

GOSPEL WONDERS

A different way to look at the gospels

The Forgiven Women (suggested) Order of Service

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Opening prayers

So where do we stand with you today Lord? Living in your love and care, in a world of beauty and wonder. So much to delight our senses. So much that, when we look and listen, leave us in awe at its complexity and intricacy. Yet for all that it comes together and allows life to survive and in many senses flourish. Did it all just happen, a whim of forces and casual occurrences or do we see the imprint of a great creator's hand. Such a combination of forces can only be thus. In this we see you. In this we ask who set these forces in motion.

So, you are there, the great Lord and Creator. Today we acknowledge you for your greatness. Worship you for your power and express our grateful thanks for you love.

Oh! But Lord, we are guilty, so often, of getting it wrong. There are times when our behaviour leaves much to be desired and lets us down. In the attitudes we have to others; times when we show them scant consideration; vent our anger on them. Times when our behaviour shows us in a poor light unworthy of being one of your people. We look at ourselves and feel ashamed.

The Lord Jesus tells us that if we think of these things and feel sincerely sorry then He will take them to the Father, and on our behalf, seek forgiveness. Looking back do we have anything that we need to lay before Him now? We will pause so that anybody who has anything they would like to take to Him may, in the silence of their hearts, do so.

Through the life and death of our Lord Jesus Christ we know that our sins are forgiven.

Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Introduction

Our story today goes back to a time where good manners and doing what was right were of great importance. Through such behaviour one could indicate not only the standing in which another was held but also obey the laws of hospitality.

We are faced with a story that involves deceit and skulduggery of the worst possible kind. A calculated insult to an invited guest with the object of causing insult and embarrassment.

The perpetrators of these behaviours would attempt to justify it by saying that it was a way of finding out the truth about their guest's views and teaching. It is strange that a man who would view himself as important and an arbiter of social etiquette should choose to deliberately deny a guest the very basic welcome required. In fact, this was more than a lapse, oversight or mistake on his part but a deliberate insult. That a guest should be treated in this way showed an intention to challenge any assumptions that the guest might have about the reason he had been invited.

Society demanded that on greeting a guest the host would bow to the ground in welcome and then greet each guest with a kiss. He would put his right hand on the guests left shoulder then kiss his right cheek. Then the process was reversed. The left hand was put on the right shoulder and the kiss was on the left cheek. A common greeting between men. After this the guest would remove his sandals and the host would provide water to wash his feet. The final stage in this welcoming, the host would offer oil to be poured on the head from a pot or horn. A mark of respect only abstained from at a time of mourning, or, as in this case, a lack of proper respect.

But then what of the woman in this story. What did she do that caused such a response? Well for a start she was there. In a room were not just men but guests who were eating. Her very presence was offensive. Then she had the temerity to touch the Rabbi. Not only was she offending him by such familiarity but, because of her reputation, she made him unclean. Then to cap it all she let down her hair in public. This was something no self-respecting woman would do. A woman's hair was seen as sexually provocative. On her marriage a woman would bind up her hair. To allow any man, other than her husband to see it was grounds for divorce without a financial settlement. That this woman did this in a room full of men would have condemned her as a sinner beyond redemption.

The messages given in that room could not have been clearer.

In our story today we will review the events of that day and how it ended.

The Servants' Story

Well, the master, Simon the Pharisee, sprang a bit of a surprise on us the other day. Not the fact that he was having people around for a meal, he was always doing that. But then they are always his 'friends'. Don't get me wrong they are clever people and I have to admit that when I am serving at the table, I can't understand half of what they are talking about. You know, discussing the law and all that sort of thing. It's just that they are so full of themselves and fussy. You just wouldn't believe it. Everything has to be just right. When they arrive, the master is always there bowing and scraping, kissing everybody in sight, washing their feet. You never saw anything like it.

That's why on this day it was astonishing. First this chap turns up in the clothes of an ordinary workman. None of the usual finery. Then the master ignores him. We had the water and oil and stuff ready for the usual welcome but the master just waves him to a couch and carries on talking to one of his friends.

This was so out of character. One of the other servants said that this chap was the new teacher who had turned up recently, but I wasn't particularly impressed. Not, as I say, like our usual visitor. All the same he didn't seem to be worried by the master's bad manners. Just went to his couch and settled down. Like everyone else, facing inwards with his feet facing the wall. Then it began. I realised that the only reason he was invited was so they could find out what made him tick. The master and his friends started having a go at Him. I mean it wasn't just odd questions. The usual sort of debate that always went on. Some of them were being very rude. It was almost as if they were trying to get under his skin. I must admit I was glad that I wasn't on the receiving end, but the teacher just stayed as cool as a cucumber. Listened to the questions and answered them.

I could see that they were starting to get angry and frustrated, then it happened.

