

There's no pattern to these moments when Jesus meets someone in the gospels. Sometimes Jesus reaches out to them as in Zacchaeus, sometimes they come to Jesus as in Nicodemus, sometimes the conversation just happens like the woman at the well or Mary in the garden; incredible variety as you'd expect. We continue today.

Hello, my name's Simon. I'm glad to be known as a Pharisee. As a young boy I trained to become one. I was required to memorize the five books of Moses, and then began a study of the Mishnah and the Talmud. I also had to practice demanding rituals such as fasting, prayer and bathing three times a day.

Because I was so eager to become a Pharisee I did all this. I think the commitment to order, to the law, to rules about every part of life suited me. Memorising and studying the Torah gave me certainty; I felt I understood what God was like and I certainly knew what he required of me – faithfulness, diligence and purity among other things.

I have to say though I do like being noticed too, I like people bowing towards me when I pass and in some way I feel because of my study and attention to detail and truth I deserve this honour.

Of course I don't like the way the Romans order us around and poke fun at our religion. We found it's easier to collaborate with them rather than resist, and anyway I have a focus and a place.

That is until recent months.....

I'd heard about this Jesus from Nazareth, heard the things he said and did. It all seemed a bit fanciful to me; especially at this time in our nation's history when we'd like to be rid of the near tyranny of the Romans. I'd heard he performed miracles; I'd heard he was gathering quite a following. So I thought I'd take a bit of a risk and invite him to my place for dinner. I'm still not sure why I did this. Little did I know what would happen when he came?

Luke 7:36-50: When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.

So Jesus came – he seemed pleased to be invited. To be honest I was more than a bit anxious. What would my colleagues think? What would they say? I wondered how it would go; would I be challenged out of my comfort zone?

I thought it was going really well, Jesus reclining along with the rest of us. He seemed at home; he just seemed to me to be a really nice bloke. And I thought we were having a great exchange of ideas, until!

Clip from Jesus of Nazareth

A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. 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.

I could never have imagined such a scene; I hadn't in all my days felt so uncomfortable, so affronted by what this woman did. I mean coming in to my house, in front of my friends and throwing herself down at Jesus' feet. And he just sat there and took it.

Would I ever gain the respect of my friends back? Would I ever get over this? Then I got to thinking, what kind of man is this. I began to think out loud – not a good thing to do, as I discovered.

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.'

Jesus answered him, 'Simon, I have something to tell you.'

'Tell me, teacher,' he said.

'Two people owed money to a certain money-lender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?'

Simon replied, 'I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.'

'You have judged correctly,' Jesus said.

Now I was really in this more than I wanted to be or thought I would be. He'd exposed something in me I didn't think was there. I'd not thought about these things before – how there was forgiveness and forgiveness so to speak. I always felt I was a good person, I tried my hardest. But Jesus wasn't finished with me:

Clip from Jesus of Nazareth

Then he turned towards the woman and said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.'

Then Jesus said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.'

The other guests began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?'

Jesus said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

It's OK for her I thought as she left; I was left to tidy the mess with my friends, with Jesus and with my own thoughts! It seemed to be such a good idea, asking Jesus for dinner!

PRAYER

Two illustrations to conclude:

An extremely effective preacher in the southern United States didn't start out life as many here did. He never thought about Christian things until he was lying wounded and helpless in a field hospital in Vietnam. In that hospital Jesus met him and he experienced Jesus' love and grace in a powerful way.

Thirty years later he still couldn't refer to that encounter without becoming tearful and emotional.

In his ministry he was especially good at witnessing to and inviting into the church hard-living young adults from the wrong side of the tracks. His great strength was that **he could remember when he wasn't a Christian**. We need to have in this community people who can still remember what it was like to not have Jesus; who still remember what it was like to be **LOST!** And I guarantee such people will make us feel uncomfortable – like Simon!

It's too easy for us to live out of a slightly smug, self-satisfied cradle Christianity. We need fresh, emotional, newly forgiven people in our midst to remind us of the wonder of Jesus who loves to invite, forgive and party with sinners. And when they come, they'll possibly make us feel as uncomfortable as Simon. The Bible applied.

And:

A group of Christians were sitting round talking about the shortcomings of their church; as you do. This group took turns chastising themselves for their closed, cold, inwardly focussed and shrinking congregation. They were having a wonderful time bad-mouthing their church.

Then a person new to the community said, 'Look I'm sure our church has its problems, I think it's great that you want to fix what's wrong but let me tell you, I didn't find you until I was in my late 30s. Nobody ever told me about grace in all my years of searching in a variety of places. I spent most of my years thinking God was mad at me, that God had it in for me. I want to tell you, this community is God's gift to me. This is where I found a gracious God or maybe this is where the gracious God found me.

Then she began to weep uncontrollably.

The story teller concluded, 'the rest of us sat there shamed by a recent entrant into our church.'

To me the essence of this experience for the woman, for Simon and for Jesus is about what kind of community we are; what kind of community we believe the Lord longs for us to be. It seems that we're either with Simon or we're with Jesus.

Either we're a '**he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner**' person and community or we're a '**your sins are forgiven**' person and community.

We either understand what Jesus did for us on the cross or we don't.

We either sing, **O help me understand it, help me to take it in what it meant to you, the Holy One to take away my sin** or we focus on how 'nice' we are.

Now this isn't easy, Simon was a good man, sure he lived by the rules but he was prepared to risk inviting Jesus to his home.

I said 7 years ago that one of the gifts our good God gives us is the gift of sight. Jesus actually becomes the lens through which we look on the world, on others. I know about lenses, I've just forked out \$717.59 for new ones. The long-distance lens is different – and it's taken me a while to adjust. But now I see things in the medium distance far better. As an aside there's no problem with my long sight – the last time I went to the optometrist he told me I can see things others can't see – that it's also true spiritually is my desire.

I wonder if my experience with OPSM has a comparison with my spiritual journey - To see as Jesus sees; to see others as he sees them; to get rid of my prejudices.

And finally would this woman have found a home here or would we say you're not welcome, you're a sinner. The young woman who came to church.....