

The readings: Galatians 2:15-21. Luke 7:36-8:3.

I am going to preach about the Epistle and the Gospel this morning, which seem to me to say something very important about the heart of what we believe as Christians. And they also say something about that big dispute of the early church, which we have talked about before – the whole question of the Law and circumcision.

The Gospel is about Jesus at the house of one Simon the Pharisee. A woman comes in – clearly prepared for this encounter – and in a tender, wonderful gesture, anoints his feet with oil (which would have been expensive) and dries them with her hair. The narrator identifies her as a sinner, and so does the host, though rather more pointedly. But more than that we don't know, and it is foolish to try and speculate at this stage what is actually meant by that word "sinner". Luke is quite deliberately not telling us. Some people suggest that she is a prostitute. But that is pure speculation, as is the idea that it is Mary Magdalene. Luke does not make that link.

And he does not make it because he simply wants us to focus on this woman – as a person. She has understood that she is welcomed, loved and accepted without reservation, by God, in the person of Jesus. It does not matter what it is she has done, or how this discovery had come about. It simply matters that it has done so. Her life has been transformed. Her tears of gratitude wash the feet of Christ.

And here we have, in two short verses, the heart of why you and I are here. The truth in which we live is that there is no barrier, no separation between us and God. Julian of Norwich, that remarkable 14th Century anchoress, has a wonderful phrase to express that. She says "In God there is neither wrath nor forgiveness." It is an amazing phrase, making you pull up sharp to take it in.. God is not angry with us, and God does not even need to forgive us. God is quite simply *for us*, including us in, with a love that looks beyond all of the things we know make us unworthy. We are accepted just as we are. We do not have to transform ourselves to stand before God. If we accept this extraordinary truth, we are transformed.

We are, I think, rather bad at accepting all this, and seeing how central it is. And the reason we cannot really believe God accepts us, is because we are not very good at accepting ourselves. We are all self-judgemental. And in consequence, we fail to grasp the other truth that is implicit in this one. If I am acceptable to God, then the people around me are equally acceptable. God does not make distinctions. So if God does not judge me, then I cannot possibly be in judgement of others. That is the point of the encounter with Simon the Pharisee.

Simon makes immediate negative, judgemental assumptions about the woman and Jesus. “He should know what sort of woman this is who is touching him!” And it is interesting the speed with which Jesus challenges him, because he ends up making it quite clear that there is no real difference between Simon and the woman. That little parable about the two debtors, and the list of Simon’s failures in hospitality turns the whole thing round. And all of a sudden this passage is actually about two sinners – the woman and Simon. And when Luke triangulates like that – which he does quite often – he creates a situation for the reader where you start to have to decide which one you are closest to, the woman or Simon.

Now that kind of challenge, and this double acceptance – God’s acceptance of us, and our consequent acceptance of each other – was for Paul, the revolutionary heart of the Christian faith. More than anyone else in the early church is saw exactly what it meant, and how it could change society. And it is why he took such a strong stand against the practice of circumcision – which is the central theme of the letter to the Galatians, from which the middle reading comes.

I don’t think this is a very easy bit of the epistle – it’s rather concentrated. But nevertheless it has all the things in it. And – for once - it makes clear the points of agreement between Paul and his opponents. Jewish Christians didn’t insist on keeping the law because they thought it made them more acceptable to God. They kept it – and they thought the gentiles should keep it - out of gratitude for all that Jesus had done. And Paul recognises that. “No one will be justified by works of the law” he says at the end of v16, and that was a point of agreement.

No. Paul's opposition to circumcision, and behind it the whole structure of the law, was because it made a distinction between people. In the ancient world it set people apart – and that is what it was designed to do. Paul was quite clear that if God makes no distinctions between us all, so neither should we. The life and death of Jesus mean that there should be none. The moment we make separations and distinctions, “one of us”, “not one of us”, we play into that double bind of not accepting ourselves and so not accepting others. Before long we place ourselves on a pedestal, and when we do that we plant the seeds of judgementalism and in the end violence.

Look again at Simon the Pharisee's comment. “If this man were a prophet, he would have known what kind of woman this is.” It is only a short step from that to saying to his servants “Get her out of here!” And this is the truth for us too. The moment we start to judge, to label, to say “This is a good person; that is a bad person”, we are making divisions, and building up walls between us. That is why the law, for Paul, was deeply dangerous.

And – as part of that: If we live by rules we miss the gift. And again, here's where it touches us. There are plenty of people round (and always have been) who think that the point of Christian faith is to live by a moral code and to be generous to those in need. But it is not.

The point is to wake up to our welcome in God. And then to realise we can live out of a strength more profound than anything you or I could imagine. *It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*, Paul says. We have everything we need to live the Christian life. That is the gift. Then what we do is an expression of love, not a rule or duty to follow.

One brief note at the end here. Yesterday Soozy and I went to Greys Court outside Henley to see the house and the garden. They have a Maze – which is really more like a Labyrinth. And when you have wound round the path, you come to the centre, and there is a pillar, with quotations carved on each face. There is one from Mother Julian and one from Augustine. I had been pondering this sermon as I walked the path, and when I read the Augustine it seemed to sum up the whole of what I was struggling to say in a single line. “We find our way to God, not by negotiation, but by love.”