

Sermon on Luke 7: 36-50

Simon Says

I don't often go in for book promotions in sermons, but in this case I'm making an exception.

This is Francis Spufford's wonderful book, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*.

It's a sympathetic and humourous account of why Christianity retains emotional and spiritual currency in the world of today.

Christianity is not, Spufford suggests, an intellectually backward, anti-science, pre-modern spiritual relic of repressive control, that's only after your money and seeking to make you feel guilty at every turn.

This is the clichéd critique of those whose prejudice against the church (which is not always unfounded), Christianity's imperfect representation in the world, is pre-determined.

Rather Christianity is the spiritual yearning that emerges in people's lives for the God whose great love was revealed most powerfully and most peculiarly in a disaster of death and misadventure;

...in a first century Jewish peasant who made a habit of eating with all the wrong people, telling lepers they were healed, and proclaiming the forgiveness of sins as if he was God;

... who gave up everything freely and seemed to think this was somehow redemptive for humans and the world.

Yet in spite of its unlikelihood, its detractors, and the mess of things the church has made of representing its own formative story through history, the Christian story, Spufford says, still – surprisingly - helps us to understand what it means to be human in God's sight.

He is unapologetic about this... and in a strange way he is at the same time making an apology, in the classic sense of a defense, of the faith at the same time.

'We're supposed to', he says, 'see God's willingness to mend, to forgive, to absorb and remove guilt, as oceanic; a sea of love without limit, beating ceaselessly on the shores of our tiny island of caution and justice, always inviting us to look beyond, to begin again, to dare a larger and wilder and freer life.'

Christianity can never get away from its own story.

However badly we fallen followers of Jesus mess things up, some unlikely vagrant like a St Francis or a Martin Luther or a Teresa of Liseuex will come along and remind us of a story like the one we've heard today from Luke's Gospel which reconfigures things back to God's way... we can't get away from our own story...

So you've heard the story...

Simon, a Pharisee, invites Jesus to a meal... maybe he wants to interrogate him... maybe he's curious... he's heard some stories... maybe he's cynically looking for a way to trap him... who knows...

Not only does Jesus come in, but a woman of the night too... a sinner... the tension rises... a sinner in a Pharisee's house... this can't end well...

She's crying and starts to wet Jesus' feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair...then she pours perfume on them and kisses them... all far too familiar for the cultural taboos of the time... the tension rises again... you can start to feel the steam coming out of Simon's ears...

Well it's all too much, this guy can't be a prophet, Simon says, if he was he would know who's touching him... and she's a sinner! The great unwashed! The reprobate! The impure! The shameful! Jesus you're being corrupted here, can't you see? And she's a woman!

Seemingly reading his mind, Jesus tells Simon a little parable about forgiveness and mercy, and then tells him... well you haven't given me water for my feet?

You haven't greeted me with a kiss?

You haven't poured on perfume, it's pretty cold in your home Simon, but she has not stopped since I arrived?

... Her many sins have been forgiven – look at this great love she has shown...

Simon, the Pharisee, one of the law keepers was not doubt stunned... all the taboos of the time broken in one fell swoop... and in his home what's more!

What will this do for his reputation?

Then Jesus turns to the woman as says, go in peace, your faith has saved you...

And so the heart of the Gospel of Jesus is played out... sin, judgement, guilt, overcome by forgiveness, love and peace ongoing...

Tacit assumptions about pure and impure, shame and honour, right and wrong... overthrown... it's a revolution in Simon's front room.

You all know the children's game Simon says... if the leader says 'Simon says', everyone has to do what they say... if they don't say Simon says and you still do the action, you're out!

Well here Simon says stand up, stand up Jesus and confirm all the cultural and religious prejudices of the day, judge this woman as I do, judge her for being a sinner, cast her out as she deserves so we can get on with our religious discussions in an unpolluted atmosphere...

... but Jesus won't play the game... he sits down, he wants out... he pardons the woman, affirms her faith, declares her saved, and sends her off in peace... not exactly the outcome Simon was after... his music stopped and he was without a chair to mix my metaphors just a little...

Christianity can't get away from its own story...

