

**Pentecost 3**  
**13/6/2010**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**1 Kings 21:1 – 21a**  
**Psalm 5**  
**Galatians 2:15 – 21**  
**Luke 7:36 – 8:3**

Sermon preached by Gavin Blakemore

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Excitement, intrigue, power, desire, irony, lure, wealth and deceit.

These are some of the words and images that media use to get our attention, especially in film previews designed to capture your imagination and thus entice you to pay your money to watch the latest film. It also well describes this story we have heard today from 1 Kings 21 of Naboth, Ahab, Jezebel and Elijah.

Ahab is King of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and is married to Jezebel, a princess of Phoenicia who worships the God of Baal. We know from earlier chapters that Ahab is torn between his role keeping Israel's faith and that of his wife's. We know also that the prophet Elijah has already brought Yahweh's message and reminder to keep the commandments. Elijah has also taken on and defeated the prophets of Baal and subsequently had to flee from the wrath of Jezebel. Having received the judgment of God in the previous chapter we find Ahab has returned to his palace in Samaria in a sullen and resentful mood.

The narrative begins with what appears to be a reasonable request by Ahab to his neighbor Naboth. He offers to purchase or exchange Naboth's vineyard which is adjacent to his palace for a garden. Naboth's refusal to sell sees Ahab return to his Palace resentful and sullen and yet one might detect recognition in Ahab of Naboth's good reason for rejection.

What happens next reminds me of teenagers who use power, bullying, lies, deceit, and manipulation to get their own selfish ways. You might remember in this story something of your own experience as a teenager or maybe of watching your children or grandchildren in this!

Jezebel ignores the rights of Naboth and his deep understanding of land as divine gift from God and not just as an inheritance. Farmers and aboriginals still have this great respect for the land as that which grows the food which maintains the family and community with a livelihood and sustenance. The clash of political and religious systems has deep implications for the possession of land.

Naboth sees the land as God's gift which cannot be bought and sold as a commodity. One is reminded of the Kerrigan's in the film "The Castle" in which the family home is valued beyond money and the greed of large corporations. Sometimes we witness this today when in the midst of a developing shopping precinct you find a single house remaining in the middle or maybe even a church.

Jezebel admonishes Ahab and sets about in an evil plot which successfully removes Ahab by having him falsely accused of cursing God. The complicities of the elders, nobles and Ahab should not be discarded and serves as a reminder to the injustice that is done by those in positions of power. Ahab goes to take possession of the land under Jezebel's instruction and the prophet Elijah re-emerges to confront the evil of Ahab as he walks in the stolen vineyard. In a stark and difficult word of judgment, Ahab is forced to encounter the evil he has done and of its consequences.

I wonder as we look at our world today whether we notice who are:  
the Naboth's,  
    the Ahab's,  
        the Jezebel's  
            and the Elijah's might be.

This story is especially pertinent for us in Australia as we consider the ongoing reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and their claims to the land of which they have been dispossessed.

The theme of power, position and prophets continues in today's reading from the gospel of Luke.

Today's story from Luke could easily be a contemporary one-act play – a single scene where characters, conflict, and social norms clash together to reveal an unexpected and utterly transformative truth.

The set: a well-decorated dining room, simple but expensive looking. The characters: Simon the Pharisee, a curious intellectual with an eye for the interesting; Jesus of Nazareth, the guest of honour; and the Woman with the Alabaster Jar, a character with no name who is the source of the scene's most uncomfortable moments.

Enter the unnamed Woman with the Alabaster Jar. We don't know how she entered the house, how many people she defiantly walked past before finding Jesus at the table. She stands behind him, then crouches on the ground. She begins to cry, allowing her tears to collect at his feet, bathing them, washing away the day's dust. Without a towel or even a scarf – maybe she didn't think this through – she unties her hair and dries his feet. Finally, she takes expensive oil and anoints him again and again, kissing him as she does it.

Imagine the room. Imagine Simon, whose casual dinner just became shockingly uncomfortable. Simon's reaction – or the emotional response that we might picture him having – is not difficult to understand. Only Jesus remains unflappable. Only he is able to understand this woman's extravagant gesture, her otherwise inappropriate actions, as a full-body attempt at reconciliation, a plea for forgiveness. If she is a sinner like the rest of us, only Jesus knows her sin.

Here, we get a sense of God's love, of God's composed and collected way of accepting our broken pleas, our vulnerable moments, and refusing to turn away from them. While we may find it difficult to forgive, we see that forgiveness is natural to God. While we may find ourselves cringing away from the brokenness of others, we see that God never blinks. For Simon, and maybe for us, this introduction to a God so full of love and so ready to reconcile with us can be almost too much to bear.

Simon questions Jesus' status as a prophet, claiming that if he really was what he said he was, he would know that this woman with her tears and her kisses was a sinner, Jesus calmly responds. I imagine him meeting Simon's gaze across the table, setting down his glass, staring for a while. In case we were wondering who is in charge here, we are about to find out. "Simon, I have something to say to you," Jesus begins, and then he tells a story.

The parable is a simple one. A creditor has two debtors, one who owes a lot of money and one who owes less. Neither of them could pay, so the creditor cancels both debts. In the end, the one with the greater debt loved the creditor more, Jesus and Simon agree. "The one to whom little is forgiven loves little," Jesus says. Then he turns to the woman and tells her that she is forgiven. Her sins, known to him alone, have been wiped away like the dust on his feet, and she is free to go and live a new life in the assurance of God's grace.

This final exchange is the resolution of the one-act play. The audience knows that something important has happened, for the Woman with the Alabaster Jar, for us. Like any good play, when the lights go down, the attention shifts from the stage to the silent working of the audience's hearts and minds, where the lessons learned struggle to take root and grow.

As we come to Lord's Table today, I wonder if you are coming with a yearning for reconciliation and forgiveness that God offers?

How might the experience of God's hospitality, forgiveness, grace and love be reflected in how you live your life out this week?

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