

Bible reading: [Luke 7:36 – 50](#)

Nicky Gumble tells the story of a lady by the name of Barbara Clapham. She moved to London at the age of 33 and was looking for a church – this was long before Nicky Gumble’s time, but she went along to Holy Trinity Brompton. The lady at the door who welcomed people as they came in, gave Barbara a very warm welcome and asked her name etc and from that welcome Barbara felt she was in the right place.

And so she decided she would go back again the following Sunday and once again she was met by the same lady at the door who said, **‘hello Barbara’** – she remembered her name.

And Nicky Gumble said he was invited to Barbara’s birthday party – it was her 100th birthday party.

The year when she got the welcome at the door was 1947 and she attended Holy Trinity Brompton for the rest of her life.

And Nicky Gumble said at her birthday party, ***‘all those years ago, I wonder if the lady on door duty had any idea the difference it would make to remember Barbara’s name and to give her such a warm welcome.’***

I hope that is an encouragement to those of you on door duty – you are on the front line – you are the first smiling face people see and we really appreciate what you do.

A warm welcome really does make all the difference.

I think we have all been to churches where that isn’t the case – even small churches where it’s obvious you’re a visitor – yet nobody asks your name or where your from.

The point of telling you that story is that we will see the exact opposite of that warm welcome in our passage for today.

Let me remind you that we are in Luke’s gospel with a particular focus on some of the meals that Jesus shared with people.

And in Luke Chapter 7 we find that Jesus has been invited for a meal at the home of Simon the Pharisee.

The Pharisees ticked all the boxes as far as clean living and law keeping was concerned. They were like the rock stars of the religious world.

However, they were also like oranges and lemons. They were oranges on the outside but give them a squeeze and what came out of them was often sour and unpleasant.

I don’t know if you have ever noticed this but when tax-collectors and sinners have meals they tend to turn into parties but when pharisees have meals they tend to turn into religious debates usually centred around the law.

That’s just an observation.

Only a relatively few people would be invited to this dinner, hosted by Simon the Pharisee – it wasn’t open to all and sundry. But it would appear that it takes place out in the open and people could stand at a distance and listen in on the conversation in the hope of learning something from these highly respectable men

So, you have those on the inside and those on the outside. Perhaps there was a big central table for the VP guests – all the religious movers and shakers, and they would be served. And round the edge you had the poor people – they weren't invited but they could come and see what it was like to be an insider. Isn't that interesting – they wanted to come along and see what it was like to be an insider.

And sometimes people come to church or watch a service online because they want to know, what is it like to have a relationship with God? What is it like to belong? What is it like to be forgiven?

When they sing their songs – does it ring true in their lives?

Do they live out what they believe or is there a tang of lemon when you get up close and spend time with them?

We are on the inside – and we all like to be on the inside. We feel good about ourselves when we're on the inside. Being on the inside can give us a sense of comfort and security as well as power and control.

How do you feel when someone asks if you can keep a secret? We love being told a secret or when someone confides in us – there is a certain pleasure about knowing something that other people don't know – it's just part of being human.

And in the church, we need to be so careful that we don't become so pleased about being insiders that we stop caring for those who are not.

We have a woman at this dinner party. She's there but she doesn't belong – she is most certainly an outsider.

We don't know her name, Luke simply refers to her as 'a woman' or 'the woman'. But of course, she has a name – but Luke doesn't name her. Maybe he doesn't even know her name.

Simon gets a name – everyone knows Simon.

But not this woman – she's not important. In fact, she consciously avoids the limelight. She lives on the margins, keeping her head down. It's far easier that way. It's far safer that way.

Over the years people have suggested this might be Mary Magdalene but that is pure speculation.

We need to give her a name – don't we?

We could call her Mary but there are already 3 Mary's in the gospel's and sometimes it gets very confusing working out which one is which.

Simon describes her as a 'sinner', which, in all probability is another way of saying she was a prostitute.

So, let's call her Rahab. Most of you will know there is a Rahab in the Old Testament. She was the one who hid two Jewish spies when they were scouting Jericho prior to it's capture.

