

11th Sunday of the Year C

Luke 7:36-50

One of my favourite fictional dinner parties takes place in Monty Python's movie "The Meaning of Life". After three eerie knocks on the door, the host goes to open up and is greeted by the sight of a shadowy hooded figure carrying a scythe, who introduces himself with the words "I am the grim reaper". Knowing her manners, the lady of the house comes along and invites him in, presenting him to her guests as one of the little men from the village, and telling them that his name is Mr Death and he is, apparently, a reaper. When he protests that he is "the grim reaper", the only response from the table is to observe that that's hardly surprising given the state of the weather.

Few social occasions are as fraught as the dinner party. The less well we know our guests, the greater the fuss we are likely to make in preparing for them. This is particularly true if we are lucky enough to have attracted a particularly impressive guest. Many of the colleges of Oxford University still have annual dinners to which one is expected to bring someone of significance, whatever that means. The competition among dons

for whose is the most impressive guest, is always hilarious to watch - there are few breeds more starry eyed than academics. But social snobbery is something to which all others fall prey at one time or another.

Imagine the scene. You have invited a new friend, one whose friendship you can't quite believe you have obtained, and this new friend is coming with some others to eat at your house and to meet your other friends. The occasion is painstakingly prepared. You did shopping a week ago, you began the cooking two days ago, you opened the wine four hours ago, but table has long been set and at last you are ready to put on your smart clothes. However, things do not turn out as you wish. There are uninvited guests, people you know slightly but would rather were absent. People who do not know how to behave at such an occasion. People who talk about unmentionable subjects which embarrass you, subjects such as poverty, disease, prostitution, deprivation. You are sure your new friend doesn't want to hear such sorts of things and yet rather than being interested by your own underprepared conversational gambits about the London literary scene, this friend seems fully engaged by your undesirable acquaintance.

Poor old Simon the Pharisee had gone to such trouble. It was harder in the ancient world to give a private dinner party, particularly if one was a religious figure. People were bound to come and go. Teachers and preachers were public figures. But it was Simon who had invited Jesus, and doubtless Simon who was looking forward to having Jesus as his own for the evening. I am the host, he is the guest he will have thought. I am in charge of the situation, everything will be exactly as I wish. But no. In comes the anonymous woman. She is not Mary Magdalen, incidentally. She is anonymous, unnamed but not unnoticed. She knows nothing of decorum. She throws herself weeping at Jesus, dripping her salty tears on to his dusty calloused feet, and wiping those feet dry with the mess of her hair before compounding that mess with the ointment on which she had spent her last penny. She doesn't belong in Simon's house, he thinks. She threatens his control of the situation, she threatens his reputation, the kudos he is gaining by having this famous young man in his house. But most of all, and most simply of all, she is spoiling all his carefully laid plans. This is his party, Jesus is his guest, he belongs to him and him alone.

How easy it is to relive this story over and again in our Christian lives. Jesus is what we want him to be, the person who comes to dinner party, to make us feel better. Jesus is the trophy friend which marks us out from others whilst gaining their admiration. Encountering Jesus is an experience so powerful and so disconcerting that we are only able to undergo it on our own terms. So we find Jesus in J.S. Bach and George Herbert, in Rowan Williams and in Desmond Tutu; but not in the under washed and shabbily dressed person who wants to talk to us after mass; not in the child whose mother is made to feel so embarrassed by his noise that she keeps him away from worship; not in the heroin addict who wanders into church in the hope of finding a few coins to go towards his next fix. Jesus belongs to us, and therefore he is under our control.

Such an approach is not only selfish, it is highly dangerous. Look at the example of Simon the Pharisee. He thought he knew what he was doing. The rules of social decorum he has known since his youth. Now his assumptions are challenged. He has made such a fuss of this Jesus person because he is convinced that he is a prophet. But this conviction cannot be right, because were Jesus a prophet he would know that this woman is a

sinner. Since he doesn't recognize her for what she is, perhaps he's not a social celebrity after all. Perhaps. But perhaps it's not that Jesus isn't a prophet, but that Simon hasn't listened to him, for a prophet is one who speaks the word of the Lord. Of course the woman is a sinner. Everybody is a sinner, and everybody is the object of God's unconditional and forgiving love. How do we respond? Which of two people will love more? Do we act like somebody who has just been bought a pint of beer, or like somebody who has just had a lifetime of debts cancelled? Jesus tells Simon this story to bring him up short.

But there is more. Not only is Simon deluded about the love of God, he is also deluded about how to behave. He, the social master, the founder of the feast who has gone to so much trouble to get everything right, has actually got everything wrong. It is the woman who has washed Jesus feet, who has greeted him with a kiss, who has anointed him before his meal. All these are the right things to do, and all of them have been done by this embarrassing streetwalker, who has shamed the social snobs for whom shame is the worst fate of all.

Simon thinks that if Jesus were a prophet, he would know if someone were a sinner. In reality, if someone knew herself to be

a sinner she would know, in Jesus, that she was forgiven. She would respond with the ludicrous and embarrassing expressions of love which so offend the smart men of the town. She would know that she who is forgiven much will love much. If only Simon the Pharisee knew not that she is a sinner, but that he himself is. For if he knew himself to be a sinner, he would know what it means to be forgiven much; and if he knew what it means to be forgiven, he would know what it means to love much. But most of all, perhaps, if Simon knew himself to be a sinner, he would know how to respond to the love of God when it was sitting at his table and staring him in the face. So then, which are we? Pharisee or prostitute? The gospel choice is clear.