

Pentecost 15
28/8/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 31:1-9

Psalm 32

Luke 7:36-50

An uninvited prophet and the judgement of love

Sermon preached by Andrew Gador-Whyte

All the Gospels record a story of a woman anointing Jesus, but Luke's account is unique. In Matthew, Mark and John, the disciples complain about the waste, saying that the money could have been given to the poor. Jesus however commends the woman, who will be remembered as having anointed Jesus for his burial.

Luke, however, has Simon the Pharisee rebuking Jesus for allowing a sinful woman touch him. Jesus responds that the woman in her extravagance has shown how full of love she is, because she knows what it is to be forgiven without reserve.

In the other gospels, the woman seems to be the only one who takes Jesus at his word, preparing his body for the death his disciples cannot understand. This ointment mixed with tears foretells those burial spices that, against all hope, will turn out to be the fragrance of the new creation, the ointments ready to anoint the head of Israel's Messiah.

In Luke's gospel, the ointment is a gift for guests, a sign of love. The ointment's costliness, like her complete, totally unreserved and undignified self-outpouring, is a gift that flows freely from the woman's love, the love which is created in her by another's free, unconditioned, costly advance of love.

In the midst of what appears as a strange irrationality and sensuality, it is as though the woman has seen with absolute clarity the events that are about to unfold in Jerusalem. Without being aware of the specific events to come, it is as though she recognises the character of Jesus' love as the love of the slaughtered lamb. In withholding nothing of herself when she anoints Jesus' feet, she seems to see that his is the kind of love that withholds nothing in anointing our whole humanity. Here she almost seems to be aware of the kind of love that will undergo with conquering forgiveness the violence and slavery, which, looking back, appeared to be the very thing that defined and constituted us.

If the woman's actions were disclosing the mystery of Jesus' Passion, it is not because she was somehow possessed or made into some automaton of revelation. Rather, the Holy Spirit, unconstrained by the linearity of our time, has reached backwards from the day of resurrection. It is precisely in what the woman does that the Spirit celebrates her healing, and makes of her act a living sign of the transformation that will be seen face to face at the empty tomb.

The Spirit, who effected Jesus' Incarnation, here proclaims his death and resurrection in an absolutely incarnational way. He proclaims it through the woman's freedom, without displacing it. The Spirit chooses to make his proclamation mediated by the humanity of the woman, just as God chooses in a remarkable way to work out the world's liberation primarily through contingent human lives and relationships. In fact, in Jesus, God becomes himself completely as subject as we are to the contingencies of human existence, and yet through that very existence and death, proves himself faithful to his

irrevocable promise. The Spirit creates unconditional love in the woman, not by undermining her freedom, but in fact in the ordinary way love comes about in human lives - that is, created in us by another, created as a free act of our own will by the prior gift from the other of her or his love.

And if we had any doubt that this is human love at work, enabled by the Spirit to be the holy scripture that makes divine love present and intelligible, then look at how Luke speaks about it. What he describes is immediately recognisable as what humans do actively when they love.

And what has brought this about? Is she responding to an earlier unrecorded meeting with Jesus? No, more likely the woman has heard about Jesus' unreserved deeds of mercy and power for the poor in Galilee, and, more than most, has immediately been struck with the impression that Jesus has also healed her. Again, it is as though her deeds speak with an authority that we have heard elsewhere. It is as though by her open receiving of the love of Jesus, she has become a prophet, proclaiming the Incarnation. Though she may not fully understand the scope of what she has done, her deliberate act rings with these words:

'Look, there is the bronze serpent raised in the wilderness that one need only look at to know that God has healed us'

'Look, there is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'

'See, the home of God is among mortals!'

Jesus' merciful love creates in the woman a love that proclaims that creation of love. Her openness to that love turns out to be (and I think it would be to her great surprise) her openness to God's anointing of her as a prophet. And like the elder prophets of God's people, her 'words' pluck up and destroy and build and plant. She speaks a word of judgment against the self-justification that has enslaved many like Simon - a self-justification which is revealed as yet another of sin's yawn-worthy disguise acts, merely a whitewashed tomb full of the familiar filth of human violence, merely another form of blindness, merely another form of slavery.

In what the world would call humiliation, the woman turns up at the house uninvited, laying everything at Jesus feet, in serving, selfless love, in agape. And Jesus' words to Simon reveal this humiliation, this weakness, as the woman's act of going up to the holy places, unsealing the ark, and unrolling the Torah, to proclaim God's unfathomable and totally unreasonable love poured out on the her, Simon and all his people, liberating them all from Pharaoh's taskmasters and gods.

In response to Simon's indignation, Jesus tells a parable of two people whose debts are both cleared. This is not a moralising tale where the debtors realise they are in the wrong, are sufficiently sorry, and then turn their lives around. Rather the agency, the vivifying force in the parable, is in the sheer gratuity of the creditor. His forgiveness transforms unilaterally a relationship of dishonesty or slavery into one of mutuality. Simon insists on burdening the woman with the task of making herself just, with proving her own justice. But Jesus makes it clear that this is a dead end, because God's will for both her and Simon is to bring about mutual love in them which will bear the fruits of that justice relationally.

God's forgiveness is always the primary agent. The faith Jesus describes is the disposition to allow oneself to be exposed to that forgiveness. The love he describes in the one who is forgiven much is the trust that is the capacity to receive forgiveness as a healing judgment, a healing wound.

So Luke does not labour the point about the woman's self-reproach. Her tears are simply called 'love'. There is no doubt grief here at the brokenness of her own life, but it is grief that is simply an act of looking backwards from the starting point of having been met by unconditional and transformative love. What the church has sometimes called 'compunction' is, through our relationship to another, simply being exposed to what is real, and recognising that one has been living in fantasy.

Simon doubts that Jesus can be a prophet, allowing himself to be touched by the unclean woman. But Jesus' incarnate love, come to birth in the woman, has not merely ritually cleansed her, but has effected a great exchange, such that the 'mind of Christ', the suffering servant, has become manifest in this prophetic woman. Her scandalous sensual ointment will become known as the water of baptism, recapitulating his baptism by John.

It is as though in her strange yet authoritative act, she is proclaiming baptism as a marking with the sign of the cross - an anointing for a life lived carrying the marks of Jesus' forgiving death, a life lived no longer defined by death and in constant competition with the other to cheat death. The woman seems to point to a life where the presence of Jesus one step ahead of us enables our bodies gradually to learn reflexes of trust that are entirely new and yet more natural to us than we could have imagined beforehand.

And so when Jesus proclaims salvation to the woman, it is not that she has avoided punishment by recognising her sin and showing appropriate repentance. It is rather that her faith in even the mere presence of Jesus, in the mere hem of his garment, her wordless trust which simply knows his unreserved forgiveness and transformation - it is in this faith, this trust, that she has allowed herself to be transferred into the kingdom of the forgiving victim.

Her healing, like ours, is a baptism into Christ, which is a baptism that anoints each of us as a prophet, not to undermine our freedom but to make us who we each uniquely are. This baptism is a gift we could never have anticipated. And so we say, 'We love because God first loved us.'

And when Jesus says to her, 'Go in Peace', it is not as a pleasant conventional turn of phrase, but as an assurance of his ancient promise, hurtling irrevocably towards its fulfillment in ordinary human relationships. Jesus assures her of the promise from Israel's God of peace with justice, the promise that transfigures our bodies as no longer 'for ourselves', but as the oil of gladness, the source of the healing and the crowning of our neighbour's humanity.