Simon may say, but it's Jesus' who declares the truth of God... this is Spufford's point.

The glory of Christianity is not found in the church's or the individual Christian's overriding virtue, as we know we're as liable to mess up as anyone else.

Rather it's found in the story that it carries in its heart, in its sacraments, in its preaching, in its fellowship, or perhaps better, the story the carries it...

... and the story of the crucified God, the church's own story, rebukes, admonishes, teaches the church, and the Christian self-reflexively, as much as it does anything or anyone else...

... but it also provides a hope beyond words, one which makes sense of who we are in a way no other story can...

... one which forgives and heals and restores and makes all things new and draws us to the truth beyond ourselves, beyond our rhymes and reasons of personality and preference...

Go in peace, Jesus says, your faith has saved you.

And yet not because it's your possession, but because faith is God's own gift to us and for us...

Taken as a parable, both as individual persons, and as the company of Christians called the church, we have sat in the place of each of the three characters in this story.

At its best, the church acts like Jesus does.

It mirrors its own story.

It's open and welcoming, breaking down boundaries which divide people, proclaiming God's forgiveness for all.

I remember doing a consultation once at a church not far from here and during the service a mother who was clearly from the other side of the tracks gave her testimony.

She talked of how she had been welcomed and loved at this particular church.

And she was nearly in tears as she spoke quietly.

There was such faith in her wavering voice, her halting stance, her gentle demeanour.

Watching on that day I think the main thing was that she had spent so much of her life being told in different ways that she was worthless, no good, a sinner, not fit for polite company...

...and here she had found a group of people who treated her as if her life was a precious gift... they saw what at that time she struggled to see...

And she was amazed and humbled and eventually came to see everything in a whole new light.

But often the church hasn't been like this.

It (perhaps we should say 'we') have been the Pharisee, the law keeper.

It's doors may have been open, but if the wrong sort came in the atmosphere would turn very cold.

Huh? A sinner, in our midst?

Wrong look, wrong talk, wrong impression.

What is he doing here?

Why does she think she's entitled to come in and mess up our settled comfort?

And the little words and the little looks begin.

We know what kind of person he is... that kind, different to us who are the righteous ones.

We forget so quickly of course, that we're all sinners.

We're all the woman who wanders into the house with a disreputable past searching for the truth and risking being judged.

We all need saving.

We all need grace.

How did Paul describe himself? As the chief of sinners.

The Christian story, our story, the story we live by, and through which we have faith, is the same story that confronts us day by day with God's call to a different way of being.

Just as much as we are to know our own worth before God, so we are to be challenged to see the worth of others with no exceptions.

And that's not a typo.

No exceptions.

There's no caveat there, no footnote to say, well, grace, yes, but people in this category we think of a bit differently.

Christianity has always flourished in prison ministry, I think primarily because it begins from the assumption that these are human beings and so in spite of the bars and guards, still precious in the eyes of God.

Society rightly protects itself and those who are vulnerable and there are rightly consequences when people injure others, but none of this changes God's love.

Wide, wide as the ocean, remember.

I remember an old minister colleague of mine telling me once about a funeral he had conducted for a murderer.

Pretty hard stuff...

It had to be kept secret because if the press had found out it would have been publicised widely...

Just 3 people standing in a solemn tableau at the grave of a man labelled by society as trash and deserving of everything he got...

He found it hard, he said, to proclaim God's love for this man that day, yet he did and from the Christian faith's point of view that was the right thing to do...

We do well to remember that St Paul, who was once Saul, stood nearby looking on as Stephen was stoned...

So Spufford goes on to say, 'In its stumbling way, the church faces towards grace.'

It's true.

Simon the Pharisee says, but the church, the faith says differently, even when it doesn't live up to its own story, even when it becomes Simon, it can't escape its own story.

It can't escape Jesus.

And at the heart of the story of Jesus is healing, forgiveness, redemption, new life.

Go in peace, your faith has saved you... says the Messiah, the one who made new life possible.

Spufford finishes his wonderful book with these words, 'don't be surprised by any human cruelty. But don't be afraid. Far more can be mended than you know.'

And that friends is our story.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Amen.