A woman pushed her way into the room which stirred things up. There was a sudden silence. The questioning stopped; all the servants stopped what they were doing, frozen to the spot. Something like this had never happened before and we didn't know what to do. Should we stop serving and hustle her out or just carry on as though nothing unusual was going on. I looked at the master but he was just staring across the room giving us no indication. The room went deathly quiet except for the woman sobbing as she knelt by the preacher's feet. It was all very difficult and we were rooted to the spot.

Now I don't understand everything that happened but I know it left the Pharisees embarrassed and very angry, the woman in tears, and the teacher as calm as ever.

You will understand that the servants talked of nothing else that night. I'll tell you what. You've heard enough from me. Let us go into the kitchen and you can hear what a couple of the maids were saying about it that evening.

The Maids Conversation

Two Maids Talking. Esther and Sara.

E) Sara did you hear what happened today at dinner. There was a lot of trouble. I was talking to the mistress and she told me how angry the master was.

S) That's one of the problems about working in the kitchen. It's all rush and push and you miss out on what's happening. So, what was all the fuss about?

E) Well! You know what the mistress is like for a bit of gossip. As she puts it "Likes to keep her ear to the ground" Some people would call it being nosey I suppose but, in her position, she probably thinks it's important to know what is going on. Anyway, about what happened today?

S) I thought you would never come to it. As I say I heard the men talking as they tidied up, but I didn't really understand what it was all about.

E) The mistress told me that yesterday she heard the master talking to Eli, Joshua and a few of his other Pharisee friends about the new teacher who turned up, from of all places, Nazareth. They had heard that he was getting a bit of a following and they wanted to know why. Was he something special or was he just another of those Rabbis who wandered around for a while and then vanished or upset the wrong people and are got rid of.

S) Do you mean the one they call Jesus? I have a cousin who lives in Nazareth and she says He was a carpenter before He started teaching. She said He was good at His job and some of the girls thought He was a bit dishy but there was always something a bit odd about Him. Often went out on His own and not always one that it was easy to get into conversation with. Always a bit of a scholar. You know!

E) Yes! But let me tell you what happened. The mistress said that the men talked of a number of ways of getting to know more about Jesus. They eventually decide to invite him to a meal and then quiz Him. Somebody said that He was used to answering questions so would come prepared. The master then said that he would arrange a special welcome that would upset Him and they would be able to catch Him of guard.

S) Yes! That's what the men were saying. When Jesus arrived, they treated Him badly, you know **not** like a proper guest. That shocked them all because you know what the master is like for doing everything properly.

E) Yes, I know and that is where it all went wrong. The mistress said that when the master came back, he was furious. She said she had never seen him so angry before.

It seems that some woman from the town, from the description I think I know who she was. Not that I would want anything to do with the likes of her. Anyway, she turned up and started making a big fuss of this Jesus which ended up with the master being told of as a poor host

S) That would really annoy Him

E) Then the woman was told that she had done the right thing and her sins were forgiven

S) I can see why the master was angry. It sounds as if his plan didn't work and that he ended up looking a bit silly.

E) Yes! And you can see why. All that happening in his own house and in front of his important friends. The mistress told me that she was having to tiptoe around very carefully. You know what he can be like when he is angry.

S) Yes! I know what you mean. Mind you I would have liked to have been there to see it happen

The Woman's Story

Many people walk across the street to avoid me. Even the men, out with their wives, look away. They saw me as a bad person. A sinner. One who breaks the laws, or their interpretation of them? I was someone to be shunned. Yes! I would agree I was the sort of woman you wouldn't want your son to be seen with. Well, we don't always get the sort of life we would like. When life treats you like dirt you just have to do the best you can to get by. It's true, I suppose, what they said about me. Sinner? Yes, I've committed just about all of them. I long ago gave up worrying. Live or maybe survive today and let the rest go to the devil. Nothing and nobody can save me. I'm one of the damned. Did I believe that? Yes

Well, I did until I met Jesus.

There was a crowd around Him and I was hanging around the edges, well you never know what opportunity might come along. Then it happened. I don't suppose he was talking to me but His words suddenly came out of the crowd and hit me. I just sat down on a wall with a bump. He was saying that everyone was loved by God the Father and that everybody could be forgiven and saved. Even the worst of sinners. He couldn't have meant me. Not someone with my record, not me of all people. I didn't know what love meant and forgiveness. Not a chance.

But the words stuck and I followed the crowd. I just couldn't believe what I was hearing. Even the worst of sinners could be forgiven. I wondered out of town and spent the night on my own in a cave. His words going round and round in my head. He just couldn't have meant me.

As the dawn broke and the sun burned the morning mist of the lake I burst into tears. It did mean me. The prospect of a whole new life was there before me. I could start again.

