness – Simon got neither. Jesus said *Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven--for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.* I can see what Jesus meant here. People like this lady or my friend George lived bad lives, yet found forgiveness and showed their love for Jesus by their acts of devotion. For people like me who came from a Christian family, we often don't understand how bad bad is and can easily fall into self-righteousness like Simon did. In fact in Britain today, the church is steeped in it and we fail to understand that God wants to forgive all who come to Him, whoever they are – and our call is to reap that harvest, however bad that person is.

And in churches that have become used to being respectable and doing respectable things, that means we need to carefully examine ourselves. In my previous church in London, we saw many people come to Christ. They were mostly thirtysomethings. All had a history of broken relationships, abuse, poverty, hardship and difficulty. We had to learn the Jesus way – the way He dealt with this woman:-

1. Acceptance – Jesus accepted her anointing and tears. He didn't cast her away because her lifestyle disgusted Him. He allowed her to touch Him. Do you want to see people come to Christ? Then welcome them and accept them into your friendship and care.
2. Love - In accepting the woman Jesus had that opportunity to deal with her sin and forgiveness was given and received. I've often found that people spend some time in and around the friendship of believers before they understand that they need forgiveness and

accept Christ.

3. Change – Jesus challenged Simeon that he needed to change his attitude. Do we want to see people come to Christ and the church built up. Then we need to realize that we are not called to avoid people, to judge people, to rejoice in our own piety – but to realize that people need to experience the forgiveness that only Jesus offers. Then you'll see the change and transformation in their lives.

And that starts with the people in your community – your neighbours, workmates, family, social circle. It starts by accepting them into your friendship and trust. *In 1994 a 75-year-old former herd-boy and political prisoner assumed the most powerful post in Africa's wealthiest nation. Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in a 7-foot-long prison cell and emerged free of bitterness, anger, and vengeance. Because of his dignity, even his white prison guards called him "Mr. Mandela." Incredibly, he invited two of his former guards to the inauguration of South Africa's first black president. "People respond in relation to how you treat them," he said in a published interview. "If you treat them with respect and ignore the negative aspects, you get a positive reaction."*

And that may well be difficult. I know that my church in Swaffham found the rather different people that God brought into the church a challenge. They were different and had all sorts of problems we found difficult to minister to. In the end we have a choice – we can stay in our comfort zones, enjoying our righteousness – but no-one will come to Christ. Simeon probably stayed where he was and just showed more of his critical spirit by echoing the words of the guests *"Who is this who even forgives sins?"* . Or we can see what God is doing and step forward and be salt and light to those people God is bringing to us with all their problems and difficulties. They will be transformed and so will we.

Prayer