

SHARING CHRIST'S SHAME.

Luke 7v36-39

In some nations today people who confess their faith in Jesus risk their lives. 'Open Doors' publishes an annual *Persecution World Watch* identifying the nations where it is most dangerous to be a Christian. Their current list has North Korea at number one for the eighth consecutive year, followed by Iran, Saudi Arabia and Somalia. We don't face threats to our life but we do face something which many of us cower from i.e. shame and humiliation.

- You might face it as a new believer when you tell your friends that you have put your faith in Jesus. Just something as simple as this - saying that you have become a Christian, may be enough for them to have a good laugh at your expense. You feel embarrassed and so you are tempted to keep your head down.
- Or it may be that a controversial topic comes up in conversation and you say what you believe and explain what the Bible teaches. Suddenly you are facing an absolute onslaught. You are told that you are living in the Middle Ages, that science has disproved all that sort of stuff and that you are a bigot!
- It may be that you are finding it tough because of some unanswered prayer. Your friends, who do not believe, are watching and listening; they know you have been praying and yet nothing seems to be happening. They begin to say – “OK, *where's your God then? What about these great promises of Jesus you tell me about?*” You have no answer. All you can do is share the shame and keep trusting.
- There can also be stigma involved in saying you belong to a particular church – or indeed, any church. When we do 'Getting On Board' sessions I usually quote Charles Spurgeon the great nineteenth century preacher and church planter who, when he first became a Christian, pestered the minister of the church in Newmarket about becoming a church member. *“I felt that I could not be happy without fellowship with the people of God. I wanted to be wherever they were, and if anybody ridiculed them, I wished to be ridiculed with them, and if people had an ugly name for them, I wanted to be called by that ugly name.”*
- Occasionally individual Christians may be targeted in a deliberate way. In the recent General election campaign a Christian candidate from one of our London churches was attacked by a Sunday newspaper with accusations regarding her attitude to gay people. It led to her being the subject of outrageous smears, thousands of blogs and tweets, personal threats and placards outside her home.

Jesus faced mockery as he approached the cross. He was mocked as a clown king by the soldiers as they scourged him; he was lifted up naked on a Roman gibbet; he had insults hurled at him as he hung there. So if Jesus suffered mockery, then when *we* are mocked we are experiencing *“the fellowship of sharing Christ's sufferings.”* (Philippians 3v10)

This morning I want to take a look at an incident in the Gospel of Luke where a woman shows her readiness to share Christ's humiliation. As I do, test yourself to see if are ready to do the same. Luke 7 v36-50 concerns two people who came face to face with Jesus: a Pharisee called Simon and an unnamed woman. I will take two weeks over this passage.

v36: Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him: Before we go any further some background about Pharisees should help. This Jewish group had emerged during the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucids between 167 and 160 BC. They began as part of the resistance movement. There is some debate surrounding the meaning of the name “Pharisee” but it probably comes from the Hebrew *‘prushim’* meaning “separated ones”. Pharisees laid great emphasis on ritual cleanliness and they *separated themselves* from anyone they considered unclean. They had a strong presence in synagogue life – watching over the purity of the local Jews, and they were also influential on the Jew’s ruling council, the Sanhedrin.

It is important to understand their attitude to the Law – both the Mosaic Law and the Scribal additions to the Law. The Mosaic Law (the Torah) is *the Written Law* given by God to Moses at Sinai. The Pharisees and Jesus were agreed in the importance of this. But the Pharisees also believed that, along with the Torah, God had given Moses *the Oral Law* to explain how the Torah was to be applied in everyday situations in minute detail. It therefore had equal authority with the written law. The Oral Law had been passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. The Pharisees championed scrupulous adherence to this but Jesus rejected it. They clashed with him over this many times. Jesus said that their fanatical zeal over ritual purity and law keeping had led to pride and hypocrisy and harsh censure of others. They laid burdens on the people that were too heavy to bear. This is why he said *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”* (Matthew 22v28-30)

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. Why would a Pharisee like Simon invite Jesus to dinner? Was it because he was drawn to Jesus? Some certainly were. We are accustomed to the Pharisees being the bad guys in the Gospels, but we do come across Pharisees like Nicodemus who came to believe in him. However, this particular Pharisee was *not* a seeker. The detail in the narrative indicates that he had invited Jesus to test him or correct him - or maybe even to denigrate and insult him. Simon had an agenda but seeking the truth wasn’t part of it. This is clear from the way Simon treated Jesus.

Later in this incident (in verses 44-46) Jesus pointed out some of the ways Simon had dishonoured him by neglecting the customary courtesies for welcoming a guest. There was no kiss of greeting, no water provided for hand and foot washing and there was no anointing with olive oil. In that culture to omit these things would be understood to be a calculated insult. To host a Rabbi was regarded as a great honour, but in this case Jesus was being dishonoured and denied the courtesies any guest might expect.

