

19 - THE ANOINTING WOMAN

Luke 7:36-50

This passage is filled with a series of striking contrasts. To begin with, a Pharisee invited him to dinner and Jesus readily accepted. A woman in the city “who was a sinner” sought him out. Was she a prostitute, an unfaithful wife or just a poor woman seeking customary charity? We are not told. Nor are we told how she got into the house.

She may have been a person of means because of the gift she brought - an alabaster jar of ointment. The excellence of the gift may have got her past the servants at the door. Or she stole in when the servants were busy elsewhere. We are not told what was in the jar, but such small containers made from a soft white rock usually held a fine ointment OR perfume of considerable value.

At table, people reclined rather than sat around a low U-shaped table. Servants provided food and drink from the centre rather than the outside. Their feet were exposed behind them as they leaned on their left elbows. Thus it would have been easy for the woman to come up behind Jesus to anoint his feet, and did so fervently, even sensuously.

Anointing a guest with olive oil and kissing him or her was a normal way to greet a special friend or guest. This woman did both, but to his feet, still dusty from the streets because his host had not provided for this to be done as Jesus arrived. Latecomers would have had their feet washed as they reclined at the table. This woman may have been mistaken for someone who arrived late.

The Pharisee knew she was an intruder and was

much displeased. Not so Jesus. He rebuked his host for not supplying the basic services a guest might expect, then frowning upon Jesus for allowing this intruder to do what he ought to have done.

Sensing the host’s embarrassment, Jesus spoke up, diverting everyone’s attention by telling his host that he had something to say to him. Given the host’s permission he told a brief story. One can imagine everyone listening eagerly to what he would say. Any good raconteur gets a hearing.

The story ended with a question that put the whole situation in context. Who deserves to be forgiven? It was a question any Pharisee would love to debate. They argued small points of the scriptural law codes like this *ad infinitum*. This time the Pharisee wasn’t too sure where Jesus was going with his anecdote, so he gave a somewhat tentative answer.

Then Jesus drove his point home by bringing the intruding woman back into the picture. He contrasted her uncharacteristic behaviour with the neglect of his host. This would put the host on the spot. The level of the host’s embarrassment must have brought great tension to room.

Again Jesus diverted everyone’s attention by speaking directly to the woman. He forgave her whatever sins she was confessing by her unusual actions. That startled everyone. What had he done? They began to question among themselves who this Jesus was. After all, he had usurped power and authority that belonged to God alone.