She was a prostitute who played her part in the story of God's people, just as this woman finds herself caught up in this story that is so much bigger than she is.

Suddenly Rahab finds herself centre stage as she steps out of the shadows. Suddenly the eyes of everyone present are on her and on Jesus.

She does directly to Jesus and immediately starts sobbing. And her tears begin to bathe the feet of Jesus. Then she before removes her hair covering allowing her hair to slowly fall down past her shoulders and

down her back. She then uses her hair to dry the tears from Jesus' feet. Then she proceeds to kiss his feet and pour perfume on them.

I can't even begin to tell you how inappropriate that was and how scandalous that was – and in the eyes of everyone present Rahab shames herself.

How embarrassing this must have been for Simon. He's invited all the top brass from the Pharisees, and Jesus is there (this new kid on the block whose causing a bit of a sensation) and Simon wants to find out if he's all he's cracked up to be – people say he's a prophet – so, let's find out.

I think if you or I were there, we would feel more than a little uncomfortable. People would have been freaking out. This is just all wrong. Acceptable barriers are being crossed. People on the outside knew you didn't cross that line and interact with the VIP's. She is a sinful woman, and Jesus is meant to be a prophet.

Yet, to everyone's astonishment there are no words of protest from Jesus. In fact, he seems to welcome it.

If Simon and the other Pharisees had any doubts about who Jesus was then those doubts have been removed once and for all, Jesus most certainly is not a prophet – that's what Simon thought. In fact, that's what pretty much everyone thought.

And if you and I had been there – that's what we would have thought too.

How can this man be a prophet when he is allowing this to happen and even welcoming it? Doesn't he know what kind of woman she is?

But Jesus sees what this woman is doing, not as something seedy but as something beautiful.

It's actually an act of #hospitality, which is born out of forgiveness and gratitude.

Rahab's gratitude flows freely and unashamedly because she has been set free from an enormous debt that she could never repay. It's the gratitude of someone who has been given a fresh start in life because they've experienced outrageous grace.

She is not shaming Jesus she is honouring him. She is not rendering him unclean, instead, he is making her clean.

As I said, Jesus welcomes it and accepts it and then he offers her forgiveness, which he goes on to explain.

Let's be clear – he isn't offering her forgiveness because of her love – as some suggest. That couldn't be further from the truth.

Jesus tells this story about two people who owed money. One owed 18 months wages and the other owed just over a month's wages and the person they owed it to forgave them both.

And as a response, the one who had the biggest debt cancelled loves more than the one who had a small debt cancelled.

In other words, love is a response to the forgiveness of your debt.

Jesus knew that in due course he would go to the cross and he would pay our penalty by standing in for us. In other words, he would take our debt upon himself so we could be forgiven and free of that debt.

And those who know we have a big debt cancelled, love more.

In verse 44 Jesus asks a very challenging question. He is looking straight at Rahab – his eyes are fixed on her, but his question is directed towards Simon, ***'Simon, do you see this woman?'***

On the surface that seems a rather odd question. Of course, Simon saw this woman – every eye is fixed on her – you would have to be blind not to see her.

So, yes Simon saw this woman but what he saw was a prostitute – someone who had violated God’s law and brought shame on herself and her community – and because of that she was of no real value or worth. What Simon saw was an object of disgust - someone to be pitied.

What he didn’t see was Rahab, an individual, someone made in the image of God. He didn’t see her pain and rejection and remorse and her longing to be loved and accepted. Simon saw none of that.

But that’s what Jesus saw – he saw the whole picture, her complete story.

Prostitution in those days was generally a result of poverty as it often is today.

Some Jewish girls were sold into prostitution by their parents out of desperation to feed their children.

I wonder what you and I would do if we were faced with the choice of prostitution or starvation – what would you choose?

Or maybe the circumstances that led to Rahab’s promiscuous lifestyle was of her own making.

Either way, she would have been used and abused and probably felt trapped in a way of life that offered no escape.

After all, mud sticks and she had a reputation.

But Jesus saw her full story, he saw her humanity and her brokenness. Of course, he saw her sin but also her hurt and her pain.

‘Simon, do you see this woman?’

