

## 17 JUNE 2007 – PROPER 6

*Luke 7:36-8:3*

Luke's retelling involves three main characters: Simon the Pharisee (the inviter), Jesus (the invited), and a woman (the party-crasher). At the heart of the story is the issue of hospitality. Simon is a lousy host who has publicly humiliated his guest in failing to wash his feet, anoint his head, and to acknowledge his equal rank of rabbi by offering a kiss. The woman—the only one in the room who understands Jesus' pain and his embarrassment by the Pharisee's rudeness—realises that in Jesus the Shekinah has moved and now resides in a person. She alone shows the expected grace of a host. Jesus is an impolite guest who does the unthinkable, especially in a Middle Eastern culture—he attacks the quality of the hospitality. Even though he is probably embarrassed by the party-crasher's gesture, he accepts it, and her, because he understands her motive. By the time Jesus finishes his parable, Simon and his mates are no longer angry with the woman. Their rage has turned towards Jesus. Upon him was the chastisement that brought her peace. In what is a foretaste of the cross, Jesus offers her a costly demonstration of unexpected love. In the words of William Williams, 'What power has love but forgiveness?'<sup>1</sup> And in that one action, he welcomes Simon and all who have ears to hear, into his own life.

There are a number of paintings that depict Luke's homely scene.<sup>2</sup> Julius Schnorr's 'Mary anoints Jesus', and James Tissot's 'Mary anoints Jesus' feet' both serve as fine examples. There's also Julius Schnoor's moving woodcut, 'Jesus Anointed by Sinful Woman' originally printed in *Das Buch der Bücher in Bildern*. But it is some poetic reflections of this episode at Simon's house that move me most. In her poem 'In the Midst of the Company', Janet Morley powerfully uses poetic license to recreate Luke's painting from Jesus' perspective.

In the midst of the company I sat alone,  
and the hand of death took hold of me;  
I was cold with secrecy,  
and my God was far away.  
For this fear did my mother conceive me,  
and to seek this pain did I come forth?  
Did her womb nourish me for the dust,  
or her breasts, for me to drink bitterness?  
O that my beloved would hold me  
and gather me in her arms;  
that the darkness of God might comfort me,  
that this cup might pass me by.  
I was desolate, and she came to me;  
when there was neither hope nor help for pain  
she was at my side;  
in the shadow of the grave she has restored me.  
My cup was spilling with betrayal,  
but she has filled it with wine;  
my face was wet with fear,  
but she has anointed me with oil,  
and my hair is damp with myrrh.  
The scent of her love surrounds me;  
it is more than I can bear.  
She has touched me with authority;  
in her hands I find strength.  
For she acts on behalf of the broken,  
and her silence is the voice of the unheard.  
Though many murmur against her, I will praise her;  
and in the name of the unremembered,  
I will remember her.<sup>3</sup>

The well-known Thirteenth Century poem 'Dies Irae', thought to be written by Thomas of Celano, describes the day of judgement. Until about 35 years ago, the poem was used as a sequence (a chant sung or recited before the proclamation of the Gospel) in the Requiem Mass, and so, unsurprisingly, finds its way into the Requiem's by Verdi and Mozart.<sup>4</sup>

Stanzas 12-13 of the 'Dies Irae' express something of what might be going on here for Luke's readers where Jesus' welcome towards this woman encourages us to hope that as we move towards Jesus, we will discover one who has already moved towards us in and for grace.

I groan, as one guilty;  
my face is red with shame;  
spare, O God, a supplicant.

You who forgave Mary,  
and heard the plea of the thief  
have given hope to me also.

In Martin Luther's words, we rediscover that 'Thou art my righteousness and I am thy sin'.<sup>5</sup> Our confidence rests, neither in our tears or in our zeal, but only in the gracious God.<sup>6</sup> In Jesus Christ, we discover that grace is bloodied, despised and rejected, crushed for the iniquities of, and laden with punishment for, those who hide their faces from it. Never abstract or cheap, grace is a man groaning on a cross, dying, not only for those who would anoint him with precious perfume, but also for those who would stand by to hypocritically condemn; for those who know what they do and for those who don't. Grace is God in his holy action, bearing the shame of desperate women and proud Pharisees on the killing tree.

Arms bare  
bloodied sap,  
stripped of all pretense,  
simplicity giving way to strange beauty.  
Alone, yet koinoniaed  
Violence, yet concord  
No form to desire this ugly tree  
yet satisfied  
the satisfaction of misplacement.  
Its white crooked limbs stretch laboriously upward,  
Longing ...

A germ so long ago planted  
out of season, yet for a time.  
Once being about a business  
Now being about a business ... aching  
forlorn and isolated,  
rootedness in desiccated ground ... and waiting ...  
Will it spring again?<sup>7</sup>

Here I conclude with John Donne's 'A Hymn to God the Father':

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,  
Which was my sin, though it were done before?  
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,  
And do run still, though still I do deplore?  
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,  
For I have more.

Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won  
Others to sin, and made my sin their door?  
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun

A year or two, but wallow'd in, a score?  
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,  
For I have more.

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun  
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;  
But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son  
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;  
And, having done that, thou hast done;  
I fear no more.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Charles Doyle, ed., *William Carlos Williams: The Critical Heritage* (London/New York: Routledge, 1997), 295.

<sup>2</sup> The homely setting of Luke's passage is perfect. Home ought to be the place where we can be most real. Any sense of inauthenticity can't be covered up with a smile. It's almost like 'reality' is something whose aftertaste lingers in the atmosphere, not unlike when one enters a place of prayer. If one enters a home where combat and dissension, hypocrisy and dishonesty are the daily ingredients, it is breathed in.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *At The Cross: Meditation on People Who Were There* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 21.

<sup>4</sup> It also appears in the opening to Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, in the *Theme of Clockwork Orange*, arranged by Wendy Carlos, in the Disney adaptation of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and is painted on the walls of the Phantom's underground home in Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera*.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Andrew A. Bonar, *A Commentary on the Book of Leviticus, Expository & Practical: With Critical Notes* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1851), 35.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Augustus Montague Toplady's hymn *Rock of Ages*.

<sup>7</sup> Jason A. Goroncy, 'The Killing Tree', n.p. [cited 15 October 2006]. Online: <http://ptforsythfiles.blogspot.com/2006/03/killing-tree.html>, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Izaak Walton, *The Lives of Doctor John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Mr. Richard Hooker, Mr. George Herbert and Doctor Robert Sanderson* (London: Methuen and Co., 1895), 34.