I didn't know how to do it but I did know that I had to see Him again, talk to Him, and just listen to Him. I ran back to town. Rushed to my house and found the most expensive thing I had, a jar of perfume. I wanted to give Him something, a present, and set off to find Him. They told me that He had been invited to a meal at Simon the Pharisees house so that where I went.

Now I know what a woman's place was and that I shouldn't have gone in but I didn't care I just pushed my way in and there was Jesus reclining on a couch. His head towards the centre so I couldn't do what I intended which was to anoint His hair so I turned towards His feet. Then what I saw horrified me. His feet were covered with the dust of the road. This meant Simon had not even welcomed Him in the proper manner. No oil to anoint His head and His hands, no water to wash his feet. I looked around and they were sitting with self-satisfied smirks on their faces. They had insulted a guest and looked so "what a clever boy am I"

I tell you. I didn't know what to do. If I had asked for water I would have been refused. I just sank down at those poor tired feet and burst into tears. It was as those tears ran onto His feet; I knew what I must do. I washed the dust away with my tears and then uncovering my hair wiped them dry. Now I know that a woman should only uncover her hair in front of her husband but I didn't care because then he leaned down and put His hand on my head and told me I was forgiven. And that we could talk later. Then he signalled to one of His friends who came and helped me to stumble from the room.

Outside he took me to a group of women sitting under some olive trees and explained what had happened, looking at them I couldn't help noticing one or two posh looking ones and I turned away before they could tell me to go away but they didn't. The poshest looking of them stood up and put her arms around me and then the rest gathered round and drew me into the group. Never before had anybody done anything like that to me and I burst into tears again. They held me until I was still.

That evening, as the heat of the day gave way to the gentle evening breeze I walked with the Master beside the lake. I asked Him how it was possible for somebody like me to be freed of all my sins. All the times I had broken the law. The times I had hurt people. I just couldn't understand how I could be forgiven. He told me that if a person accepts that they have done wrong, and seeks forgiveness then He would take it to the Father and speak on their behalf.

Forth the fourth time that day I found myself in tears. I told Him all about my life. All I had done that now I was ashamed of and begged forgiveness. Of course, He knew all about me but He just listened. Then I realised that I needed to open my heart before Him. It was wonderful for me to do it.

Afterwards I found a freedom I have never known before.

Since then, I have been travelling with the group. All my past has gone and I am a new person.

The Disciples Story

Why does He do it? Over and over again He does it. Instead of keeping His head down and keeping quiet he will insist on getting involved.

What do I mean? Just take this latest incident. Some of us had managed to get into the Pharisees house. You know how it is. The custom of letting in the poor and downtrodden in so that they can watch their betters eating and maybe get a few of the crumbs that were left over. We of course weren't included in the invitation but there was no way we were going to let Jesus go in there on His own so we shuffled in among the deserving poor and saw what happened.

When we saw the way the Master was treated right from the start we were appalled that any host would treat an invited guest that way. In fact, one of our number (who shall be nameless) was all for jumping up to protest at the bad manners, until that is, the rest of us sat on him to keep him quiet. Then it happened.

She came in. We had seen her the day before standing on her own and taking things in but before any of us had a chance to speak to her she vanished so it was a surprise to see her here.

She went straight up to Jesus and fell at His feet, crying and rubbing them as though she wanted to wash them and making such a fuss: she uncovered her hair wiped his feet, and started kissing them. None of us knew what to make of it. A woman, who knew her place, would only do that in front of her husband and would only kiss him and then not in public. What was happening? I can only imagine what the other people in the room were making of it.

Of course, all this touching and weeping meant that, in the eyes of Simon and his friends Jesus was now ritually uncleaned. So would have to go through the whole washing and cleansing routine. Any good Rabbi would.

But what does Jesus do? This is what I mean by Him getting involved. Instead of pushing her away and getting Simons servants to come and take her out He reaches down, touches her and speaks to her. In front of a room full of people he acknowledges her.

Well, you can imagine the look of glee on their faces. He had played tight into their hands Here He was, this man who everybody was saying was so wonderful, didn't know how to behave. That what I meant about Jesus putting Himself in the firing line. If he had her pushed her away then all the anger would have been directed at her and He might even have got a bit of sympathy that He had been approached this way. But no. What He did meant that the woman was forgotten and all the anger, scorn and criticism was directed at Him. He drew it to Himself like a magnet.

Then to cap it all he commented on the way Simon had ordered Him to be treated. I ask you. You're in the house of somebody who considered himself to be pretty

important and then made him look small in front of his friends. Now that is not the way to make friends and influence people. Then to finish He tells a little story about forgiveness which Simon could not help but see was aimed at him. It suggested that this woman with all her sins was more deserving of forgiveness than somebody with few sins to forgive which really rubbed Simon's nose in it. Because it more or less said that this woman was more worthy of forgiveness than he was.

