

Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> June 2020

*“When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.*

*When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said 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.”*

Luke 7:36-39

Luke’s gospel has often been described as the gospel of the outcasts. Repeatedly we see Jesus speaking to the marginalised, to those whom society has rejected. In addition to speaking to the woman referred to above, Jesus heals a leper (Luke 5:12ff) and then a paralysed man (Luke 5:17ff); chooses a tax collector to become his disciple (Luke 5:27ff); and heals a man possessed by a legion of spirits (Luke 8:26ff).

The leper would have been regarded as ritually unclean but Jesus makes a point of reaching out and touching him; the paralysed man would have been regarded as useless by society and was reliant on his friends to carry him round; tax collectors were famously despised by Jews as they were seen as collaborating with the occupying Roman forces; and the possessed man was chained hand and foot and had to live among the tombs. These were the dregs of society.

Jesus, however, sees beyond the way that society had labelled these people and sees them for what they are – people who are alone, who are hurting, who need help. When the Pharisee questions why he is helping what is presumably a prostitute in the passage above, Jesus makes it clear that it is precisely because she is what the Pharisee calls “a sinner” that he has intervened. She needed help.

The message for us is clear. How often do we judge people by how society labels them? How often do we not get involved because it would be too awkward and inconvenient and messy? How often do we write people off as useless because we cannot see beyond their physical disabilities? How often are we swayed by society’s view of those whose politics or sympathies are different to our own? How often do we unthinkingly adopt the media’s caricatured portrayal of those with severe mental illness and see them as the sum of their symptoms rather than as suffering individuals needing help.

Perhaps it is not surprising that Jesus was able to break the mould and identify with these outcasts and to cherish them as individuals made in the image of God. After all, Jesus himself was an outsider. If we look beyond the lineage traced back to David, we see Jesus as a carpenter from an ordinary hill town in lower Galilee who abandoned his livelihood and hometown to undertake his ministry, a wandering Palestinian Jew who relied on the goodwill and support of his followers. At his end, he was branded a criminal by the Roman state and killed by crucifixion, the traditional punishment reserved for slaves, pirates and enemies of the state.

But, perhaps, therein lies the secret. It is only when we put to one side the honour and privilege that the world has afforded us, only when we recognise our own failings and fallibility, only when we become outcasts ourselves that we are able to stop seeing these people as “other”. Only then do we see that they are us; and that what they need is not our judgement but our help.