Rahab was used to being looked at – either with lust or disgust.

And I suspect that Jesus was the first person in a very long time to look at her with love and compassion.

‘Simon, do you see this woman?’

Or do you see a label, a pre-conceived idea, a prejudice.

It’s interesting that Jesus is looking at Rahab as he asks Simon if he can see this woman – I think he’s inviting Simon to look into her eyes and see her humanity, her hurt and her pain.

Look at this woman who has had to sell herself so she can eat – look at this woman who has had to shame herself to survive.

It’s so easy to judge people without knowing their background and to see them through our own assumptions, especially when we disapprove of their life choices.

Do we see people’s hurts and fears and pain or do we only see their sin and shortcomings?

‘Simon, do you see this woman?’

Oh, he saw her alright, everyone did. He saw her spoiling the dinner party and ruining the whole evening. He saw her shaming herself with this public spectacle.

What did Jesus see?

Jesus saw Rahab expressing her love, gratitude, and hospitality in the only way she knew how. Jesus saw something beautiful. He saw an act of sacrificial worship.

From Jesus' perspective, if anyone should be ashamed it was Simon. There were very well defined norms for hospitality in those days. Hospitality is something they took very seriously. It was important that you did hospitality well.

And yet, Simon ignores those norms. He provided no water for Jesus to wash his feet – nothing to help Jesus freshen up – no kiss of greeting.

And when Simon fails to fulfil these duties, Rahab steps up to the plate. Washing his feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, refreshing him with perfume and greeting him with kisses.

Rahab turns the norms of hospitality (which Simon failed to provide) into an act of worship and devotion.

In verse 48 Jesus says to Rahab, ***'your sins are forgiven.'***

Of course, we don't know the background to this encounter, but my hunch is that Jesus and Rahab had met before. And what takes place in Simon's house is her response to something that has already happened.

Rahab has already encountered Jesus and experienced his love and grace and mercy.

If that's the case, then you might be wondering why Jesus ends by saying her sins are forgiven. If Jesus has already pronounced forgiveness, why is he saying it again?

My hunch is that these words are not for Rahab's benefit – we have already seen the evidence of her forgiveness through this act of love and devotion and hospitality.

These words are like a public announcement, and I think they're for Simon's benefit and for all who would look down on Rahab – and maybe even for us who would look down on Rahab.

God has declared her forgiven and clean and now you must recognise her new life and welcome her back into the community.

Treat her as one of your own – treat her as an insider not an outsider.

But Rahab wasn't the only one who had been trapped in a cycle of sin – so was Simon.

For Simon it was the sin of self-righteousness and pride and arrogance. Simon clung stubbornly to the notion that he didn't need much forgiveness.

And yet, Jesus longs for Simon to be set free just like Rahab has been set free.

There is an irony in this story which you cannot fail to miss – Simon, who is religiously orthodox and highly respected seems more immune to grace than Rahab whose life has been blighted by sexual infidelity.

One remains trapped in their sin while the other is wonderfully set free from theirs.

So, what can we take away from this?

I think first of all, that we need to make sure that we're sweet on the inside – that we're oranges and not lemons.

Let's make sure we don't just have a veneer of Christianity where we are sweet on the outside but sour on the inside.

We need to ask God to fill us with love, especially towards those on the outside (that can be outside of church or within the church) – with the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.

We also need to see that this woman is such an encouraging example – someone who has a reputation for playing the field can be forgiven and start a new life.

I don't know all of your stories, but we've all done things that we regret – perhaps there are other people who know about things you've done. And yet, God's love and grace is such that it has reached into our lives with forgiveness and acceptance.

Accepting the kind of people that Jesus accepts and who Jesus died for and wants to give a new life to – can be quite messy and costly.
It might even tarnish our reputation as a church.

Jesus was called a glutton and a drunkard. – he was called a friend of tax-collectors and sinners. These weren't compliments by the way.
Would we be happy for people to say that about us?

'Oh, that Park Road Baptist Church, they have some very strange people in it'.

I know we already do!! But there's always room for more, isn't there?

Do we love enough to be willing to look bad?

Do we love enough to be willing to be misunderstood?