The atmosphere became incredibly prickly. Jesu stayed as long as the niceties of etiquette demanded then made His farewells and we all beat a retreat. The fresh air outside was a joy to breath after the poisonous atmosphere in that room.

Later that evening we saw Jesus talking to the woman. She was in tears again but it was a new start in life for her. She stayed with us and became one of His most ardent supporters.

Mind you I'll never forget the look on Simons face when Jesus pointed out His failings as a host. That was one for the album.

Conclusion

What seems to be a fairly simple story turns out to be one of the most important that is told about Jesus.

It shows something of the attitude of the religious establishment to Jesus. It speaks of His attitude to women, and His lack of concern for the religious mores of His time. It shows Jesus at His most courageous, not taking the easy way out but putting himself forward and deflecting anger from others onto himself. Then it says a great deal about forgiveness.

The religious people were already taking notice of Him and were showing signs of concern at the following He was gaining. So much so that they came up with a plan through which, it appears, they could discredit Him.

Then comes the one thing they could not have allowed for. True there is one school of thought that suggests that she was planted as part of the plan but the way it is recorded does not seem to support that and even if it were so then it went seriously wrong.

Why? Because when Jesus saw this woman His heart went out to her. As so often happens with Jesus he saw what her deep problems were and, instead of rejecting her welcomed her and made himself a shield between her and her enemies.

What a difference. On the one hand the religious establishment. Tied up in the law and the way it had been interpreted over the years. So concerned with ensuring that it was maintained, the human need was lost, and they were unable to see the reality of what they were doing.

On the other was Jesus. Saying the law should now be based on love. That the traditional approach no longer applied but demonstrated it an open and public way. He was willing to put himself on the line in order to protect a rather fragile individual. A challenge He could easily have declined but by accepting it made himself very unpopular with the establishment.

Then we have the woman: on the face of it hard bitten, cared little for anybody or anything, taught some hard lessons by life which had helped her to survive. But underneath the hard shell that she had built around herself was a hurting and fragile individual. Looking, maybe praying, for a way out of the mess her life had become.

She heard Jesus and realised that it was possible. Then in front of Him she fell on her knees at His feet and as the hot tears scalded her cheeks, we see all the pain, rejection and anger pour from her. A new life opened up. The question was could she accept it.

How many of us have, at some time in our lives had to face up to hard facts?

Firstly, whatever we think about ourselves we have to accept that we are loved.

Secondly that Jesus demonstrated that love in a very spectacular way when he stood as a shield between us and those who would do us down.

Finally, He made it possible for us to clear out all those aspects of our lives that cause us pain. To go before Him. Acknowledge that we have done wrong and place it in His hands. It can take a long time for everything to be understood but the important thing is to keep faith. That morning the woman could have shrugged and walked away but the word she heard stayed with her. She trusted and was saved.

Prayers of Intercession

Jesus said "Two commandments I give you. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbour as yourself"

Lord we have neighbours across the world some of whom are suffering through wars, abuse and poverty. Often brought about by their leaders. The very people sworn to protect them. We see internal strife caused by cultural and religious differences. Lord we know that so often this happens, not by your will Lord but by the choices made by evil people.

Even so we pray that you will be in those situations, not only working in the hearts of leaders but caring for the individual and the unrepresented ones caught up in these situations. In the silence let us bring before the Lord any of these things or areas concern us today.

Jesus said "Peace be with you, as the father sent me so I send you"

Lord we pray for your church here on earth. We know that in your name many people have worked for the good of their neighbours and for them, past and present, we give them thanks.

So we pray for the leaders that they will understand your purpose and make decisions that work to those ends. In our prayer we do not forget the people whose power and influence is limited but without whom the church could not exist and ask that you guide and support them in all that they do.

We also remember those who suffer persecution for acknowledging you as their lord and saviour. The pain of physical torture. Being ostracised by their neighbours and friends and deliberately marginalised just for opening their hearts to you. We remember them now.

Jesus said "Come to me who are weary and heavily laden and I will refresh you"

Finally Lord we know those who are suffering at this time. Those who are sick in body or in mind. Those who are experiencing bereavement and loss. Those having difficulty coping with the stresses of life and unable to see a way through their difficulties. We pray that you will reach down, touch them and let them know that they are in your heart and in our prayers. We bring those known to us before us now.

Lord we give you thanks for all those who have, over the years, brought your word to us and pray that one day we may join with them in the joys of your heavenly kingdom.

Blessing

How can we know the depth of love?
That's reach into the imprisoned soul.

The comfort from the one above,
That moves our lives towards their goal.

That comes as gentle as a breeze,
Or storm that warms the heart.

It frees those ties which hold us,
And in its arms enfolds us.

So friends let us now depart this place.
Our friend is there all will be well.