

**A sermon preached by Christopher Cocksworth, Bishop of Coventry at  
the Chrism Eucharist on Maundy Thursday 2014**

**Readings: 1 Samuel 3.1-10; Luke 7.36-50**

**Introduction**

‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’ Faith has saved the woman who came to Jesus.

**What sort of faith?**

What sort of faith is this? Is it a quantitative faith, that if it gets to a certain level will trigger God’s response?

No, I don’t think so. This sort of faith is qualitative and by that I mean faith of a certain quality. Not a graded sense of quality – in a sense it is not something that can be measured. I mean that faith should have a certain character to it.

This character of faith is seen (as Jesus says to Simon the pharisee) in this person: ‘Jesus turning toward the woman said to Simon: ‘Do you see this woman?’ Jesus knows that Simon sees this woman as someone well known throughout the city as a sinner. This probably means that Simon saw her as a prostitute and that meant that although she was in the city (and known in the city) she was, in Simon’s mind at least, well outside the people of God – and in a very real sense not known or loved by God.

Not only did Simon see her in his mind as a sex-worker, but probably as a rather successful one who plied her trade with Gentiles, giving her enough money to buy an alabaster jar and fill it with expensive oil. In Simon’s eyes, she was somebody who ignored all the conventions of hospitality. Contravening all the rules of ritual purity, she gate crashed his banquet, and then true to form (the form that was in Simon’s mind) performed erotic gestures with high emotion in a way that was shamelessly trying to seduce Jesus and bring disgrace on Simon’s household.

Jesus sees her very differently to Simon. He sees someone who has met the complete, forgiving, healing, loving, restoring, undeserved, gracious, kind, understanding, unconditional, absolute grace and mercy and love of God made known in the word and works of Jesus. He sees her as someone who knows that God has looked kindly on her in her hard situation where she’s

exploited by the sin of other and, damaged by the evil of the world, she has been drawn into it.

Her presence at the feet of Jesus was proof that her faith had saved her. It was a faith that the reformers of the Church liked to call *evangelical faith*, faith in the gospel, faith in the good news of God's unmerited, undeserved, unearned grace and goodness. A faith that can do no other than respond with tears of gratitude, and kisses of love and extravagant pouring out and giving over to God of all that one has and all one is.

The reformers called the doctrine of *justification by faith in the grace of God* the doctrine by which the Church stands or falls. One reason they said this was because without this doctrine each of us, and the ministries we seek to exercise will fall without this doctrine as the foundation. And something of that is shown in the oils that we receive today – some of our tools of the trade, except that grace can't be traded, only given.

### **The oils as signs of God's grace**

One of the oils we receive is for baptism. Baptism is the sign of the grace by which we are saved, which is why we never baptise ourselves and why baptism is open to infants. It is the sign that God saves us, God cleanses us and God immerses us into his life. For our part, we simple come to the water, to receive the gift of God, to believe the promises of God.

The oil is simply to reinforce the extravagant grace of God and, by the mercy of God, the new identity we have as his chosen and anointed people. Baptism stands or falls by the doctrine of justification by faith in the grace of God. Baptism is the invitation to live our lives in the grace of God. It is the call to trust, believe, to have faith in the favour of God towards us.

Another oil is for anointing for healing. Perhaps we could see healing here as an image of all the pastoral ministry in which we take part – a ministry that seeks to bring the healing love of God into each situation. So whether we are literally anointing people for healing or whether we are caring for the sick in other ways, or helping those who are hurting, or reconciling those who are estranged, we are there to bring the powerful, transformative favour and mercy and love of God into each situation inviting people to receive the touch of God's kindness.

We minister as people who have nothing of ourselves to give, no powers of healing, only very shallow wells of compassion; we minister as hurt people living with our own experiences of damaged relationships and failed projects, earthen ware vessels (often cracked and crumbling) but those who,

nonetheless, by the extravagant, unmerited mercy of God have been chosen to be instruments of God's love.

Our ministry stands or falls by the doctrine of justification by faith in the grace of God. We minister the grace of God trusting that through our ministry the grace of God is available to those who, with faith, can receive it.

The remaining oil is the oil of chrism – the oil for anointing for service. And I'm grateful to Joe for following ancient tradition and mixing this oil with other fragrant oils because there is something especially fitting about this oil being sweet smelling. This is because today of all days, as we come to renew our vows of ministry, it is good for us to know with all our senses that we are chosen by God to bring the fragrant scent of God's presence to every person and situation we encounter – not because we have anything great to offer – but because we have a very great God to offer.

This is the oil that is used at confirmations and ordinations: and each of those callings into the service of Christ stands or falls by the doctrine of justification by faith in the grace of God. We are chosen to serve Christ because of God's grace. Our faith is required simply to believe it and then to live it. Perhaps that is why we have the story of Samuel's call today: Samuel, the child, was called before any of his gifts, or skills could be tested and before extended experience of life and service among God's people and even of God himself could be acquired. Chosen by the grace of God to minister the grace of God in the grace of the grace of God.

### **Renewing our love for God in Christ**

As the years of ministry go on and as the years – as it were – of our salvation go on we can forget that we are like the woman in Simon's house and we can become more like Simon. We should listen carefully to what Jesus says to Simon:

‘you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.’

The woman's extravagant response to the extravagance of God's grace can become, gradually, in each of us the formalism and neglect of Simon.

And that is why we are here today: those of us who will be so busy ministering the grace of God over Holy Week have the chance to step back

and allow ourselves to be ministered to and to prepare to enter into the momentous story and powerful events of Jesus' last week.

Before we become absorbed with the climax of Holy Week and the celebration of Easter on Sunday, we have the chance to turn with Jesus and to see 'this woman' – and see ourselves.

We have the opportunity to turn to Jesus and find him looking at us in the way he looked at this dear woman – full of affection. We see again that, though we may invite Jesus into our house, our parishes, our churches, we do not truly, lovingly, joyfully, expectantly welcome him into all that we are doing. Indeed he – Jesus – bathes us with his tears of longing and loving, tears that take him to the cross, tears that are like blood in Gethsemane, tears that become blood at Calvary, saving blood that is given to us as life-giving wine of the eucharist.

We see again that though we too can sometimes betray Jesus by a false kiss of feigned affection, he expresses his love for us in the absolute authenticity of his life laid down for us. And we see again that though we try to follow Christ and make every promise to do so, our strength so often fails us and our lives in effect deny him but that Jesus nevertheless stoops down to wash our feet and then lifts up our faces – even the faces that have turned away from him like Peter's or turn to the ground, downcast, like the disciples on the way to Emmaus and anoints us with his Spirit – anoints us beyond measure, so much so that if we will but open our hearts and minds and lives and hands out in faith, the oil of gladness, the oil of sweet smelling joy, the oil of the powerful, redeeming, accepting, forgiving presence of God will flow though to us to fill every part of us and then flow out of us to heal to the world.

## **Conclusion**

In the Gospel reading, Jesus says 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace'. He says it to the woman, but also says it to you and to me.