Anyone else would have been angry and indignant and then stormed out, but not Jesus. He just **reclined at table**. Jesus was practicing what he preached. He had taught his disciples about facing insults. *“If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”* (Mtth. 5v39) This describes an insult. Being struck on the right cheek means someone has given you a backhanded slap with the right hand – and that was a well known insult - like a medieval knight striking you in the face with their glove.

v37: One of those looking on and witnessing these insults was **a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town**. There is a hint here that she was a prostitute, although this word is

not explicitly stated. She was there because **she had learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house.** So here we have a situation in which two of the principal characters are poles apart: one is a Pharisee, scrupulous about law-keeping - and the other **a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town.** And in the middle, is Jesus!

But how come this woman was allowed in? Her lifestyle was well known in that community and she knew how women like herself were regarded by Pharisees. So how come she is there? Surely she would not be welcome? Kenneth Bailey explains: "*At traditional Middle Eastern village meals, the outcasts of the community are not shut out. They sit quietly on the floor against the wall, and at the end of the meal are fed. Their presence is a compliment to the host who is thereby seen as so noble that he even feeds the outcasts of the community. The rabbis insisted that the door be open when a meal was in progress lest you "shut out the blessing of God."*" So Simon the Pharisee allowed her to look on from the shadows. But she did not remain on the edge and in the shadows for long

She brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and (v38) as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. This is fascinating. I suspect this woman went way beyond what she had intended. To begin with, she had come with the intention of honouring Jesus. What a contrast to Simon! She had brought an expensive jar of perfume to anoint Jesus. I wonder if this had been bought with her immoral earnings. Was this even the perfume she normally used it to make herself attractive to men? Now she has brought it to lavish on Jesus. She may have already met him, but if not she knew of his attitude to sinners like herself – that was why she was there. Jesus had a former tax collector in his band. He ate with outcasts like her. The Pharisees taught that God loved the righteous who kept the law but Jesus was teaching that God loved those who knew that they were sinners in need of God's mercy. This was such good news for this woman. God's mercy was not a vain hope. She could be forgiven. So she had come to thank him and honour him.

But when she saw how Jesus was denied even the common courtesies her plan went out of the window. She couldn't bear to see Jesus treated in this way; maybe this is why she began to weep: **as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.** What she did here was a direct response to what she had seen. Jesus was being publicly humiliated! But if Simon wouldn't welcome Jesus *she would!* So she did everything Simon had neglected to do. She had no water but her tears would have to do. She had no towel so she used her hair to dry his feet. She had no olive oil – but she had something even better – her perfume.

Notice her concentration on Jesus feet: **she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.** Jesus was reclining at the table with his feet away from the table. She couldn't clamber over the bodies to reach his hands and his head – imagine how that would have looked! But she *could* reach his feet which were soiled and dusty. Washing feet was always a humble task and not just because feet got dirty when you walked in sandals and smelly in a hot climate. The feet were considered a lowly and defiled part of the body. In the Old Testament the way you humiliated a defeated enemy king was to make his head your footstool. In certain cultures still today if you sit with the soles of your feet facing someone it is taken as an insult. But this woman lavished her loving attention on Jesus' feet.

The perfume she had been intended for Jesus' *head* as a mark of honour, but she was happy to pour it over his feet. His feet were worthy of honour too. *"How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news."*

This was the woman's response on seeing Jesus' dishonoured. I can't help think back a few years to the reaction of Christians to Jerry Springer the Opera in which Jesus is presented as a figure of ridicule. The first response hit the headlines – some Christians reacted with anger and stood with placards outside theatres, calling for legal action citing blasphemy laws and giving the cast an earful! A less publicised response in one city was a local church inviting the cast around for a meal, treating them with respect and lovingly sharing the gospel with them. I know which of these two responses I prefer. But maybe the woman in our incident shows us another response. When Jesus and the Christian faith is ridiculed - come out of the shadows and publicly identify with the figure of fun. Learn from this woman. Instead of lashing out at Simon she lavished love on Jesus – in full view of everyone, and in so doing shared Christ's shame.

³⁹**When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."** Simon began to humiliate both the woman and Jesus. The woman was an easy target. By coming out of the shadows and identifying with Jesus she had made herself vulnerable to criticism. She began to share Christ's humiliation.

This woman was well known in the town. Her appearance may have been that of the classic painted lady. Her hair was loose, another sign of decadence. At that time for any woman to uncover her hair in public was grounds for a husband to divorce her without a financial settlement. It was that serious. In traditional Middle Eastern Society, a woman let her hair down for the first time for her husband on her wedding night. So this was an action shocking in its intimacy and coming from this woman utterly scandalous! She was also touching a man in public – something no respectable woman would do!

Simon the Pharisee regarded the woman's behaviour as further shame for Jesus. Here was a notorious local madam getting intimate with the great preacher! But Jesus welcomed her attentions. He saw into her heart. This was an act of love. This was a costly identification with Himself. In this instance she and Jesus were connected by both being publicly humiliated. Don't you think there is something wonderful about this – the willingness to share Jesus' humiliation? It was a mark of the early Christians – they were prepared to be *"fools for Christ's sake"* (1 Cor. 4v10). It has been a feature of the persecuted church through the centuries. It looks like Christians in the west are now getting plenty of opportunities to share Christ's shame too.

Jesus said "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory..." Paul wrote "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.." and, to Timothy, "Do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel by the power of God..." Like this woman are you ready to come out of the safety of the shadows and share Christ's shame?

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