

Sermon delivered 12th June, 2016 at Morning Communion

Today I'm going to pretend that I've found two diaries in a box in the ancestral attic, one by King David, and the other by Simon the Pharisee, Jesus' host in the second reading. David's account of his meeting with Bathsheba and what happened next proved rather too, er, racy for a Sunday morning, so I'm going to read out Simon's instead. I think we can probably all identify with him to some extent. And as we're especially honouring our monarch today, it seems a shame to focus entirely on what we are told was David's only sin. My old friend Nicodemus was telling me the other day about this young preacher who has appeared on the scene. His name is Jesus, and Nicky went to see him the other evening. He sensibly waited until after dark. After all, if you're a Pharisee you don't want to be seen hobnobbing with some new-fangled thinker who has lots of fancy arguments up his sleeve. Anyway, they had a long chat and it seems to have been a fascinating conversation, about the spirit, wind, and being born a second time. Nicky didn't really get the hang of it all, but this Jesus certainly has some unusual ideas, and Nicky says he found him strangely convincing. Well, between you and me, Nicky isn't intellectually quite out of the top drawer, but he's no fool, and as he recommended this Jesus fellow to me, I've invited him to dinner, and I'm looking forward to a good discussion. We Pharisees like nothing better than a good argument about the scriptures.

The next day's entry. Well, everything went rather pear-shaped yesterday. It started off all right. Jesus turned up and took his place at my table. I didn't make a fuss of him. He seemed quite happy – quite a humble sort of chap, in fact, at least to begin with - so I didn't kiss him or give him water to wash his feet, or anoint him, or anything like that. After all, he's only a country lad, and I didn't want him getting ideas above his station. And anyway, if he'd proved to be a complete charlatan, I didn't want to be left with egg all over my face. Things started going downhill almost at once. A local prostitute came in. Now, don't get me wrong – I don't mind passers-by drifting in and out. It happens all the time, and a few extra guests help to make it more of a party. Also they show how popular I am, and if they're here to admire my debating skills, well, who's to complain? But I recognised this woman straight away. I've often seen her hanging around in the street, wearing fewer clothes than she should, plying her trade. And if she'd sat quietly in the corner I wouldn't really have minded. However, bold as brass, she went right up to Jesus clutching an expensive jar of perfume, burst into tears over his feet, and began to wipe them with her hair, splashing the precious ointment around as well. I could hardly believe my eyes! But one thing was clear: this Jesus was no prophet. If he was he certainly wouldn't have let that sinful woman near him. But then he had the gall to challenge me with a question.

I thought to myself "At last! Now we can get down to some decent argument and lend some semblance of respectability and intellectual stiffening to this totally chaotic meal." So I expressed my willingness to talk, but he just asked me some footling question about two debtors! I ask you! As if this were some economics debate! Well, I grudgingly gave him the

obvious answer, which was what he seemed to expect, because he said I'd got it right, so I waited expectantly for something a little more searching. (Although at the same time I was slightly alarmed that he had seemed to know exactly what I was thinking...) But I could hardly believe my ears when he pointed to the woman, who was still fiddling around with his feet, and complained about my manners, comparing me unfavourably with the prostitute!! And there was I trying to keep everything low-key so as not to embarrass him and make him feel socially out of place, and potentially to save my own face as well, of course. Well, I was more than shocked, I can tell you, and then, to crown it all, he actually turned to her while he was still talking to me and said "Your sins are forgiven." Yes, you heard me: **he forgave her sins!!** Well, I wasn't having any more of this. I got up and left the room, leaving my other guests and anyone else who'd drifted in to their own devices. They were pretty shocked too, I dare say. I retired to my room, poured myself a stiff drink, and tried to banish the whole occasion from my mind.

This is me talking now. We don't know what happened next. This is the only occasion when we meet Simon the Pharisee in the gospels. But I'd like to think that a subsequent diary entry went something like this, with the addition of a few comments from me which Simon couldn't have written, but which I hope will illuminate and not dislocate your thought processes. **A week or two later.** Well, I couldn't forget that extraordinary meal which Jesus came to, when he was frankly, outrageously rude to me. I've thought a lot about it, and about what he said to the woman - and to me. I've also compared notes with Nicodemus, who has been, for him, remarkable wise and understanding. He has very tentatively suggested that I may have got it wrong, and I hate to admit it, but he may well be right...

Jesus was completely different from what I expected. He doesn't mind hobnobbing with the outcasts of society, because they know they need him, and he recognises their need. Now obviously my sins are pretty small beer compared to the prostitute's, but a sin is a sin is a sin, and all sin separates us from God. And I'm beginning to wonder whether my intellectual pride (quite justified, of course) and social superiority (also fully justified) may not be just a tiny bit sinful too. **Me:** [I like the story about Calvin Coolidge, the strong, silent American President, who came back from church one Sunday. His wife asked him "What did the preacher talk about?" "Sin," he replied. "And what did he say about it?" "He was against it." And not only that preacher, we might add, but God too, and he takes sin so seriously that he considered it worthwhile to sacrifice his own son for our sins...]

Back to the diary. And the woman was weeping, even after Jesus forgave her sins. I've never wept for my forgiveness, and I'm beginning to realise that I'm not really conscious of my sins in the same way that she was. And perhaps therefore I'm rather further away from God than she is...? I think I knew in my head that I was a sinner, but never really felt it in my heart and so I've never experienced that shock of grateful recognition that God really does let us back into his presence through sheer love, because he longs to forgive us. And as we become more deeply aware of that love, it stirs up in us a far stronger love for him. I've

been thinking a lot about this recently.

Modern illustration from *The Servant*

Queen (hold it up): two of the swords which are part of the Coronation regalia have the tip of their blades broken off. This is a reminder to kings and queens that they should, like God, practise mercy. And in 2011 the Queen said “It is in forgiveness that we feel the power of God’s love.” Simon the Pharisee didn’t of course know the modern chorus we sang just now. “There’s a way back to God from the dark paths of sin, there’s a door that is open and you may go in. At Calvary’s cross is where you begin, when you come as a sinner to Jesus.” But the woman would certainly have understood the last few words of it. She came as a sinner to Jesus, found forgiveness, and wept.

Do we, like Simon, intellectualise our beliefs? Keep them in the head, well away from the heart? I suspect that the better educated we are, the better off we are, the more, dare I say it, securely middle class we are, the more likely we are to do so. And it always remains a danger, doesn’t it? LOVE is what matters most of all. Jesus kept on stressing it, (think of his twofold summary of the law - it’s in our bulletin, and elsewhere, if it’s momentarily slipped your mind!) and so did Paul (think of 1 Cor 13 – so often, rightly, read at weddings, and worth re-reading regularly, by all of us). Both of these are sound authorities(!), who knew well the tendency of the human heart – and head - to drift off in other directions.

Back to Simon’s diary. While I was drinking in solitude after the party, they all continued to talk about Jesus downstairs. And I learned later that some of them made the staggering connection: if this man can forgive sins, and say to that woman “Your faith has saved you, go in peace,” then either he’s a deluded charlatan, or he’s God himself. Hmm. I must talk to Nicodemus again about all this, and we’re going to go together to hear more of Jesus’ preaching whenever we can. And then there was the very pricey perfume... **And there my imagined extract ends.**

What about the perfume? Normally used on the guest’s head, and here, it would seem, more expensive than usual. It’s probably true to say that we could all give more than we do. We’re rather coy about discussing money, especially about revealing how generous, or more likely how mean, we are. Here’s what John Wesley did. He was a fellow of an Oxford college, and well off compared to his clergyman father. In 1731, when he was 24, he earned £30 a year. His living expenses came to £28 so he had £2 to give away. The next year, his income doubled, but he still lived on £28 and gave £32 away. In the third year, his income jumped to £90; again he lived on £28, giving £62 away. The fourth year, he made £120, lived again on £28, and gave £92 to the poor. And so on. He believed that with increasing income, it wasn’t the Christian’s standard of **living** which should increase, but his or her standard of **giving**. One year his income was slightly over £1,400: he gave it all away except for £30 (minimal inflation then!). He was afraid of laying up treasures on earth. Makes you think, doesn’t it?

There’s a huge amount in this story – and remember it’s an actual incident in Jesus’ life, not a parable. It’s interesting how this book illuminates how much our Queen’s behaviour is

moulded by her love for God. I want to end with something from her 2012 Christmas broadcast. How do we respond to Jesus' love? It's simple, really, and at the same time very hard. The Queen said: The carol "In the Bleak Midwinter" asks a question of all of us. And she quoted the last verse. "What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; if I were a wise man, I would do my part" We probably can't be like John Wesley who gave in that one year a tithe of slightly over 97 % of his income! But as we contemplate God's love for us, and begin to grasp its enormity, surely the last line of that hymn should be our aim. I know I will try to make it mine in the coming days. **"Yet what I can I give him – give my heart"**